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In 1976, during Americas bicentennial celebration, a family decided to travel to the American West instead of joining the majority of people that were celebrating on the East Coast. They wanted to follow the trails that the pioneers had made when they began to settle the West. The family was looking forward to making their own discoveries.

JOURNEY WEST Jim Doherty We began our trip out West on June 19, 1976, a time when millions of other American families were preparing to crowd into the Bicentennial shrines of the East. We sized up Americas 200th birthday celebration a bit differently.

Although the Republic may have been born in the East, it had spent most of its time and energies since then moving west. So we resolved to head in the same direction in 1976, following the old pioneer trails and the famous rivers. Concentrating primarily on Wyoming and Montana, we would explore such legendary mountain ranges as the Big Horns, the Bitterroots and the Swan. There was one problem though, I was sure our four kids educated about the West through the movies would be disappointed. As an environmental editor, I knew that strip mining was tearing up many scenic areas and that clear-cutting was causing widespread damage in the mountains. I was well aware that draining and damming were making a mess of many rivers and wetlands. The grasslands were overgrazed and coal-burning power were befouling the air. Wildlife was on the run

everywhere and tourists were burning the national parks into slums. I was prepared for the worst. But how to prepare the kids? The answer, we decided, was to undertake our journey not just as tourists on a holiday, but as reporters on the trail of "the real West." So all of us, from my kids to my wife, pledged to do our homework before we left and to record on the way everything we did, saw, hear, felt or thought. Predictably, we did not uncover any new truths about the West in three short weeks. But there were plenty of surprises on that 5,200-mile journey and the biggest one was this: I had been wrong. Some of the troubles we saw were every bit as bad as I had dreaded. But by and large, the country was as glorious, as vast and as overwhelmingly spectacular as those know-nothing kids had expected! Half the fun of going west is discovering, along the way, how much the past is still with us. Old wives tales. Little old farm towns shaded from the summer heat by enormous maple trees on streets. White-haired folks reading the paper on their farmhouse porches at sunset. Worn-out windmills standing alone in pasture... All in all, we did not see much evidence that small-town America is vanishing as we traveled through rural Wisconsin, Minnesota and South Dakota. Its true that many new homes are rising in many old cornfields. But for the most part, life in vast areas of the American heartland remains pretty much the same as it was 30 and 40 years ago. In the hilly farmlands of southern Wisconsin and Minnesota, we found the fields and forests green and the creeks still flowing. The farms, with their "eggs for sale" signs and enormous "grandmas gardens" in the front yards, looked prosperous and secure. Not

much further north, though, a drought was threatening the land. In South Dakota, the situation was far worse. "Havent seen anything like this since the dirty thirties," one farmer told us. Even in normal times, most of South Dakota is dry. Now it was being burned to a crisp. The water holes were dried up and we saw dead cattle lying here and there on the treeless, rolling range. Some farmers were hauling water out to their thirsty stock daily. others were trying to drill deep wells. We saw two distinctly different Wyomings. We crossed the first Wyoming between the Black Hills and the Big Horns. Wide-open grassland, fenced and colorless, with red rocks and sweet-smelling shrubs scattered about, it was typical of a hard-used land. Cattle grazed on it. Oil rigs pumped on it and power lines zigzagged all over it. Freight trains labored across it, hauling coal from strip mine to power plant, hauling uranium and other minerals to refineries. This Wyoming, clearly, was booming. The other Wyoming started some miles east of Buffalo, an unexpectedly graceful community in the foothills of the Big Horns. On one side of town, antelope abounded by fours and fives in the hills, and yellow wild flowers lined the roads. On the other side rose the Big Horns and nearly 10,000 feet up, Powder River Pass cut through them. The Big Horn canons were incredible, with four and five distinct layers of pine trees somehow clinging to the steep, rocky walls. Far, far below, Ten Sleep Creek was a thin, white torrent on the rampage. In some of the less wild terrain, we saw deer on the high green hillsides and, as we climbed up toward our picnic spot, we flushed two does and two fawns. That night, we fell asleep with the roar of Ten Sleep in our

ears. We had picked by chance for our stopping place an area rich in western lore. At one time, Ten Sleep a small village at the western base of the Big Horns lay midway between two great Indian camps. In those days, the Indians measured distances by the number of sleeps and the halfway mark between those two camps was exactly ten sleeps. We crossed the Continental Divide for the first time on a cool morning, cutting through the Rockies in northwestern Wyoming at a place called Togwatee Pass (at a height of 9,656 feet) . Our van had just leveled off and we were rounding a downhill bend when, all at once, there they were, stretched out before us in a spectacular procession of massive white peaks: the Tetons. My wife gasped and, behind us, the kids began to yell. In truth, it was a startling sight a sight none of us will ever forget. We had seen mountains before, but we had never experienced anything even remotely like that initial impact of the Tetons. It was exactly what we had in mind when we decided to take our first trip "out West."

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