

A Sense of Belonging

Wherever I go, the West defines me.
By Candice Barnes

I define myself as a westerner, a daughter belonging to the soil that has been imbedded deep into the “souls” of my bare feet since childhood. Wallace Stegner wrote in his essay, “A Sense of Place,” that as a society we cannot be healthy until we stop running, learn to be quiet and acquire a sense of belonging. My belonging is the mesa homestead that my great-grandfather carved out of the rugged land of northwest New Mexico. This land—the heat, the smell of scrub cedar after a storm, the flow of a horse galloping across a sage flat—created me.

It is more complex, however, than saying I am defined as a westerner simply by having a home west of the 100th meridian. It is a stewardship for the land born of the experiences of five generations of cattle ranchers, farmers, loggers and sheepherders that defines me. Their struggles, defeats and triumphs are buried deep in my spirit. This West—herding cattle to water every day the summer I was nine, learning to drive the truck through the alfalfa field, and pictures of my father, mother, and me at logging camp when I was learning to walk—is what I am.

This stewardship, an essence of creating, being and living not on but with the land, evolved in me an impacting and lasting sense of community. Prevalent in most western agricultural areas are communities, individuals who have ties outside of family to each other. These ties are both tangible and intangible; individuals in these communities are a helping hand, helping to brand calves, feed in the winter, or put up hay. They are also emotional support. The loss of family land is felt by the community as a loss of their own; equally both joy and pride in your life are felt by the community. These ties to the land do not acknowledge race, religion, or income level; they look deeper than that to the steward as the caretaker of our most precious resource for future generations.

My western heritage has given me many

experiences through other’s eyes. I have seen grown men, their faces hardened by life, break into joyous smiles every time a new calf is born. I have seen these same men tear up when their entire herd is shipped because drought forced them out of a business and lifestyle they love. I have seen the farmer at complete peace as he runs his fingers through freshly plowed soil. I have seen a sheepherder struggling through driving rain to help a ewe

alone on a horse with only God’s beauty to keep me company. I know too that there is the land and the animals that depend on me as a westerner, as a caretaker, owner, and user for survival. For me it is deeper than this, buried in the land that my family and I live and work on and in the dreams of my ancestors. It is their dreams that whisper through the pinions and roar down the mountains in the spring thaw.



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ABOVE: Candice begins to find her “sense of place” around 1985 on Middle Mesa, N.M., where her grandfather Pinky Mackey (left) shows his son-in-law some of the cattle in 1986.



PHOTO COURTESY THE BARNES FAMILY

deliver a lamb, and being soaking wet and overjoyed that the lamb is alive. These experiences have made me stronger in the face of trial and thankful for the lifestyle I have had a chance to live.

There is also a feeling of profound individualism. Yes, you are dependent on the land for your livelihood; yet I can spend hours

Without these roots to my past that my western heritage has given me, I would not be who I am today—an individual proud of the western soil that is ingrained in my soul with generations of hardship, struggle and triumphs making me stronger. Regardless of where I make my future home—a

high-rise in New York, a plantation in Georgia, or a cattle ranch in New Mexico—because of this inheritance from my ancestors I will always be a westerner. ■

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