

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

# **FIRE**

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# **ON THE**

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# **PLATEAU**

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**CONFLICT AND ENDURANCE IN  
THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST**

A photograph of a stone ruin, possibly a tower or a small building, built on a rocky plateau. The structure is made of reddish-brown stone and has a rectangular opening. The background is a bright blue sky with wispy white clouds. The foreground shows the rough, textured surface of the rocks.

**CHARLES WILKINSON**

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# **FIRE ON THE PLATEAU**

Conflict and Endurance in  
the American Southwest

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## I n t r o d u c t i o n

# THE COLORADO PLATEAU

**G**eologists, beginning with John Wesley Powell, recognize the Colorado Plateau as a physiographic province—the Plateau Province—isolated from adjacent regions. Just a few dozen million years ago, the Plateau was a flat plain, a former ocean floor with rivers flowing across it. Then gigantic forces caused the region to rise. But the rivers held resolutely to their courses, cutting into the ground as the landmass rose around them. This left slashes of canyon cuts all across the Plateau. The Grand Canyon is the most spectacular, but scores upon scores of others are fabulous in their own right. Wind and water have worked on the soft rocks in other ways, crafting all manner of monuments, pillars, arches, natural bridges, spires,

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minarets, cliffs, and crags ablaze in every hue of earth color, but with the red—all variations of red, always the red—the most memorable to our eyes.

The Plateau is barriered in nearly every direction. The southern border is the Mogollon Rim, a cliff for most of its 200-mile run, a thousand feet high or more in places; below the rim, down in the Salt River Valley, are Phoenix and its suburbs. To the southwest and southeast, modest mountain ranges separate the Plateau from lower-lying Las Vegas and Albuquerque. On the west, the province is bounded by the high and jagged Wasatch Range and beyond the Wasatch lies Salt Lake City. The crest of the Uinta Range, nearly in Wyoming, marks the northern boundary, and the lower beginnings of the Colorado Rockies define its eastern side. The Plateau Province therefore includes about half of Utah, northern Arizona, the northwest corner of New Mexico, and a long strip in westernmost Colorado, some 80 million acres in all. By way of comparison, the entire state of Arizona holds 73 million acres.

Throughout almost all of its reach, this land is arid, a desert. Except for the mountain spines above 10,000 feet, it receives 10 inches of precipitation a year or less, the traditional measuring stick for defining a desert. (Scientists now also require a high rate of evaporation for classification as a desert, and the Plateau's bright sun, heat, and winds qualify it within this framework too.) A small part is "hot" desert, mostly in deep canyon bottoms in the southwestern area of the Plateau; the hot desert receives the lowest amount of precipitation, sometimes as little as 3 inches a year. The bulk of the Plateau's landmass is 5,000 feet or higher. Apart from the upper alpine reaches, this is "cold" desert—more than half of the precipitation comes in the form of snow. Deliciously temperate springs and autumns precede and follow the chill winters of the high desert. Summers, mid-May through mid-September, are blast-furnace torrid.

Remote, rugged, and dry, at once forlorn and glorious, this is a separate place: a place with its own distinctive landscape, history, and future.

Many of my travels, first as a law student and young Arizona lawyer, then as a staff attorney with the Native American Rights Fund, later when teaching and writing about the laws, land, and people of the West, have

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taken me to the Colorado Plateau. Some have come as part of the joy of writing this book, for I have made a point of getting out on the Plateau about once a month. Other trips have been with family, friends, or students. Still other visits have been as a lawyer working for the Navajo and Hopi on tangled issues involving ideas and events that go back decades, centuries, more. Inevitably, working with Indians is working with time.

For it is this other sense, our sense of time, that becomes so fully engaged on the Colorado Plateau. All the recently made dams, reservoirs, coal mines, coal-fired power plants, transmission lines, oil and gas rigs, uranium mines, mills, and dumps, all the motels, condominiums, and espresso shops, prove how quickly our kind can move, how little time we need to reach big results. Yet time's longer and more profound side still pervades the Colorado Plateau. Deep time is laid bare everywhere: in all the stripped-off rocks of this brittle, elevated land that holds some of the finest displays of exposed geology anywhere on earth. The ancient cultures have left us their handiwork and their ideas. Indian people on the reservations, having heard the old stories over and over, possess a precise consciousness that stretches far back and blends into the remembered earth. The quiet of the deep canyons and the long still vistas, encompassing so much sacred ground, slow us down, take us far back, and hold us there. The Colorado Plateau is a place where we can discover great distances, both of terrain and time.

This book recounts my journey through the Colorado Plateau, a journey through place and time and self. The journey was unstructured. It depended on requests for assistance from Indian tribes and community groups, on family and teaching schedules, on the beckonings of my personal interests, and on flashes of suspicion that caused me to drop everything and track down a lead. I did a great deal of formal research—in the literature, library collections, and government documents—but the travels mattered more. Fascinating and valuable though the reading has been, my best learning took place at arduous late-night meetings, listening to the deliberations of earnest Indian people; at the base of a power plant with 700-foot stacks, trying to imagine how the coal somehow produced elec-

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tricity for cities hundreds of miles away; in a blue-ribbon trout stream below a 400-foot dam, casting a fly and wondering about the societies submerged by the reservoir; in a twisty back canyon, where the Ancestral Pueblo people once resided, moving down a faint trail with a backpack and a boy; and beneath a great natural arch in a conversation of reconciliation with the father who forced me west in the first place.

During my explorations of more than three decades, I found a land that sears into my heart and soul, a place that has taught me and changed me. I also discovered a land of conflict and endurance, a land that has given birth to one of the great chapters in American history.

The methods of conquering the tribes were many and diverse: war, land sales, bad resource deals, cultural assimilation, and the treachery of their friends. As for the land, the most notable conquest took place from about 1955 through 1975. I have come to call it the Big Buildup. The cities surrounding the Plateau—Denver, Albuquerque, El Paso, Phoenix, Tucson, Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, San Diego, Los Angeles—had exhausted their own local resources. Civic leaders organized a concerted campaign for the rapid, wholesale development of the energy and water of the Colorado Plateau.

Indisputably the Big Buildup achieved the objectives that its architects intended. It made the modern Southwest. It transformed it from a backwater region of 8 million people at the end of World War II into a powerhouse of 32 million today. It was one of the most prodigious peacetime exercises of industrial might in the history of the world.

The consequences of this conquest—for the land, rivers, air, and human health—were many, and they are with us still. So, too, are the consequences for the tribes. Among other things, the linchpin for the Big Buildup was Black Mesa, sacred ground for the Hopi and Navajo, who leased their coal and water at prices far below market value.

Standing near the center of the Big Buildup was an eminent Salt Lake City lawyer named John Boyden, who represented both the Ute and Hopi tribes. For years, charges had swirled that during the decisive times of the 1960s Boyden, in violation of his high ethical and legal obligations to his

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tribal clients, also worked in the dark for Peabody Coal Company and other development interests that wanted Indian land, minerals, and water. At first, as I began to look into these episodes, I doubted that Boyden had acted wrongly or, if he had, that it could be proved. The evidence was thin. But gradually, by the plain luck that sometimes accompanies perseverance, I uncovered the truth about Boyden's dealings. His story is the story of the conquest of Black Mesa and the two tribes—and, in turn, the story of the conquest of the Colorado Plateau. There are ways in which Boyden's story is the story of us all.

Yet, for all the many conquests, the homefires of endurance burn still. This is a big land, and its rough, dry landscape gives it the shield of remoteness. The wild desert country, as I learned, can still heal us. The Indian people, against all odds, have held on. They own a third of the Colorado Plateau. Their cultures—battered all over, to be sure—remain strong.

The tribal endurance raises questions that burn in the coals of every piñon fire and twine through all the back canyons of the tribal homelands. Why, for all the effort, all the money, all the military might and threat of it, for all the industrial efforts, for all the apparent helplessness of the tribes, for all the *inevitability* of the final result, has the forced assimilation never finally taken? Why is the Colorado Plateau still Indian country? Why do the Navajo tell the Coyote stories to this day and fight—successfully—to send their children to their own Indian schools? Why, after the warfare in the sagebrush bowl on upper Milk Creek between two military forces, one native, one from the newer nation, and after all the consequences of that battle, do the Ute hold nearly 2 million acres? Why do the Hopi still perform Home Dance, with all its pageantry, dedication, and commitment of weeks of time just to prepare for this one ceremony? Why do the tribes still govern themselves and their land by the old values and priorities?

One might surmise that this is simply because no one yet wants the tribes' lands and minds badly enough. Perhaps. But in learning the story of the Colorado Plateau, one finds another reason: the tribes possess a tenacity—a tenacity stronger than all the technology and guile levied against it, a tenacity that will not, will not ever, let go.

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If that tenacity is the secret, then the secret inside it is the core value that creates the tenacity: a reverence—think that word through—for the land, for a particular place. Romanticism? The story of the Colorado Plateau makes it plain that, in this age when we careen toward an uncertain destination, a true and lasting commitment to place may be as valuable to us as any serum.

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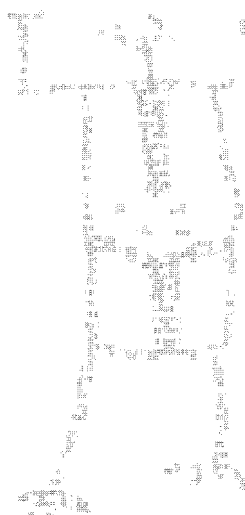
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P a r t O n e

# BEDROCK





# ROUTE 66



I remember the first time I saw the Colorado Plateau. It was in December 1963 during my beginning year in law school. Still new to the arid West, I was heading home from Stanford, the passenger of an anthropology graduate student who had responded to my notice on a campus bulletin board: “Christmas Vacation—need ride back East.” We had decided to take the southerly Route 66 because of winter storms on the more direct highways farther north combined with the dubious condition of her beaten-up Ford.

Not that I had ever heard of the Colorado Plateau or even thought much about the Southwest. I did know about the road I was traveling, old Route 66, storied in song and pop culture, America’s Main Street, escape

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valve for Oklahomans fleeing the Dust Bowl, great national connector between Chicago and Los Angeles. I chuckled at the kitsch along the road in Arizona and New Mexico. Hokey billboards and highway signs sported outsized cowboys and Indians. At the “men only” establishments, neon cowgirls beckoned travelers with animated come-hither gestures. Wigwam Village in Holbrook, Arizona, was one of the many pseudo trading posts. Nor were the local proprietors limited to a Real West theme, as evidenced by tacky stopover spots like the bright pink Andy Womack’s Flamingo Motel in Flagstaff. The main route between east and west had its own flair, all right.

Still, everything whizzed by and I was glad that it did. This place was just mileage that had to be logged in order to get home. Sure, the San Francisco Peaks north of Flagstaff looked sublime. That view struck me as the real West: mountains. But all the rest, the redrock formations and the broad open range country, were sterile, gritty. Nor did I find anything compelling in the people. When we came into Gallup, New Mexico, my driver pointed out the Navajos standing around on the sidewalks. I had never seen an Indian in person before. To make conversation, I asked her how she could tell they were Navajos. Her description of their distinctive facial characteristics—the high cheekbones and oriental features—interested me no more than the sagebrush and rock landscape.

Today, my senses race when I am in that country. The buttes and mesas coax my eyes toward them, and the redrock walls make concentration lines on my forehead as the colors change with the new angles and intensities of a day’s light. Sagebrush, so common in the Southwest, has a scent uncommon in the extreme: I’ll tear off a handful and stuff it in my shirt pocket for a hike or, if I’m driving, lodge it on the dashboard so that the car will fill up with magic. The sparse piñon-juniper rangeland is an old friend by now and it makes me laugh, too, because I am on its side: this “worthless” shrub-forest, scorned by ranchers and silviculturists, has won out. Today the sweet nuts of the piñon draw \$16.99 a pound at your local market.

My emotions ride with the people as well. Although I never could have imagined such a thing in 1963, a decade after my first trip though Gallup

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on Route 66 I stood before a federal judge in a high-ceilinged Albuquerque courtroom trying to help rectify discrimination against Navajo children in the Gallup schools. I put my whole body into my presentation to the judge—not just because the children had been wronged by the denial of their civil rights but also, in a larger sense, because by then I had come to respect the worth and distinctiveness of Navajo culture, so that the legal wrong seemed doubly crass and raw.

What is it that causes a place to occupy a cherished spot on the best wall of a person's mind? A place, such as a sparse high-desert landscape, where a person's taste will have to be acquired? A place where the cultures are different and hard for outsiders to comprehend? This is a complicated matter. But it is one that tells us a great deal about our humanity, as the force of place is created by peoples and history as well as terrain, by the ordinary as well as the elegant and the dramatic, by the emotional and spiritual as well as the quantifiable, by the incremental passage of time that eventually breeds intimacy, by all of the things that allow a person to acquire a profound understanding of the story of a place. In my case, while my superficial visit on Route 66 in 1963 conveys my initial impression of the place, the true origins of my fascination with the Colorado Plateau are not to be found there. But I know where they are found, and that has to do with Paul Roca.



**M**y next contact with the Southwest took place a year and a half after my Route 66 trip. By then I was working as a summer law clerk for the Lewis & Roca firm, at forty lawyers the largest in Phoenix. One of the other clerks was Mariana Roca, daughter of Paul, a senior partner. Mariana and I, thrown together in the first professional venture for both of us, became fast friends. Since she was living at home and regularly invited me over for dinner, I quickly got to know Paul—and his passion for the Southwest.

Paul, in his early fifties, was a rumpled sort. Of medium height and build, he wore his pants low at the waist and they brushed the floor at the

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heels of his cowboy boots. He had a way of standing, locking his knees, that made his legs look saggy, concave. The informality of Phoenix suited him well: except for court appearances, lawyers went without jackets year-round and dispensed with neckties during the hot season.

One of the Southwest's most respected lawyers, Paul wrote much of Arizona's Insurance Code and became an expert in the laws affecting blood banks. When asked if his clients objected to his hefty fees, he would answer dryly: "My clients take pride in having the most expensive attorney between Houston and Los Angeles." An impatient practitioner, Paul wanted things to happen right now. His tirades were legend, although he always directed them to the world-at-large rather than people in the office. I am convinced that Paul, who had his theatrical side, staged most, perhaps all, of his tantrums—either to remind people of the importance of the job at hand or just to punctuate slow days with a little excitement.

Paul was anything but impatient when it came to the history of the Southwest. If he had your attention, he would take as long as you wanted, answer as many questions as you asked, tell as many stories as you could absorb. I was a willing captive and Paul became a mentor—uncle—best friend that summer. We spent all kinds of time together—some of it with him telling his stories and me listening, some of it arguing about law, politics, and grammar over beer or Paul's explosive *toros bravos* (two shots tequila, one shot Kahlua), playing poker, and getting out into the country around Phoenix or the family's summer place up north near Prescott.

Despite my devotion to Paul, when I left Phoenix in August I never expected to return. I had no determination to stay in the West and assumed I would go into practice in New York City or maybe San Francisco. Phoenix, just a backwater town then, was only a summer lark. I couldn't help defining Phoenix by my mother's initial reaction to it: when I told her I was going to clerk there with a good firm, she responded, so help me, "Phoenix? Phoenix *where?*"

Yet, once back at law school, I began to miss the firm and Paul. A couple of professors mentioned that working at Lewis & Roca would be an outstanding professional opportunity. When Paul called and made an offer, I

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jumped at it. After another two and a half years in Arizona with Paul, there would no longer be any doubt that I would live my life in the West.

Paul loved the Southwest with every bone in his body. Born to a Hispanic family in Tucson, he was fascinated by Sonora, the Mexican state south of Arizona. He scoured old journals and church documents and set out on jeep trips into the Sonoran backcountry to photograph dozens of Catholic missions, some in reasonably good shape, some in ruin, some overwhelmed by sand dunes and barely visible to the naked eye. Many had been lost to memory until Paul's rediscoveries. He wrote a fine account of his explorations, *Paths of the Padres through Sonora*. Later, just before his death in 1979, he wrote a similar book on Chihuahua, the neighboring state to the east.

The history of Arizona was intimate and personal for Paul. He had once worked as a legislative assistant for Carl Hayden, who served in Congress, first as a representative, then as a senator, from statehood in 1912 until the 1970s. The association with Hayden, who had seen and shaped so much history, made statehood a recent happening for Paul—including the long series of events leading up to it, beginning with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 when the United States took the Southwest from Mexico. Paul loved to tell stories about Arizona and the Southwest, anywhere, anytime, waving his arms, pacing, heeling the floor with his cowboy boots, his enthusiasm building upon a beer or two, reaching the highest spirit of all after a round of *toros bravos*.

I managed to get Paul to tell me a very substantial percentage of his stories. Before knowing him, I had no sense of the West. Then, through his stories, Paul gave me the West. I had to unwrap the gift myself, but I received it from Paul.



I was born in Ann Arbor, just before Pearl Harbor. My father went overseas with the Army Medical Corps, and my mother and I moved to Saginaw, where her sister lived. After the war, our family moved east. I went to