

BIG BROTHER KNOWS

The West meets here. Words and photos by Tim Findley.

THE FUTURE rushes at us with digital electronic speed, faster than we can think. In some already wired urban areas, it is welcomed for its promise, but often in the haunting regions of outback where people have invested generations in already “sustainable” lifestyles, it feels like a threat.

Maybe not for the first time, but with more rapidly known examples, we seem not quite to trust each other, as if we have lost any really unifying purpose. We have gone from parading our pride and world leadership in the promotion of human rights to arguing about our responsibility for impending doomsday. The politicians capitalize on fear while mocking the courage of the past and revising the history of our ancestors. Don't go there, some of us think, but others still believe in the promise of their heritage.

American society has long since evolved from Teddy Roosevelt's inspiration to send the Great White Fleet around the world as a message of national pride. A few sociologists and political scientists have

lately begun to propose that the United States is becoming a collection of balkanized regions driven and divided by peculiar interests, something like the Soviet Union after the collapse of communism. Still others suggest, even demand, that we should become part of a global community, putting aside national pride and economic advantage, but responsible, somehow, to assure the world's well-being. Young, well-educated people even argue that our history itself is a lie, based not on the productive use of natural resources and industrial strength that once amazed the world, but on what they now define as exploitation of indigenous people and abuse of precious wilderness.

Our “unalienable rights” that Thomas Jefferson defined in The Declaration of Independence were taken from the 17th century writing of British philosopher John Locke. “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of,” Jefferson wrote before changing just one of Locke's words. Trying to dodge the issue of slavery, Jefferson wrote “happiness” where Locke had written “property.”

Times were changing. ■

DON'T ASK QUESTIONS

Bridgeport, Calif.—Fred Fulstone takes a seat in the front row of folding chairs lined up before a small riser and a dais. It is the kind of room meant to accommodate all sorts of needs in the community of Bridgeport, Calif.—from a potluck supper to a planning-commission hearing. The nicely polished wood floors in the hall rimmed with windows reflect a bright late autumn sun just beginning to cross the soaring high Sierra that dominates the western horizon near the Nevada border.

It is nothing new to the old sheep rancher. Fred has confronted this same issue time and again in boardrooms and rented halls from Reno to Carson City, and even on mountainsides and boggy meadows where he brought up the bureaucrats himself over the last few years. He might not have met all the 30 or so others from this rim of the Sierra invited to the meeting at Bridgeport, but Fred thinks he knows what to expect. He sits patiently in the front row, a loose-leaf notebook on his lap and his carefully handwritten three-page statement ready for him to read.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FSW) dis-

trict director Bob Williams steps up on the riser and clasps his hands around the dais like it is a pulpit. And although they know each other well from all those years when the federal government pushed and bullied away Fulstone's grazing allotments in regions further north, the director takes no notice of the familiar old sheep rancher seated directly in front of him.

Williams counts heads—maybe 25 people

there, including two members of the press. He has plenty of chairs, too many really, set up before his step-up stage, and he knows he will easily be in charge. He takes a friendly posture, the Fish & Wildlife emblem on his shirt sparkling against his light gray, wiry beard. It presents a portrait of the ultimate outdoor bureaucrat of our time, true to his uniform, but expressing his own assumedly wild spirit that seeks only “cooperation” and

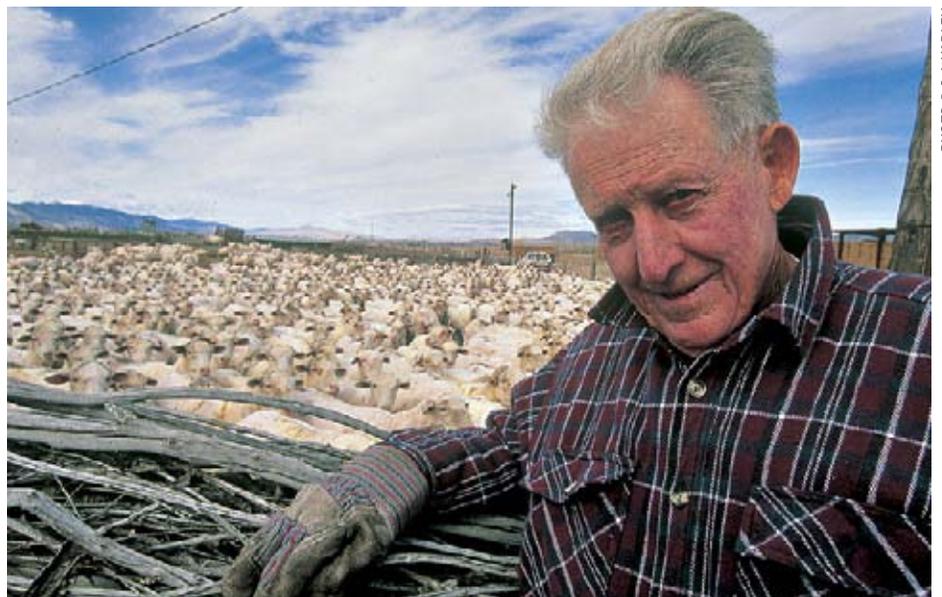


PHOTO © C.J. HADLEY

Fred Fulstone has been running sheep in the Sierra Nevada for more than 70 years. The federal government seems to be trying to make it pretty near impossible for him to continue.

“partners.” John Muir with a GS rating.

“We won’t be taking any statements today,” Williams tells them. “I’ve brought my whole team here to talk with you and we think it’s a better idea if we just break up into groups and talk one on one with any questions you have. We’ve done this before, and it works much better.”

His team lines themselves up at the back

“We want to work with you on this.”

Fred just sits there, and Williams ignores him, talking first with the outfitter who seems to grow more and more exasperated at what Williams expects to be the new “designated habitat” in hunting grounds around Warren Peak.

The press-agent member of Williams’ team is always nearby when Williams talks to

Williams’ fox-furred hand in presenting this sort of guided forum as means of reaching consensus is part of his training to avoid argument in getting what he wants and what the Center for Biological Diversity is trying to engineer with threatened lawsuits.

What that amounts to north of Mammoth Lake is some 417,000 acres designated as “critical habitat” for bighorn sheep in part



ABOVE: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service district director Bob Williams runs the meeting his way: “It works much better.” LEFT: Williams is an outdoor bureaucrat looking for “cooperation” and “partners.” He talks to frustrated hunting guide Matthew Taylor.

of the room and raise hands to show who they are, as if their own stitched-emblem shirts aren’t enough. They have charts with printed explanations like you’ll see at ranger stations, all set up on easels where the team will distribute themselves, ready to discuss it.

“This is your time,” Williams coaches the audience. “Use it well.”

“Wait a minute,” says hunting-guide Matthew Taylor in a politely mild protest. “I’d like to hear what others say so we can understand this whole thing.”

“Well, you can talk to them, then,” Williams tells him in patronizing terms. “Like I said, we’ve done it this way before; it works much better.”

Of course it does. Williams will not admit it, but it must be somewhere in the manual he and other federal bureaucrats study on how to use facilitators and charts and little dodges like this one to arrive at what they will claim later is “consensus.” As he promises them,

media. She nods reassuringly as the boss fends off questions on how his arbitrary acts might affect the livelihood and, maybe less importantly, the customs of people in this region. “Our job is to protect endangered species,” he proclaims, beginning to wrap himself in a cloak of righteous authority. “I believe in the United States and Congress and they passed the Act. I serve the Act. Have you even read THE ACT?”

To be sure, the reporter has plenty of experience with the missionary zeal of FWS as well as its petty litigious partners—in this case from the Center for Biological Diversity using the Endangered Species Act as the “law of the land” to supersede human interference.

It works for all kinds of convenient purposes, like forcing people off federal land, reducing their right to raise livestock, preventing access to “critical habitats,” and generally attempting to regulate the liberty of using even private property for productive purposes. To date, “the Act” alone can’t be credited with saving any critters from extinction, but its managers have a long and distinguished record of raising hell with the human population.

trucked into the region from other states that Williams and his team want to be reclassified as an endangered “subspecies” of the desert bighorn. Despite contrary scientific evidence presented by the Nevada state veterinarian as well as others, Williams insists on what others say is a “wives’ tale,” that bighorns would be threatened with extinction by contact with Fulstone’s domestic sheep. Taylor’s hunters, as well as just about any other humans except the subspecies of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service employees themselves, generally cannot be trusted any more than cougars on the habitat trails Williams intends to serve.

“Damned if I know what to make of this,” says hunting-guide Taylor after listening to Williams talk in circles. “But I think, clearly, we’re right in their sights.” He says people coming down from the mountains told him of federal agents torching manzanita and brush that might serve mountain lions in an ambush of the bighorns.

“I could designate much more,” the FWS director has said again and again, pretending to seem generous, but sending a message that sounds threatening.

Fulstone has been grazing his sheep in this region for more than 70 years and knows plenty about bighorns in their natur-

al habitat. But in the 10 years Williams and his team have moved in many more of their “subspecies” into areas they never occupied, Fulstone has lost thousands of acres in grazing allotments, cutting into his business and changing his way of life. Part of what he has written to read at this meeting addresses the concerns of others like Taylor or like local shops, stores, and services that depend on the outdoor-bound visitors to Bridgeport.

“By promoting policies based on quack science, to enlarge their area to the north, invites ecological disaster,” he has written. “You will lose your watershed and plant life by burning and not grazing....”

“The USFWS of the Department of Interior

is trying to pull a fast one and railroad its agenda through. If it gets by with this, it will be a tremendous social and economic disruption to the communities that will be affected....”

It is the sort of thing others like Taylor have been hoping to enlarge upon from an open discussion. But Williams prefers his trained one-to-one method that divides the crowd. The FWS chieftain strolls around his posters at the back of the room, purposely ignoring the old man—the biggest landowner in Smith Valley—who remains seated with his nephew Kris Leinassar among the empty rows of folding chairs, angry and speechless. ■

maybe even clever.

Even while President William Clinton paid off more enviro dues by halting the opening of the Newmont Mine above Yellowstone in 1996, the McLaughlin churned on, not only avoiding environmentalist challenges, but actually winning praise from the Sierra Club for its management’s cooperation with environmentalists. That was Krauss, a tall, unassuming, but clearly centered and intense man who knew how to play the game in a state where excuses alone won’t do.

It was in an area already stripped and pitted by mercury mines operating since the 1860s, but Homestake, after spider veins of ore rather than nuggets, stressed its efforts to repair the damage of the mercury mines. It required more than 300 special permits before its work could even begin. By 1992, 7,000 acres of the property had been turned over to the University of California at Davis, leading up to the point 10 years later when all 11,000 acres had given up the last of its profits and become part of a growing open-space reserve.

The Donald and Sylvia McLaughlin Reserve bore the name of the geologist for whom the mine was named and his wife, who by then had become what UC Davis

THEY JUST WANT TO HELP US

Winters, Calif.—In another multipurpose room with late autumn sunlight glazing the polished floor, a slightly larger crowd of perhaps 30 sit together around banquet tables arranged into a large square. This meeting in Winters stresses equality in the arrangement, inviting each one there to speak in turn, telling his or her own story.

Ray Krauss’ chair at one corner of the square gives him no greater position than anyone else, even though they all know the former mining-company representative is the main instigator of the Blue Ridge Berryessa

Natural Area (BRBNA) and a paid consultant to steer the ever-growing 800,000-acre concept through blessings from local governments of four Northern California counties.

No pushy bureaucrats here; no printing-office posters proclaiming protection of endangered species. This is Northern California, west of Sacramento, where the children are well behaved, dogs are kept on leashes, nobody smokes, and everybody loves the gently rolling hills laced with parklike groves of oaks. Retirement is a busy way of life here in a place still-Spanish “Californios” style in its quiet stride, seemingly forgotten by the tacky clutter of common development elsewhere in the Golden State. Nobody around that big square of tables wants anything to do with that kind of growth.

Oddly enough, the big table sharing experiences of oaks and eagles, wild pigs and black-tailed deer, owes its origin to maybe the richest gold strike of the 20th century in California. Between 1979 until it finally petered out in 2002, Homestake’s McLaughlin Mine at the confluence of Napa, Lake and Yolo counties brought out 3.379 million ounces of gold—a truckload by volume, but still the biggest, richest strike of the century in California, a last bonanza.

Krauss, who at one point had represented the statewide mining association, wound up his career as the environmental manager for the McLaughlin Mine. When it was opened, from the air at least, it seemed like a dreadful moonscape around an open pit, potentially endangering the headwaters of Putah and Cache creeks. But Homestake would be wise,

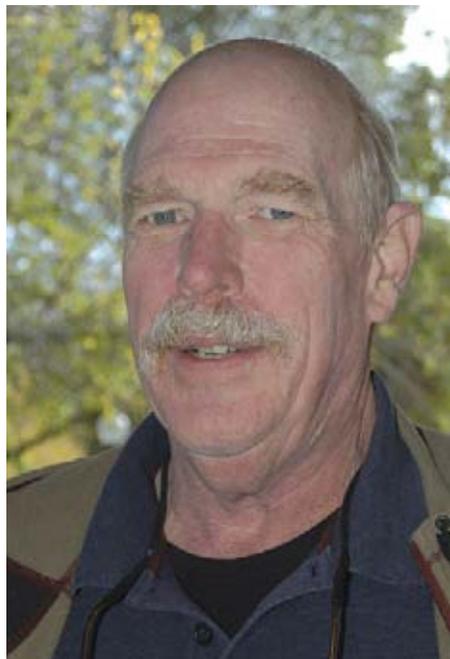


The square table stresses equality in the arrangement, inviting each one there to speak in turn, telling his or her own story.

described as “a celebrated Bay Area environmentalist.”

More than just a field trip for UC Davis students, it was soon like a laboratory for young people studying not geology as much as ecology. Aided by Krauss’ connections, the reserve, almost before it could be named or even defined, simply began to grow. By the end of last year, the concept consumed a region from the edge of the Mendocino National Forest on the north, all the way to the strip of Interstate 80 on the south in Solano County, covering a region split between federal ownership, state preserves, and private ranches, farms and orchards.

Predictably, The Nature Conservancy was there ready with half a million dollars to pur-



Ray Krauss used to represent the statewide mining association but wound up his career as environmental manager for the McLaughlin Mine. He knows how to play the game.



Waves of hills, grass, dark oaks and groves of black walnut run like rivulets through mild coulees into the crease of the Capay Valley. One property owner says, "I feel like the BRBNA is a blanket spreading over us, not with development or just new people, but with a sense that someone else is in charge, even over our own property."

chase more land from state, federal, and private sources. The "Conservation Partnership" (BRBNACP) began, in Krauss' vision, to virtually invent itself. "It was just a forum to discuss it all," he says. "We don't do anything but help landowners and other stakeholders do what they think is best."

Yet, this meeting in Winters is in part to identify new sources of funds to purchase still more lands under easements and trusts and to prepare a winning presentation for county governments that will win their approval.

Far down one end of the big square of tables where Krauss seems sprung on the edge of his chair, Vicki Murphy fidgets a little, not questioning the others who speak of the peaceful, uncluttered valley they want to save, but uncertain about why they are there to somehow redefine it.

Nearly as long as Krauss has been organizing the BRBNA, Vicki and her cohort, Family Farm Alliance members, have been appearing at county supervisors' meetings and planning sessions, urging them not to fall into simple approval of the nonprofit idea. She sees it as a siren's song, luring local government into another form of control.

Vicki and her husband Bob earned their retirement on 2,400 acres owned by the fami-

ly for the last century. They have a comfortable, entertaining way of life with a few cattle and some docile horses in a place they built themselves. From the nob of one of the waves of hills behind their home, they can look out on a landscape that remained much the same in the 19th or even 18th century, with grasses faded to a winter chocolate gray among the dark oaks and groves of black walnut, running like rivulets through mild coulees into the crease of the Capay Valley. On another hill below them is a 15-foot cross, hardly noticeable from anywhere else, that honors their ancestors. It is a peaceful pastoral scene, mildly marred at the south end of the valley where the largest casino in Northern California maintains its own, gated expanse. Just 29 surviving tribal members created the 75,000-square-foot Cache Creek Casino along two-lane state highway 16 in a place far from any freeway and unlikely, it seemed, to draw the high rollers it now does from San Francisco and elsewhere.

The Murphys, like others blessed to live in this time-stilled valley, are troubled by the casino's expansion and with what might be more unwelcome development. Yet the casino has been willing to limit its growth with help from a conservation easement, and the

economy alone has slowed any new housing. What really seems to be expanding is the BRBNA.

"I feel like it's a blanket spreading over us," Vicki says, "not with development or just new people, but with a sense that someone else is in charge, even over our own property."

There are others at that big square of tables who are also property owners—ranchers, orchard growers, local equipment operators. No one, Krauss insists, who need have any worry about the BRBNA.

Yet, at the big table they are not considered property owners as much as they are "stakeholders," just like the students, the environmentalists, the tribe, and the federal-land representatives who have an equal place in the discussion.

It is difficult to get a full grasp of the BRBNA, like reaching for a handful of foam. According to its media release, the group has nearly 75 partners guided by five principal objectives, including preservation of regional natural and cultural values, support of "sustainable" economic development, respect of landowners' rights, and encouragement of nongrowth recreation on public lands.

It is the fifth of those "principal objectives" that bothers Vicki. "Consider all positions on

an issue but only support those where the partnership has reached consensus.”

That word consensus again. No vote counting, no majority, but a degree of peer pressure that works best when everybody gets around a big table and agrees they love the place enough to show it. Enough, Vicki fears, to create an “Agriculture Park” spread over private and public lands under the umbrella of an unelected consensus.

“What that would do is simply encumber farms and ranches, maybe not into a park, but a virtual park where we would own the land, but be told what we can do on it and with it,” Vicki says. “That’s serfdom, and it erases property rights.”

“Oh, no, no,” Krauss calmly advises. “We have ranchers and growers as part of the group who agree that this is the best way to protect their property as well as the open space.”

Among the BRBNA’s partners are certainly several ranches and farms, but also a near who’s who of nonprofit environmentalist organizations ranging from The Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Club to the Trust for Public Lands and the wilderness/wildlands’-promoting Tuleyome group.



Bob and Vicki Murphy, with their view of Capay Valley, still worry about its future.

In the “vision” of a BRBNACP release: “It is the year 2030. The 800,000-acre BRBNA is an expansive landscape composed of publicly owned wild resource and recreation lands;

and well-managed private lands, ranches, and vital agricultural operations.... The BRBNA is protected from urban sprawl through a combination of public ownership, conservation easements, and the efforts of conscientious landowners. New housing and visitor services are located in the gateway communities that border the BRBNA, further protecting this extraordinary region....”

It’s almost a transcript from Agenda 21 created under United Nations’ auspices in the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit in 1992.

Or is it? Is it instead just a well-intentioned forum of people who want to preserve their way of life, meeting in a sun-glazed room on a late

autumn afternoon and lunching later in one of the good restaurants in an almost-perfect little town called Winters? ■

CONSPIRACY OF LIBERTY

Reno, Nev.—The convention meeting rooms at John Ascuaga’s Nugget in Reno, Nev., are almost always carpeted, with nightclub-style tables gathered around a rostrum. The lighting is muted, perhaps not providing as much illumination as there should be on someone

willing to call himself “a Paul Revere of our time.”

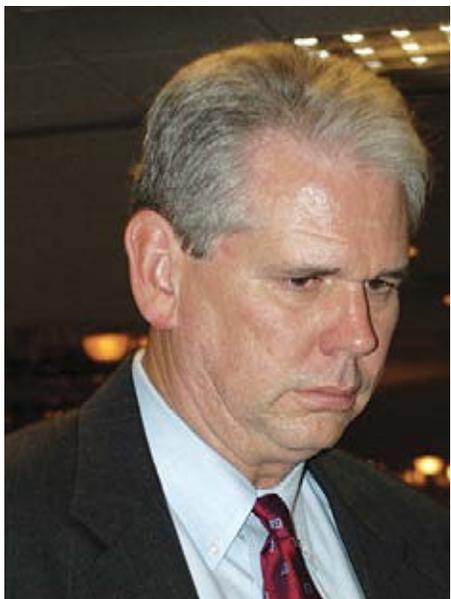
It is a rhyme that once every American child heard, and probably memorized: “Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.” The poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, gave Revere too much credit as the only rider to alert the militia of the approaching British, but at the same time allowed history to forget the even greater role of the Boston silversmith in formulating the American revolution.

“We are the Paul Reveres of our time,” Dan Byfield of Stewards of the Range tells the crowd of some 100 or more in introducing the Stewards’ president, Idaho attorney Fred Kelly Grant.

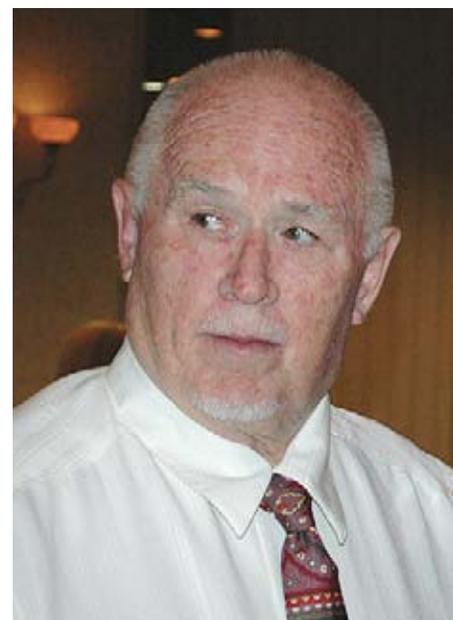
The people seated at the round tables listen like patient kids eager to hear the epic rhyme. But even more, as the middle-aged landholders and rural residents that most of

them are, they are anxious to learn how to defend themselves against a government bureaucracy more invasive of their rights in these years than the redcoats themselves.

Stewards of the Range—an organization founded by the already legendary rancher Wayne Hage—has met annually in the West for several years to discuss practical means of confronting the siege of federal authority



Dan Byfield, left, tells the crowd for the Stewards of the Range meeting in Reno, before introducing president Fred Kelly Grant, right, “We are the Paul Reveres of our time.”



around its rural ranch lands and homes.

Grant, who became president of the organization after Wayne Hage died, is not a revolutionary. His background stretches from being the chief of the Organized Crime Unit in Baltimore, Md., to working in the Idaho governor's office, and more recently creating a "renegade" reputation among the feds for his defense of private property rights in Owyhee County, Idaho.

Like Paul Revere, his expertise and experience is not in methods of confrontation, but

in organization on a local level that will require official attention.

"Sure," he says, "it's the same technique the left has used to infuse its authority. Only this time we will have people prepared to claim their own rights."

The two-day session at the Nugget features an array of speakers from across the West, but emphasizes the workshops where property-rights' advocates discuss reasons and means of reestablishing influence and authority in local governments.

It is unashamedly a conspiracy of liberty and free speech, the same elements that fueled the American Revolution. It struggles with the same disadvantage of trying to convince a majority who would prefer just to get along with the system as it is, but it is Grant's hope that by sounding an alarm, people might see the federal power overwhelming their lives. So the meeting breaks into workshops planning, sharing, and even conspiring—just like their adversaries do. ■

IT'S STILL A FREE COUNTRY. ISN'T IT?

Americans have never quite trusted their politicians. They weren't expected to. That's why framers of the Constitution included a system of checks and balances to prevent any political leader from gaining ultimate power. Of course, that was before we saw the likes of Nevada Sen. Harry Reid.

Short weeks after Fred Fulstone had his latest encounter with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Nevada sheep rancher was at another meeting in Yerington, Nev., trying to convince county commissioners that the addition of more Sierra wilderness in legislation backed by Reid would not only threaten grazing use, but pose the ultimate threat of wildfires.

Reid, who has amassed a personal fortune in real estate during his 20 years in office, did not consult with Fulstone. The Senate majority leader seldom consults with constituents not already beholden to him. The tradeoff for more wilderness in the Tahoe region would open parts of Lyon County for sale or trade of federal land to developers. Reid helped build Las Vegas that way, by using supposedly environment-saving pressures to convince farmers in the northern part of the state to sell their land to shills from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) or private developers who would then swap it for more lucrative federal property in Vegas. Except for using TNC operatives in a secret deal, Reid hardly even tried to disguise the scam. Nothing could be done about it anyway. In Lyon County, the senator's aides described it as a take-it-or-leave-it offer, one they dare not refuse.

President William Clinton, never known as an "outdoorsman," set aside more than a million acres of the West with the help of his

Interior secretary, Bruce Babbitt, who called it Clinton's "legacy." Using federal lands in the West to build supposedly lasting admiration seems to have replaced the old style of erecting pigeon-spotted statues in public parks.

In this session of Congress, more than 20 separate bills designating thousands more acres in the West as wilderness have been introduced by politicians eager to win their merit badges (and, incidentally, campaign contributions) as supporters of the environment.

And while Fulstone took his frustration to Yerington, Vicki Murphy went once again to supervisors in Yolo County, Calif., urging them not to so easily accept the designation of a National Conservation Area that Krauss' BRBNA now proposes for the Capay Valley.

It is just that sort of end run at legal authority that Fred Kelly Grant and the Stewards of the Range hope to block with his seminars and workshops to "bring control back home." But, as Grant instructs, it is no longer so simple as casting the right votes. "There just aren't enough of us in the rural West to make a difference," he admits.

Especially since the 1990s, Americans have begun to see that there are shadows within shadows in the formulation of public policy—from environment to immigration—with fear of the future a favorite tool to win the argument.

Of course, the world may end anyway on a Thursday in December five years from now, according to the Mayan calendar, or Washington may simply slip into the sea, according to Al Gore. But, if you must scare yourself with visions of doom, there is one that seems already to have come at least partially true.

English author George Orwell foresaw it in 1949 when he wrote his novel "1984" about a society ruled by "Big Brother" and convinced in "newspeak" to accept the absolute domination of their lives by an unseen tyrant who told them what was best for them all.

Newspeak was sort of like what we call "politically correct," and a little more like the computer language we have learned to understand without understanding. We don't need to understand when our every move on many streets is monitored by the kind of big screens Orwell described. But even Orwell in "Animal Farm" did not foresee the computer chip track-

ing of livestock and domestic animals with the NAIS program, and we don't seem to recognize the insidious means of computer chip management of our lives implanted now in passports and credit cards.

Indeed, there are some places we all frequent that automatically know and record everything about us. Ever notice how your personal computer seems to know your buying habits and your interests? Ever wonder why Wal*Mart really does seem to meet all your needs?

In "1984," Big Brother wasn't seen as a real person, like Harry Reid, but as a sort of reassuring cartoon face...a little like that happy smile on a yellow button we all know.

Have a nice day. ■

