



# CENTENNIAL

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JAMES A.  
MICHENER

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BOOKS BY  
JAMES A. MICHENER

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Tales of the South Pacific  
The Fires of Spring  
Return to Paradise  
The Voice of Asia  
The Bridges at Toko-Ri  
Sayonara  
The Floating World  
The Bridge at Andau  
Hawaii  
Report of the County Chairman  
Caravans  
The Source  
Iberia  
Presidential Lottery  
The Quality of Life  
Kent State:  
    What Happened and Why  
The Drifters  
A Michener Miscellany: 1950–1970  
Centennial  
  
with A. Grove Day  
Rascals in Paradise

## *Acknowledgments*

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gas shortage. Alys Freeze, Western Collection, Denver Public Library, provided invaluable help, and so did the entire staff of that estimable institution.

A group of wise and dedicated scholars read segments to help me avoid gross error: *Geology*: Wright, Cuffey, Tweto, Schumm; *Inhabitants*: Lewis, Schultz, Stout; *Early Man*: Wormington, Crabtree, Bradley; *Indians*: Trenholm; *Oregon Trail*: Mattes, Franzwa; *Trappers*: McDermott; *Fort Laramie*: Heape; *Cattle Trail*: McClure; *Hunters*: Sellers; *Sugar Beets*: Andrews; *Irrigation*: Moore. They must not be charged with such error as has persisted, because in certain instances I decided to stay with my own interpretations.

During my research I was aided at different and crucial times by two gifted members of the *Reader's Digest* staff: Leslie Laird, who had earlier helped me on my book on Kent State, and John Kings, who had for some years been a rancher in Wyoming. Tessa Dalton provided much expert guidance on wildlife. These three accompanied me on extensive field trips to Mexico, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, California, Utah, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri. All three were good drivers, amiable storytellers and opposed to smoking.

TO  
THREE DISTINGUISHED COLORADO NEWSPAPERMEN:

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Floyd Merrill of Greeley,  
who showed me the rivers;

Otto Unfug of Sterling,  
who taught me about cattle;

Clyde Stanley of Keota,  
who introduced me to the prairie

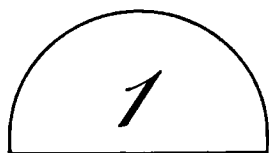


This is a novel. Its characters and scenes are imaginary. There was no Venneford Ranch, no prairie town of Line Camp, no Skimmerhorn cattle drive in 1868, no Centennial. None of the families depicted here were real, nor founded upon real precedents. There was no *Lame Beaver*, nor Skimmerhorn nor Zendt nor Grebe. On the other hand, certain background incidents and characters are real. There was a great convocation in 1851 at Fort Laramie. There was a drought in 1931–1935. Jennie Jerome, the mother of Winston Churchill, did frequent the English ranches near Cheyenne. Charles Goodnight, one of the great men of the west, did haul the corpse of his partner home in a lead box. Melchior Fordney, the master gunsmith, was murdered. The South Platte River did behave as described.

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# THE COMMISSION



ONLY ANOTHER WRITER, SOMEONE WHO had worked his heart out on a good book which sold three thousand copies, could appreciate the thrill that overcame me one April morning in 1973 when Dean Rivers of our small college in Georgia appeared at my classroom door.

'New York's trying to get you,' he said with some excitement. 'If I got the name right, it's one of the editors of *US*.'

'The magazine?'

'I could be wrong. They're holding in my office.'

As we hurried along the corridor he said, with obvious good will, 'This could prove quite rewarding, Lewis.'

'More likely they want to verify some fact in American history.'

'You mean, they'd telephone from New York?'

'They pride themselves on being accurate.' I took perverse pleasure in posing as one familiar with publishing. After all, the editors of *Time* had called me once. Checking on the early settlements in Virginia.

Any sophistication I might have felt deserted me when I reached the telephone. Indeed, my hands were starting to sweat. The years had been long and fruitless, and a telephone call from editors in New York was agitating.

'This Dr. Lewis Vernor?' a no-nonsense voice asked.

'Yes.'

'Author of *Virginia Genesis*?'

'Yes.'

'Had to be sure. Didn't want to embarrass either of us.' The voice dropped slightly, as if that part of the discussion were ended. Then with crisp authority it said, 'Dr. Vernor, I'm James Ringold, managing editor here at *US*. Problem is simple. Can you catch a plane from Atlanta this afternoon and report at my office tomorrow morning at nine?' Before I could even gasp, he added, 'We cover expenses, of course.' Then, when

I hesitated because of my surprise, he said, 'I think we may have something that would interest you . . . considerably.' I grew more confused, which gave him time to add, 'And before you leave for the airport, will you discuss schedules with your wife and your college? We shall very probably want to preempt your time from the end of semester right through Christmas.'

I placed my hand over the mouthpiece and made some meaningless gesture toward Dean Rivers. 'Can I fly to New York on the late plane?'

'Of course! Of course!' he whispered with an enthusiasm as great as mine. 'Something big?'

'I don't know,' I whispered back. Then into the phone I said, 'What was your name again?' When he replied, I told him, 'I'll be there.'

In the next hour I called my wife, arranged for Professor Hisken to take my classes and then reported to the president's office, where Dean Rivers had prepared the way with President Rexford by telling him that it sounded like the chance of a century for me and that he, Rivers, recommended that I be given the necessary leave.

Rexford, a tall southern gentleman who had accomplished wonders collecting funds for a college that badly needed them, was always pleased when one of his faculty received outside attention, because in subsequent meetings with businessmen he could allude to the fact that 'we're becoming better known all the time, something of a national force.' He greeted me warmly and asked, 'What's this I hear about *US* wanting to borrow our finest history man for the autumn term?'

'I really know nothing about it, sir,' I replied honestly. 'They want to interview me tomorrow morning, and if I pass muster, they want to offer me a job from term-end to Christmas.'

'When's your next sabbatical?'

'I was planning to spend next spring quarter in the Oregon libraries.'

'I remember. Settlement of the northwest. Mmmmm?'

'I thought that having started in Virginia and then done my study on the Great Lakes, it might be natural for me to—'

'Complete the cycle? Yes. Yes. You do that and you'll be a very valuable man to us, Vernor. A lot of foundations are going to be looking for projects dealing with the American past, and if we could offer you as a man who has done his homework, Virginia to Oregon . . . well, I don't have to tell you that I could generate a lot of interest in a man like that.'

'So you think I should stay here and work on my Oregon project?'

'I haven't said what I think, Vernor. But I know for a fact . . .' Here he rose and moved restlessly about his office, thrusting his arms out in bursts of energy. 'I know that a lot of these foundations would just love to place a project in Georgia. Get them off the hook of appearing too provincial.'

'Then I'll tell the editors—'

'You won't tell them anything. Go. Listen. See what they have to sell.'

And if by chance it should fit into your grand design . . . How much do we pay you a quarter?"

'Four thousand dollars.'

'Let's do it this way. If what they have to offer is completely wide of the mark—bears no relation to American settlement—turn 'em down. Stay here the fall and winter quarters, then go out to Oregon in the spring.'

'Yes, sir.'

'But if it does fit in with your intellectual plans, say, something on the Dakotas. And'—he accented the word heavily—'if they'll pay you four thousand or more, I'll grant you fall quarter without pay, and you can take your sabbatical with pay spring quarter and head for Oregon.'

'That's generous,' I said.

'I'm thinking only of myself. Point is, it wouldn't hurt with the foundations if I could say that our man Vernor had done that big writing job for *US*. Gives you a touch of professionalism. That and your two books. And believe me, it's that professionalism that makes you eligible for the big grants.' He stalked about the room, hungrily, then turned and said, 'So you go ahead. Listen. And if it sounds good, call me from New York.'

At eight-thirty next morning I was walking down Avenue of the Americas, among those towering buildings of glass, marveling at how New York had changed since I knew it in 1957 when Alfred Knopf was publishing my first book on Virginia. I felt as if I had been away from America for a generation.

*US* had offices north of the new CBS building; its glass tower was the most impressive on the avenue. I rode up to the forty-seventh floor and entered a walnut-paneled waiting room. 'I'm early,' I told the girl.

'So am I,' she said. 'Coffee?' She was as bright as the magazine for which she worked, and she put me at my ease. 'If Ringold-san told you nine, nine it will be.'

At one minute after nine she ushered me into his office, where she introduced me to four attractive young editors. James Ringold was under forty and wore his hair combed straight forward, like Julius Caesar. Harry Leeds, his executive assistant, was something past thirty and wore an expensive double-knit in clashing colors. Bill Wright was obviously just a beginner. And Carol Endermann . . . well, I couldn't begin to guess how old she was. She could have been one of my good-looking, leggy graduate students from a tobacco farm in the Carolinas, or just as easily, a self-directed thirty-three-year-old assistant professor at the University of Georgia. I felt I was in the hands of four dedicated people who knew what they were doing, and was sure I would enjoy watching them operate.

'Let me get one thing straight, Vernor,' Ringold said. 'You published *Virginia Genesis* in 1957 with Knopf. How did it sell?'

'Miserably.'

'But they brought it out in paperback two years ago.'

'Yes. It's widely used in universities.'

'Good. I hope you got back your investment on it.'

'With paperbacks, yes.'

'That book I know. Very favorably. Now tell me about your next one.'

'*Great Lakes Ordeal*. Mostly iron and steel development. A lot on immigration, of course.'

'Knopf do it, too?'

'Yes.'

'Miserably?'

'Yes, but it's paying its way . . . in paperback.'

'Delighted to hear it,' Ringold said. 'Harry, tell him how we got onto his name.'

'With pleasure,' young Leeds said. 'Sometime ago we needed expertise of the highest caliber. On a project of some moment. We sent out calls to about thirty certified intellectuals for recommendations—and guess what?' He pointed at me. 'Abou Ben Adhem's name led all the rest!'

'In the profession,' Bill Wright said, 'you have one hell of a reputation.'

'Hence the phone call,' Leeds said.

'Your books may not sell, Vernor,' Wright continued, 'but the brains of this nation know a good man when they read his research.'

Ringold was slightly irritated by young Wright's interruption and now resumed charge. 'What we have in mind, Professor Vernor, is for you to make a research report for us in great depth, but also at great speed. If you devote your entire time from the end of May till Christmas, we feel sure that with your background you can do it. But our schedule is so tight, if you submit it one day late, it won't be worth a damn to us—not one damn.'

'Does that kind of schedule frighten you?' Leeds asked.

'I work on the quarter system,' I said. 'Either they understood what this meant in way of planning and precise execution, or they didn't. They did.'

'Good,' Ringold said. He rose, walked about his desk and said, standing, 'So now we're down to the nitty-gritty. Carol?'

'What we have in mind, Professor Vernor'—I noticed that she used the exact phraseology of her boss—'is to publish in late 1974 a double issue of *US* devoted entirely to an in-depth analysis of one American community. We want you to go to that community, study it from the inside, give us intimate research on whatever aspects of it interest you deeply.'

'The ones that awaken a gut response,' young Wright volunteered.

'We're already prepared to do a quick once-over job,' Miss Endermann said, 'but what we're after is much deeper . . . nothing less than the soul of America . . . as seen in microcosm.'

I gripped the arms of my chair and breathed slowly. This seemed the kind of commission a man like me dreams of. It was what I had tried to do in Virginia after graduating from the university at Charlottesville and



what I had followed up with at the Great Lakes when teaching at the University of Minnesota. I at least knew what the problem was.

'Have you identified the community?' I asked. Much would depend upon whether I had competence in the selected area.

'We have,' Ringold said. 'Tell him, Harry.'

'Because the arteries of America have always been so crucial,' Leeds said, 'we determined from the start to focus on a river . . . the ebb and flow of traffic . . . the journeymen up and down . . . the influence of time sweeping past . . .' As he spoke he closed his eyes, and it was apparent that he had chosen the river, and no doubt the specific settlement on it. He opened his eyes and said, 'So, Professor Vernor, I'm afraid we've stuck you with a river.'

'I worked with rivers in Virginia,' I said.

'I know. That's what attracted me to you.'

I was eager to land this job, because it was the kind of work I ought to do before going to Oregon, but I did not want to appear too eager. I sat staring at the floor, trying to collect my thoughts. DeVoto had already done a masterful job on the Missouri River, but he had left some topics undeveloped. I might be able to write a strong report on St. Joseph, or one of the Mandan villages, or even something farther west, say Great Falls. 'I'd not want to compete with DeVoto,' I said tentatively, 'but there's a chance I could do something original on the Missouri.'

'It wasn't the Missouri we had in mind,' Leeds said.

Well, I thought, that's that. Of course, there was still the Arkansas. I could select some settlement like La Junta . . . include Bent's Fort and the massacre at Sand Island. But I insisted upon being honest with these editors, so I told them, 'If your river is the Arkansas, you'd do better choosing someone more fluent in Spanish. To deal with the Mexican land grants, and subjects like that.'

'We weren't interested in the Arkansas,' Leeds said.

'What did you have in mind?'

'The Platte.'

'The Platte!' I gasped.

'None other,' Leeds said.

'That's the sorriest river in America. You've heard all the jokes about the Platte. "Too thick to drink, too thin to plow." That's a nothing river.'

'That's why we chose it,' Leeds said.

Miss Endermann broke in. 'We specifically wanted to avoid notorious places like St. Joseph, one of my favorite cities on earth, because it would be too easy to do. A great deal of American history was drab, just as you said now—a nothing river, "a mile wide and an inch deep."'

'We reasoned, and properly so I'm convinced,' Ringold said, 'that if we can make the Platte comprehensible to Americans, we can inspire them with the meaning of this continent. And goddamnit, that's what we're going to do. We'll leave the drums and bugles and flying eagles to others. We are going to dive into the heart of that lousy river . . .' He