THE LAND OCEAN
John Florin and Kathleen Braden

If you pull off US-93 in south-central Idaho into Craters of the Moon National Monument, park at the bottom of Inferno Cone, and hike to the summit, you have climbed into a 6000-foot high crow’s nest at the top of the world. Around you is a sea of lava, desert soil, buttes, sagebrush, pine, and juniper, stretching for what seems to be a thousand Idahos. The only sign of settlement is the town of Arco on the distant horizon, a long-time gathering point for “seekers.” It began as a junction for miners heading north to Montana and the Idaho Panhandle, seeking mineral wealth from the land; then it worked as an agricultural center when people took up the fight against the arid western soil, trying to turn the desert brown into green with Snake River waters. In the 1950s, Arco became a boom town again when the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission sought an isolated place to build the nation’s first nuclear power reactor; and finally, the town found its niche serving the tourists and hunters who seek out the Great American West, hoping to bring the frontier myth to life.

There are few signs of travelers today, and below you from Inferno Cone, the Land Ocean undulates in waves of grass and mountains. Your eyes can find no borders here. On this vast sea, there is only frontier.

THE LAND OCEAN
Raymond Krischynas and Aleksei Novikov

Krasnoyarsk is the place that always seems to be in the middle of Russia. To the left is western Siberia and European Russia; to the right, eastern Siberia and the Far East. Krasnoyarsk is also in the middle of Siberia itself, wedged between the oil and gas province of the West Siberian swamps and the gold and diamond-rich plateaus of Eastern Siberia.

The horizontal east-west stretch that dominates the outline of the country is diversified in this place by the mighty perpendicular of the Yenisey River, going in a straight line up to the Arctic Ocean. Here the Trans-Siberian railway crosses the Yenisey, and as if admitting the particular centrality of Krasnoyarsk, the express stops here for twelve hours. The central location breathed life into the city less than a 100 years ago, and here one almost senses that each place in Siberia is not a locality, but rather a location, a dot in the navigational chart for the immense ocean of land. The rather bleak city has little history and few attractions except views of the Yenisey from its only bridge and a memorial called the “Siberian Road to Exile.” The middle of the road seems to be the most logical place for a memorial to a way that leads from everywhere to nowhere.

After Krasnoyarsk the traveler’s only companions on the boring and relentless journey across this stretch of Russia would be the staccato of rails, the stately trees of the taiga, and the mileposts that seem to celebrate the triumph of distance over human efforts in this endless expanse.
SIBERIA

The train takes almost a week to traverse this immense Land Ocean, and little wonder that the notion of "Siberian distances" has become idiomatic in Russian. Spanning eight time belts, Siberia has an area far larger than Australia. Most of land area is the wilderness of the taiga, the northern coniferous forest dominated by fir and larch, the monotonous ocean of trees where human settlement is a scattered archipelago of small islands. A line from a popular 1960s song, when the romanticization of the Siberian frontier was at its peak, conveys a rather accurate image: "the green seas of taiga are humming under the wings of the airplane."

The surface of the Land Ocean is not smooth: the southern and eastern perimeter of the region consists of rugged mountains and plateaus separating it from China and the Pacific. The overall build is that of a bowl open to the Arctic, offering the cold air an unimpeded road into the interior. The image of the great frozen wilderness is of course the biggest part of the popular perception of Siberia both in Russia and abroad. The Land Ocean is indeed a continuation of the Arctic Ocean, part of the great northern realm of the cold. Not surprisingly most of the region is underlain by an ocean of frozen water in permanently frozen subsoil, the "permafrost" that is the blight of Siberia. It not only severely constrains opportunity for agriculture, but makes the construction and maintenance of permanent roads extremely costly, as roadbeds begin "to flow" with each spring thaw. One-third of Siberia's land area lies north of the Arctic Circle in the tundra zone of Arctic grasslands, which in the extreme north becomes almost an arctic desert with only sparse mosses and lichens for the reindeer to browse. Even the official designation of this area as the "Extreme North" or the "Far North" evokes a feeling of the edge of the world, where life gives way to the reign of ice and people huddle in layers of fur to survive.

THE AMERICAN WEST

Big Sky Country, Great Plains, Grand Canyon, Great American Desert - there is nothing small about the Land Ocean. Perhaps no other region of the United States inspires such clearly defined imagery, both at home and abroad. Mention the American West, and immediately people see cowboys, covered wagons, and cattle drives. It is a place that lends itself to legend, hyperbole, and promotions; in fact, the West was opened up to a large degree by developers selling mythology to the American public.

The initial element of that myth was a picture of an "empty" land, waiting for a growing population to flex its muscle and spread from sea to sea. In the first of a series of historic contradictions, what turned out to be the truth was that the land was hardly empty, and the indigenous people who used it for millennia were reduced through a series of wars and betrayals to tenancy on the most meager parcels of the Land Ocean. The cowboy cattle drives that were to become one of the most enduring legends of the Old West turned out in reality to represent a relatively brief period before rail connections and roads integrated the West into the national economy. Perhaps in the most ironic twist of truth, the rugged individualists who are supposed to have built the West by their own stamina and tenacity have been supported all along by a generous federal system of subsidies.

But what exactly is the West? The topography of the region is strikingly diverse. The rolling high plains of western Kansas are joined with the peaks of the Rockies of central Colorado, the stark flatness of Utah's Salt Flats with the dramatic gorges of the canyonlands of northern Arizona and southern Utah. A key element of the West is the region's general aridity. The land from the mountains of Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana eastward to the Middle West are distinguished primarily on the basis of a climate too dry to support the fields of grains that characterize the "heart of America."

To the west, only the Pacific-facing higher elevations are moist. Lowlands everywhere
Humans are scattered far and wide in this unlimited region. The Yar’al Peninsula has one person per 2.5 square miles - islanders lost in the ocean of land. In the tundra blizzards can strike in July; the last snowstorm of spring can be easily confused with the first one of Fall, the clock may show noon in utter darkness, while the sun may shine at midnight. Even the areas that lie south of the Arctic Circle have climates far more harsh than the equivalent latitudes for European Russia. The four directions of the compass rose tend to lose their meaning here, as north and south blend and become synonymous with east; while everywhere else where the edges of the steppes, with cruel Siberian climate but fertile soil. In functional terms, this area is the latest extension of the national granary, but the very low productivity of its wheat farming does not qualify it for inclusion into the Breadbasket region. With the effects of continentality increasing eastward, the very low productivity of its wheat farming does not qualify it for inclusion into the Breadbasket region. The popular image of the Land Ocean remains that of wide open spaces where deer and buffalo roam. A drive across the region may easily reinforce that image, for indeed the impression is often that of an overwhelming emptiness. To the easterner, especially, used to seldom being far from the clear evidence of human occupation, this emptiness can be almost unnerving; there just aren’t any people here! The truth, of course, is something quite different, since the population of the region is strongly concentrated in a relatively few urban areas. But then reality rarely enters into images of the Land Ocean. Manifest Destiny A popular conception in the United States of the 19th century was that the ownership and settlement of much of the North American continent was part of America’s “manifest destiny,” that the country and its people had a special right to continental occupation. Beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which placed all of the vast drainage basin of the Mississippi River under United States ownership, the country seemed to have a limitless supply of new western land just as settlers began to push against the western margins of the existing national territory. In 1845 the recently are dry, intensified in some places by either a more southerly location or a lowered location in the shadow of especially tall mountains. It is no surprise that one of the driest places in the country, Death Valley in eastern California, is a lowland at the eastern foot of the highest U.S. mountains outside Alaska. Finally, aridity and an often rugged topography contribute to a distinctive pattern of population distribution. After Alaska the most sparsely populated states in the United States are Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and then Nevada, all with 12 or fewer people per square mile, compared with an average for the “lower 48” of over 80. Throughout much of the region, people are concentrated in islands of special opportunity - areas of irrigated agriculture, mineral extraction and refining, tourist development, or transportation services. The popular image of the Land Ocean is the realm of endless winters, but the image hardly applies to the southern fringe of the region. In the east, it ends with the jewel of Lake Baikal, the deepest lake in the world, with a unique ecosystem and remarkably clean water. It is also the largest body of fresh water on the planet - a resource that one day may become more important than Siberia’s legendary mineral wealth. The Gift of Destiny Russia began its cross-navigation of the Land Ocean with the expedition of Yermak (1581), when Moscow extended its authority to the basins of the Ob and Irtysh rivers. A mere sixty years later, Russian explorers reached the Pacific. It was in the late 16th-early 17th century that most of the fortresses and stockades that later became the nuclei...
of major cities of modern Siberia were founded. The amazing swiftness of annexation of this huge chunk of the world’s land surface was not due to cunning state enterprise and foresight. It was rather a combination of adventurism (as seen in the expedition of Yermak, a plundering cossack leader of a privately hired and outfitted band who “conquered” West Siberia by defeating a small Tatar khanate called Sibir) and serendipity (Russians entered a geopolitical vacuum: China and the Kazakh hordes were far to the south, and the native tribes were no match for Russians armed with firearms). This swift and easy annexation established a long tradition of carelessly taking Siberia for granted as an asset somehow destined to become Russian.

The goal of the initial advance into Siberia was the quest for the “hard currency” of those times, furs, which were collected as Russia’s tribute from the subjugated native population. Fur trade alone could not lead to any firm settlement, however, and the real annexation of Siberia occurred only with Peter the Great’s attempts to harness its wealth and to integrate Siberia into the Russian Empire. Numerous expeditions were outfitted by Peter and his successors to prospect for minerals and map Siberia, and mining began. At the same time, the tightening of serfdom in European Russia sent into Siberia growing numbers of fugitive peasants who formed the core of the so-called “old settlers.” The substitution of deportation to Siberia for capital punishment (1773) brought in a third element of population. If Russians were outnumbered by the native peoples in 1700, by the 1730s they accounted for 70 percent of the population: Siberia had become part of Russia in more than merely a political sense.

independent country of Texas was annexed. A year later the Oregon Compromise with Great Britain placed all of the land from what is now western Montana westward to the Pacific Ocean under America’s expanding control. In 1848, after the Mexican-American War, the Republic of Mexico ceded what is today essentially the southwestern quadrant of the United States. The outline of the 48 United States was largely complete, and most of those new territories had been added to the nation’s political map before significant American settlement.

An explanation for the comparative ease with which the United States acquired its western half has more to with a series of fortunate differences in political goals than with any special destiny. At the beginning of the century France was involved in a bitter struggle for control of Haiti, so the Louisiana Territory, recently acquired from Spain, was just not that important to French interests. They were almost pleased with the opportunity to sell the land to the United States, for it meant that they could focus their effort on holding their sugar-producting Caribbean colony. Texas in 1845 was largely controlled by American-born settlers who had been instrumental in defeating Mexican forces in the War of Texan Independence (1836), and many of them had sought the opportunity to unite with their home country immediately. It was barriers created by the United States that largely slowed incorporation of Texas for nine years. Great Britain agreed to the Oregon Cession largely because it feared that an eventual flood of American settlers into the Northwest would overwhelm a relatively modest British settlement based on the fur industry. And finally, Mexico, having lost its war with the United States, had little choice but to sell its own northwest, the land that became America’s southwest, for about 5 cents per acre - the same price that had been paid for Louisiana Territory 45 years earlier.
Submerging Native Siberians

The impressive ethnic diversity of the Land Ocean is reflected in the pattern of two east-west belts of native peoples, one in the north and another in the south, separated by a Russian wedge along the main penetration route. For the peoples of the northern tier occupying the tundra and taiga zones, the traditional economy relied on fishing and hunting; that of the much better endowed southern tier was based on nomadic cattle and horse-breeding. The fate of the native peoples in these two belts under Russian rule differed even more than their traditional lifestyles.

The peoples of the northern tier are officially recognized as “the small peoples of the north,” a reflection of their sparse numbers (on the average several thousand) and special protected status. Some of these peoples belong to the Paleoasianic group (the Chukchi, Koryaks, Itel’mens, Yukagirs) and are extremely ancient, relics who were pushed into the north by much later arrivals from the south. The societies of shamanist native northeners had little incentive to change as the risk of discarding the accumulated experience of generations was too great. The fragility of these “frozen” cultures which were perfectly but rigidly acclimated to their equally fragile northern ecosystems spelled doom under Russian impact. Although Russians were paternalistic so long as the natives paid tribute, epidemics and the introduced addiction to alcohol began to decimate their numbers. Over the last 300 years their populations remained static or even dwindled, and added to this loss was the destruction of the natural environment. It takes many years to heal a scar left in the tundra by the passage of a single caterpillar tractor, or to restore spawning grounds in rivers maimed by mining.

The Soviet government created huge territorial autonomies for the peoples of the North that account for 71 percent of Siberia’s area, but only 19 percent of its population. The influx of Europeans to develop mineral resources has meant that now the proportion of native population nowhere exceeds 15 percent. Native peoples are raising a demand for smaller territories with exclusive rights to the use of land and resources, in fact almost reservations.

Marginalizing Native Americans

Perhaps 2.5 million Native Americans were spread rather thinly across what was to become the United States at the time of first European contact. By 1900 the ravages of contact with Europeans had reduced their number by 90 percent. The government had followed a two-nation policy during its first century, with Native American groups repeatedly moved westward beyond the areas of European settlement, creating a Euro- african East and a Native American West. President Monroe had given expression to this approach in 1825 when he wrote that the Native American “should yield to the greater force of civilized population; and right it is to yield, for the earth was given to mankind to support the greater number of which it is capable.” The native population, its numbers ever decreasing, was pushed toward the margins, away from more productive, more accessible areas.

For a time the Land Ocean, viewed as the least desirable portion of the West, was bypassed by this expansion. The region’s native population — the Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche hunting buffalo and antelope along the dry margins of the plains; and the Utes, Paiutes, and Shoshone, living on a diet of deer, small game, and wild edible plants — were briefly ignored. Eventually the open-range cattle industry, dry farming, and minerals attracted American settlers and the process of removal crept across the region. Huge blocks of land earlier set aside for Native Americans were reduced to smaller and smaller parcels. The two-nation concept was abandoned, replaced by a reservation policy that required the indigenous population to surrender their general claim to the land and placed them on clearly defined and generally rather small reserves. By the late 1890s nearly all Native Americans had been moved to some 268 reserves, most of them in the most marginal portions of the West. In a separate current, the 1887 Dawes Act encouraged Native Americans to opt out of the communal lands of the reservation, claim what had been reservation land with the same 160 acres provided for Whites under the Homestead Act, and become farmers. Nearly
The scattered settlement pattern of the small northern peoples is the major cause of their loss of culture, since the teaching of native languages becomes an almost unsurmountable problem of logistics. Founding even a single school can ensure the survival of a native language, but is not always possible. Young people often refuse to learn their own language. Worlds of local culture are hidden on the bottom of the Land Ocean beneath the tidal wave of modern “civilization.”

While the fate of the tribal societies in northern Siberia justly arouses public sympathy, it is often overlooked how different was the course of history for the far more numerous south Siberian peoples (Buryats, Altayans, Khakas, Tuvanins and Yakuts). These Tuirkic and Mongok-speakers (Buddhist with the exception of the Orthodox Yakuts) occupy the southern band of mountains and forest-steppes adjacent to Mongolia. Their numbers grew from about 200,000 in the 17th century to 1.3 million in 1889. Yakuts and Buryats learned the techniques of sedentary agriculture and the tricks of trading from Russians. These people perfectly adapted to Russian rule and thrived by exploiting the more primitive native groups. In fact, their role in driving out the small peoples of the North was greater than that of Russians. Many were assimilated by Yakuts, nomadic cattle-herders who began to migrate into the Lena basin not long before the Russians. Under Russian rule they expanded their territory to the modern boundaries of the Sakha (Yakut) republic, which is larger than India in area. Yet, due to Slav immigration even these more resilient Siberian peoples account for only a quarter of the Land Ocean’s population.

THEME 1: THE FRONTIER AS MYTH AND SYMBOL

The very name “Siberian” suggests to Russians a tough and independent character shaped by the stern life of colonists. This image of the classic Siberian as a bearded peasant, reliable, simple, and solid in his ways, was kept alive by the efforts of the Soviet

Unfortunately, most of their land was unsuited to agriculture, and they soon gave up the attempt and sold the land if they could. Having rejected the reservation system, they became a landless, poor population of farm and rural workers or urban laborers. Today many Native Americans in the West live either in relative deprivation on reservations or in poverty in urban areas. Reservations, often inaccessible and lacking resources, offer scant opportunity for improvement. Full integration into the society and economy of urban American has also been difficult. Still, a very real Native American Renaissance is a part of this environment. It has taken many forms - a return to communalism, a revival of the reservation as a main base of life and culture, a rise in native-owned businesses, an increasing wish to preserve traditional institutions, and a vibrant activism seeking broader recognition of Native Americans as a part of the fabric of American life.
“village prose” circle, whose best-known members were Valentin Rasputin from Irkutsk and movie producer-actor-writer Valit Shukshin from the Altai. One of the favorite plot lines of Shukshin is that of a dashing young Siberian lad without a penny in his pocket who “conquers” Moscow, a story in essence the expression of Siberian frontier identity as opposed to corrupt and false Moscow. Portraying Siberia as a reliable rear guard and frequent savior of ungrateful European Russia has a grain of truth. Such writings have far wider than regional appeal, which may be explained by the desire of non-Siberians to believe that somewhere out east there still is that land of pure rivers, great wealth, and strong people who will never let them down.

The work of another known Siberian, the poet Yevtushenko, demonstrates a quite different facet of the Siberian image. His Siberia is the “Wild East” of tramps, vagabonds, and outlaws. Even at the height of Soviet totalitarianism, Siberia was the place where a man without a passport could easily get lost and find work. Hobos alternating chance jobs with petty crime and drinking sprees are familiar local figures to this day. The Land Ocean has the dubious distinction of having record-high levels of alcoholism and crime, and the rude mores of motley work crews in its logging camps and mines are well known. Part of this spirit of frontier lawlessness stems from Siberia’s past as the land of exiles, many of whom were deported for life or stayed by choice in the rough and tumble Siberian scene when freed.

The mixture of steady peasants and unruly outlaws accounts for the lack of a clear and widely accepted image of the Land Ocean. Furthermore, until recently, the region never was the country’s only or even most important frontier. In contrast to the southern frontiers of Russia, it does not evoke the heroic mythology of colonial wars, Cossack chivalry, or Christian triumphs over Islam. Beginning with Peter’s projects, most of the region’s population were brought there to serve state interests: even Siberian Cossacks were little different from the regular army. The region faithfully served and furthered the strength of that same state whose dictates it instinctively opposed. In the Soviet the 19th century, and especially as the East developed into a more urban and urbane seaboard, interest in the West as a special place blossomed. Eastern writers almost flooded the country with an endless series of Western stories and heroes, some based in fact but many pure fiction. From James Fennimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking tales to Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill Cody, America’s fascination with the Frontier seemed insatiable. Cody himself gained considerable additional fame and fortune by gathering together a collection of his friends and acquaintances, plus a herd of animals, and touring the East and Europe with his Wild West show. This obsession with the West did not end with the passing of the century. Television and American movies have mined the rich possibilities of stories about the West for decades, with John Wayne the embodiment of the American hero.

The West of popular image is as much an experience as a place, moving with settlement and allowing for a constant repetition of the western experience. The Land Ocean may simply be the last West, the final place (outside Alaska) in the country where Americans could be renewed and energized by the frontier experience and by meeting a series of physical challenges: great distances, arid climate, rugged terrain, and an earth difficult to subdue. As writer Tom Mathews described it: “you have to grasp the seductive power of the Western landscape. Drive over the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming or stand at 7000 feet on Mesa Verde...look out and each mesa is an acropolis, each canyon a cathedral.”

Even a tenacious shrub called Artemisia tridentata (better known as sagebrush) has come to symbolize the West, and the population of the United States is probably the proud owner of more of it than any other plant. A single sagebrush may live 100 years, surviving on winter snow waters and tapping water below with its extensive roots. Perhaps in its lonely determination and individualism the tough plant has come to represent the qualities of western life that permeate American mythology about the region.
period, the need to shift population eastward led to the manufacturing of a new image of the region as the land of youth. Here was a wilderness that needed to be “conquered,” the romantic lure of opening new lands and a test for one’s willpower and physical strength (and a great service to the motherland, of course). Land Ocean is still the land of the young, and yet it is a strange frontier. Several times nearly forgotten and then rejuvenated, Siberia seems trapped in “eternal youth” even though in terms of Russian history it is 400 years old. It may now be losing population, and the scarred look of its once pristine nature betrays an advanced age, but the region is still the ever-hopeful debutante with naive visions of a great and special future.

Although the prevailing image of the Land Ocean is that of a great wilderness, it is in fact one of the most urbanized parts of the country. In Northern Siberia the cities (such as Murmansk and Norilsk, the world’s two largest cities located beyond the Arctic circle) stand as solitary icebergs in the emptiness of the Land Ocean. The profiles of cities in southern Siberia are more diverse, and bear testimony to the gradual southward shift of the all-important east-west trunk road. The original administrative and cultural capitals of Siberia (Tobol’sk, Tomsk, and Yakutsk) were beaded along the early “road of chains” that went well north of the future course of the TransSiberian. Bypassed by the railway, they afterwards grew little, preserving quaint old church-studded streets and the atmosphere of Siberia’s first cultural centers, where refinement was brought (somewhat paradoxically) by Russia’s early political exiles.

In contrast, the cities along the Transiberian from Tyumen’ to Krasnoyarsk experienced explosive growth in the 20th century. During the Second World War numerous factories (evacuated into this deep rear) laid the foundations for diversified modern industries, better linked to European Russia than to the resource frontier farther north. The populations of focally located Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk grew from about 60 thousand before the Revolution to respectively 1.4 and 0.9 million by 1989. Novosibirsk with its famous Akademgorodok (a city of science, housing the Siberian If sagebrush still thrives in the West, the buffalo has almost disappeared from what was once the grasslands of the Great Plains. Early travelers could not have imagined that extinction could even be a remote possibility; the buffalo population on the North American continent was estimated at 45 to 60 million before European-Americans began to eliminate the herds. More than one million per year were killed in the latter half of the 19th century, and in 1883 the last great herd was wiped off the Land Ocean. In the National Bison Range in Montana and other centers, the buffalo is now protected, another symbol of the stubborn Western spirit. However, in a blow against American myth, the people who inhabit this vast region are hardly rural folks. Most people in the West are classed as urban by the U.S. census and live in a series of scattered city dots on the map of the Land Ocean. For example, the majority of people in Colorado live in a string of cities at the western edge of the grasslands along the front Range from Pueblo in the south through Colorado Springs and Denver to Boulder and Greeley in the north. Similarly, the great majority of Utahans live in cities in an irrigated lowland along the east side of Utah Lake and the Great Salt Lake from Provo through Salt Lake City to Ogden in the north. Most residents in Nevada live in the Las Vegas urban area, and many of the rest live in Reno. Why should the land of “home-on-the-range” be actually quite urbanized? The answer is essentially a list of many of the reasons why cities exist in the first place. Denver, the Mile High City and easily the region’s largest urban area, has become a major service and administration center for a large portion of the country’s western midsection. The Denver Federal Center is said to be the largest single concentration of federal government operations outside Washington. Like a number of other western cities (Albuquerque and Ogden are examples), Denver has become a major service and warehousing center for transcontinental shipping. Its airport is one the country’s busiest. Like nearly every other state capital in the country, Denver has grown in response to the increasing role of state government. Denver has also become a major
branch of the Academy of Sciences) has developed into the new cultural capital of Siberia.

Cities aside, some of the oldest islands in the Land Ocean are the villages and homesteads of ancient settlers, many of them schismatic Old-Believers who retreated from religious persecutions ever deeper into the taiga. Symbolic of the remoteness possible only in Siberia is the recent case of an Old-Believers family, discovered in the taiga, who had still not heard the news of the 1917 Revolution. The youngest islands are those of mining and industry, many of them small company towns grouped into archipelagos of almost dictatorial rule by a Moscow ministry. The notorious GULAG archipelago adds to this mix its own islands of penal colonies. The popular image of the region features fettered convicts and political exiles, but like much of Siberia's portrait, this image weaves myth with reality. Truly enough, since the 17th century it was the land of "damnation and chains" that culminated with Stalin's forced labor camps. But before the Stalinist terror, the proportion of convicts in Siberia seldom exceeded 5 percent, only one-fifth of them political exiles. The stream of settlers was always dominated by free people who came on their own will. Throughout the length of Russia's history, Siberia's role was twofold: the voluntary refuge of non-conformists who fled from the system and the forced destination of those who openly threatened it. While Siberia served as a safety valve for the state, it also satisfied the quest for freedom in the Russian soul. In Land Ocean there was room for all.

THEME 2: THE BAM AND BUSTS

The wealth of the Land Ocean has long been perceived as a strategic reserve - a safeguard of Russia's future. Frenetic campaigns to tap the rich storehouse followed whenever the geopolitical situation demanded. The tidal rhythm of active booms interspersed with calm interludes punctuates the whole history of the Land Ocean. One of the most recent booms of activity on a grandiose scale is the BAM: the Baikal-
Amur Mainline, cutting across Siberia to the Far East and representing one of the most ambitious railroad engineering challenges in history. Technical problems, setbacks, and massive investment requirements for the BAM show that collecting the riches of the Land Ocean does not come easily, and the region's economy has been on a roller coaster ride from the beginning.

A Resource-Based Economy

The fur bonanza that followed the initial conquest was the first high tide in Land Ocean's economic history. For a while this "soft gold" constituted the bulk of Muscovy's foreign trade and created the economic foundation on which the Romanov dynasty forged a Russian state. However, the depletion of furs soon put the region backstage until it was reawakened by Peter's reforms which gave Siberia a new role as Russia's mineral treasure chest. The first silver and copper mines and smelters originated in the Altai and served as a major source for coinage, and the lower Lena became the country's prime gold-producing area. This emphasis on precious metals highlights Siberia's longtime role as Moscow's emergency hoard of resources.

After this burst of development the Land Ocean experienced a century of calm. The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in the 1890s had momentous consequences, but only for the southern fringe of Siberia, where a swelling tide of peasant settlers claimed their homesteads, while in the rest of Land Ocean the population grew even more slowly than in European Russia. The Trans-Siberian itself was largely built for strategic reasons to secure a link with the Far Eastern provinces newly annexed in 1858-60. The intervening spaces of the Land Ocean were perceived as a mere obstacle to be overcome. Remoteness, as well as European Russia's wealth in resources essential to the Industrial Revolution, again left Siberia forgotten, one of the least developed regions of Imperial Russia. Reflecting this lack of interest, the region's southern boundary with China remained nearly unchanged from 1689 to the Soviet period, when Siberia belatedly became Russia's main frontier.

A Resource-Based Economy

The economic structure of the West for many years resembled that of any underdeveloped region: raw materials were sent out; manufactured goods and investment capital sent in. The Land Ocean at first held far less interest for the westward drift of American settlement than did the new Pacific margins of the country. The moister lands of the Willamette Valley in present-day Oregon, or the bountiful opportunities of California after the discovery of gold in 1848, drew people westward. Between 1845 and 1860 an estimated 200,000 Americans journeyed westward into the region. Most were bound for California or the Oregon Territory. Only Mormon Utah attracted a significant settlement within the Land Ocean. Trails in the region (such as the famous Oregon Trail and its California Cutoff) were not routes to this dry and often rugged land, but merely across it.

To our day, most major transport routes in the interior West still connect east with west rather than north with south. Five major interstate highways lace the region in a strikingly even series of east-west ribbons. The region's railroads have an even more dramatic east-west orientation. Lines of transport have integrated the Land Ocean with the rest of the country better than they have joined the sections of the region itself. Exploiting the resources of the West has always been a transportation challenge, and a map of America's interstate highway system, railroads, and air routes shows that the Land Ocean is still an area sparsely served by all three.

While for those making their way to the gold fields of California or the Klondike the Land Ocean was merely an obstacle, others later found riches by dipping into the "waters." Nevada was the site of the Comstock Lode, and Virginia City, Montana, soon boomed to a population of 20,000. Gold, silver, lead, zinc, and copper drew miners to the West, and in later years, tungsten, molybdenum, and uranium were added to the list. Butte, Montana, became famous for sitting on "The Richest Hill in the World."
In the Soviet years, the depletion of resources in the European part of a quickly industrializing Russia along with strategic concerns prompted the movement of the economic center of gravity eastward, and in the period from the 1930s to 1970s, the Land Ocean experienced its greatest boom ever. Even without the southern fringe, the region’s population grew at twice the rate of the country as a whole and many new cities emerged.

Thus, the new Kuznetzk coal basin (Kuzbas) was developed as an alternative to the country’s old metallurgical bases in a mere ten years. Between 1926 and 1939 the Kuzbas centers of Novokuznetzk and Kemerovo, grew from about 5 thousand to 150-200 thousand population. Today the Kuzbas accounts for 37 percent of coal production in Russia and has three metallurgical plants, two of which are the largest in the country, yet in another sense, this young industrial area already appears to be worn-out. From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s the proportion of Siberian industrial output turned out by Kuzbas shrank twofold, while thoroughly neglected amenities and dismal atmospheric pollution caused an absolute loss of population. Novokuznetzk and Kemerovo rank among least desired urban places in Russia.

Similar features of a failed utopia are evident in Tyumen’ oblast - Russia’s hopeful oil emirate. The area’s development as the linchpin of a crash program to boost Soviet oil and gas output began only in the late 1960s, and by the 1970s it appeared to be a spectacular success as the area came to account for two-thirds of oil and more than one-half of natural gas production in the former USSR. Oil and natural gas exports from Land Ocean provided the bulk of Soviet hard currency earnings and brought the country a modicum of prosperity. They propped up the senile Soviet regime, just as furs had bolstered the early Romanov reign. But this bonanza was short-lived. In a hurry to skim the cream off the best oilfields, the reserves were overtapped and the oil fields damaged, to be abandoned for new ones beyond the Arctic Circle. Despite this as a wealth of metals were mined from the city for over a century. Copper came out of the Bingham Mine near Salt Lake City, and vast oil shales were discovered in Utah and Colorado. The gluttony was promoted by the Mining Law of 1872, which facilitated easy and cheap rights to mining on public lands.

The mines created fortunes for some people, but also their share of headaches. Local environments were wrecked by polluted runoff and topsoil torn off to create open pit mines. Smelters smothered vegetation, buildings, and human lungs alike in arsenic and other poisons. Mine tailings piled up on the landscape. The West and the United States as a whole are still dealing with the cleanup cost of the mining bonanza of the Land Ocean.

Timber extraction has played a large role in some local economies of the West, but perhaps the tradition most branded into public folklore of the region is cattle raising. Ranchers have in the past been in close competition with both farmers and sheep graziers; more recently, battles are being fought between those who still favor federal lands for cattle and those who believe the practice creates too much environmental damage.

In the 1800s, millions of wild Texas longhorn cattle fed on the open ranges of Texas. The tradition of rounding them up for the drive overland to railroads in Missouri and Kansas began in 1866, spawning the era of the cowboy. But almost from the beginning, cattle raising on the open country has been hazardous. Open warfare erupted between cattle ranchers (mostly Mormon or Anglo-American) and sheep herdurs, who were often of Mexican origin. The cattlemen accused the sheep of ruining the rangeland by their habit of eating the grass right down to the roots. Other disputes arose over ownership of unbranded cattle on the range and the desire of farmers to build fences. But perhaps the greatest threat came from the cattlemen themselves, whose confidence in the ability of the Land Ocean to support the herds was soon proven foolish. The
extension, in the 1990s the production of oil in West Siberia has been declining, and boom towns like Surgut or Urengoi are pondering their future. Although industrial areas like Western Siberia received huge infusions of investment, the race to open them up meant that creating decent amenities for migrants was always neglected. Hastily built and lacking a lived-in feeling, the cities appear makeshift, adding to a false image of the region’s eternal youth: everything seems to lie ahead. But maturity is never reached, as neglected areas move steadily into senility, and the wave of new development rolls deeper into the wilderness.

The opening up of the Land Ocean required connecting it into the national economy, but that has not been an easy task. Obviously, the most important linkages run east-west. The backbone of the system and Siberia’s umbilical chord to the nation is still the TransSiberian railway, easily the world’s record holder in terms of the bulk of cargo moved. The second major east-west route into the region is the legendary Northern Sea Route along the Arctic coast, dependent on powerful icebreakers accompanying convoys of ships, and available only a few months of the year. Between these two great routes the only links are those of the world’s longest domestic air-routes, now managed by the sometimes-risky regional successors to Aeroflot.

The preponderance of east-west routes accounts for the weak link between southern and northern Siberia. While the southern fringe has a developed urban-industrial economy, the rest is still a poorly attached appendage. The horizontal bands of Siberian territory are stitched together by the vital seams of north-flowing rivers. Frozen for nine months a year they become roadbeds. Mortally dangerous, the work of truckers on Siberia’s famous highway to Yakutsk and Magadan has made them into folklore figures. Overall, the map of Siberia seems to be as sketchy as its cities are makeshift: scattered blots of cities or oilfields and disconnected traces of transport lines do not form a cohesive entity.

early 1880s were a time of deceptively mild winters, and grazing pressures grew as more and more cattle were released. In 1870 a steer could derive enough nourishment from 5 acres of grassland; by 1880, 50 acres were required. The animal population level was already too high by 1885 when one of the worst winters known hit the plains, followed by a second bad season in 1886. Up to one-third of the herds perished.

The precarious nature of the meat industry here continued up to the 1980s, when a decline in domestic demand for beef occurred at the same time that exports to foreign markets were constrained by rising exchange rates for American currency. Debt problems for farmers and ranchers in the West increased as costly, capital- and energy-intensive techniques drove many out of business. Land prices declined as well, and communities whose economic base depended on their role as agricultural service centers were hurt by spin-off effects. In a final “bust,” energy prices fell in the 1980s, and plans for development of western oil shale reserves turned out to be not only environmentally unpalatable, but also plain uneconomical.

The New West was now dependent on urban-dwelling service employees, ready and willing to spend money in the countryside on weekends and for vacations, but firm to demand that the same countryside not be deforested, strip mined, or overgrazed. Meanwhile, the rural population of farmers, ranchers, and miners were aging and becoming fewer in numbers as landholdings were consolidated, giving way to large operations that could survive the financial crunch of the later 1980s. Tourism has grown to be a major income source, not only in states such as Nevada which have long sought tourist dollars in the form of gambling and legalized prostitution, but also in places like Montana, only recently emerging as a prime travel destination for people who enjoy the outdoors. Pressure from sightseers and outdoor sports enthusiasts sometimes requires developments that are not always benign for the western environment, and the culture imported by urbanite western tourists may not sit well with local folks.
For all its vicissitudes, the Land Ocean remains the country’s economic mainstay and hope. With 20 percent of Russia’s population, the region accounts for 40 percent of its exports. Taking into account the crucial dependence of most ex-Soviet republics on Siberian oil, the region is vital to the economic re-integration of the former USSR; Tyumen’s wield more power as a defacto CIS capital than Minsk. Besides fuels, the Land Ocean supplies the bulk of Russian diamond and gold production and exports. Such areas as Noril’sk and the Kola peninsula provide the bulk of strategic non-ferrous metals. Reserves of coal and natural gas in southern Siberia and Yakutia are among the world’s greatest, and may acquire international importance in the future. But even if the region becomes a resource semi-colony of the western world rather than of Russia, it will hardly escape its boom-and-bust predicament.

Who Should Own Siberia?

The extreme remoteness of Siberia led to a sense of separateness and a desire for autonomy. This notion was even given official support under Catherine the Great, who instituted the “Siberian Kingdom” in the 1760s, envisioned as a self-supporting dominion with separate currency. Siberian coinage stopped in 1781, but until the Revolution there existed a movement of the so-called “regionalists,” who foresaw the prosperity of Siberia in federal union or secession from Russia. Even ethnic differences were cited in support of autonomy, as a large proportion of the old Siberian population were of mixed Slav-native origin and felt little affinity with Russia proper. In recent times, living literally on top of the rich mineral wealth combined with the strict control of resources by the central authorities strengthened the local feeling of a victimized region, from which resources and profits are unfairly taken. While Siberians quite justly feel that their region was historically neglected and used, some also blindly accept the simplistic notion that Siberian oil belongs to those who happen to live in Tyumen’ oblast or that Yakutian diamonds belong to residents of

An example of this employment-base shift is Kellogg, Idaho, a town whose original name was “Noah Kellogg’s Jackass,” after an animal of the man who discovered the lode that created the Bunker Hill Mine. Beginning operations in 1885, Bunker Hill brought lead, silver, and zinc out of the mountains, but in 1981 economic change, environmental concerns, and resource depletion called for closing down Bunker Hill, throwing 2000 people out of work. Today, Kellogg is the site of the Silver Mountain Resort, a destination ski resort. Tourist money is filling in the income gap for many places in the Land Ocean, but even as the visitors come for an “authentic” experience, they are by their very presence changing the face of the West.

Who Should Own the West?

An historic irony in the American West is that the federal government became the biggest landlord in the region, despite the fact that no one seemed to want it that way until Teddy Roosevelt’s era. Since the 19th century, many American citizens in the West have complained about government interference in private ownership rights; but at the same time, the U.S. government has been attempting to get rid of vast tracts of the Land Ocean, a goal evidenced by various pieces of legislation giving away the rights to farm, mine, and ranch public land. A landlord-style government, especially one based in the East, was not the image of America that most nineteenth century citizens held, and almost from the beginning there was pressure to give over rights of utilizing the land to private interests. If ownership is defined as use, then the federal government has been a give-away agent of historic proportions. Land rights were ceded to the railroads, to land speculators, and in perhaps the biggest gift of all, to agriculturalists. Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862, allowing any man or woman who applied to own 160 acres of public land that had not yet been otherwise appropriated. Claims continued well into the twentieth century until 1934 when the Bureau of Land Management took over stewardship of
Yakutia. They would happily see themselves as oil or diamond “emirates” emerging from the chaos of Soviet devolution. The Yamal-Nenets “republic” and Yakutia have both declared sovereignty over land and resources. The stakes of such struggles for resource ownership are quite high: Yakutia (which has reclaimed the old name “Sakha”) provides 99 percent of Russia’s diamond output, about one-fourth of such gems mined in the world. Since such a small proportion of the population is non-Slavic, ownership claims may be more related to local managers and politicians’ ambitions than to the rights held by indigenous peoples. In the case of Yamal-Nenets, only one percent of the population is native “northern people.” In fact, most residents of northern Siberia are temporary drifters, modern nomads attracted by the “long ruble” of northern wage differentials. Their tour of duty finished, they leave the region to settle down with accumulated savings in a more welcoming climate. The majority of oil workers in the north of Tyumen’ oblast are even flown there for their workshifts from the European part of the country or Tyumen’ city (900 miles away). Without a population attached to the land, the land is in turn poorly attached to the nation; and the colonials are pressing to renegotiate relations with the mother country.

The Land Ocean clearly gives the country more than it receives. But with its insatiable need for infrastructure investment and state-subsidized transport and its requirement for special salary incentives, it is also strongly dependent on the center. The predominance of large-scale economic enterprise in strategically important sectors means that Siberia will long lag behind other regions in privatization. What Siberia seeks today is not so much fair treatment as special privileges, and to get that, Siberians need a strong central government. The regional bravado about self-sufficiency and isolationism have been born largely out of the Land Ocean’s self-promoted myth of a perennial frontier.

the remaining acres. As a result of the federal policies, land prices fell during much of the last century, and land speculation was difficult to combat. The ideal of the small, family homestead gradually gave way to the economic realities of corporate agriculture. Farm size was not the only geographic myth that was perpetuated on the Land Ocean. Despite the fact that the environment of the West demanded a different style of land management, people continued to operate by rules learned in the humid East. Arguments over rights to water, mineral resources, and grasslands occurred among private citizens, sometimes with violent results. Multiple use management means reconciling interests that may be irrecconcilable, and battles between environmentalists and ranchers over grazing rights on public lands erupted into the so-called “Sagebrush Rebellion” in the 1970s. In Nevada alone, almost 90 percent of the land is under federal ownership, and the state government began to argue for transfer of rights to the local level, a call to arms soon taken up by other western states.

There is a fair amount of pretending going on in the traditional economy of the Land Ocean. The image of the region pretends to rugged individualism and hard work, yet the region receives constant subsidies from people in other parts of the United States. Many local folks pretend that they want no interference from the federal government, yet public ownership, federal spending, and management of lands have been a mainstay for building much private wealth. The economic bases of the Old West seem to reflect local identity, but the investment for creating these activities long depended on people outside the region. And finally, folks historically have pretended that the resources and territory of the West have been unlimited. Like most aspects of the West, there is a bigness even in the boom and bust cycles of the economy. Some years have been good ones, some miserable; few have been what one would call “average.” But then what could ever be ordinary in a place made from myth?