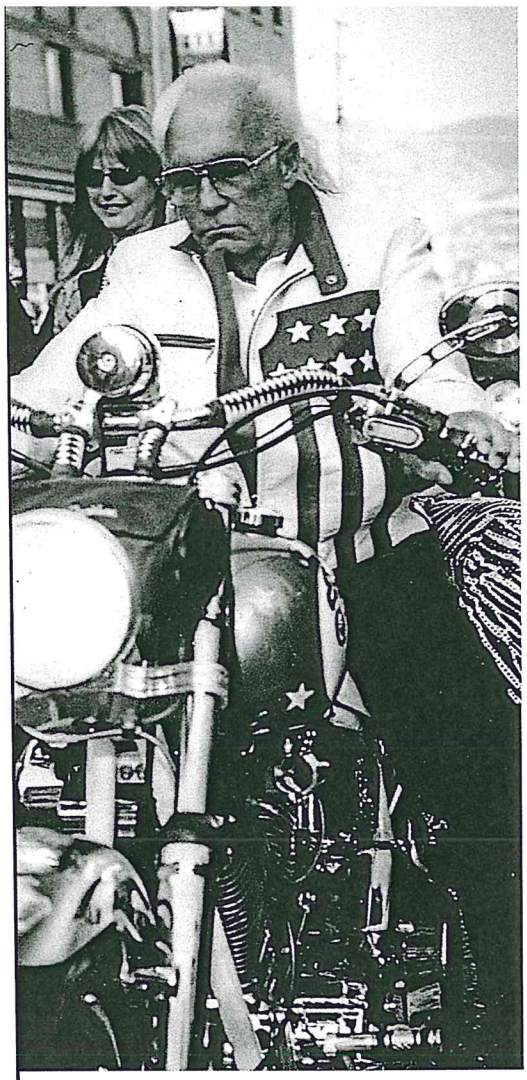


THE DAY EVEL KNIEVEL DIED

BY Sean Prentiss

"America likes to think everyone can recover from everything, but about this, especially, America is wrong." — Liam Rector

I

The famed historian Frederick Jackson Turner is best remembered for his "Frontier Thesis," which he read at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. To a packed house, Turner stated that America's rugged identity came from the country's western expansion and was cemented where civilization met wilderness. Turner went on to posit that this frontier dichotomy produced a new American archetype—a person able to tame the wilderness while also being taught individuality by those same forests and deserts and mountains.

To a hushed crowd, Turner ended his lecture by claiming in a voice that boomed through the hall, that the American citizen had transformed from hunter to trader to rancher to farmer to store clerk to factory worker. As Turner finished his speech, he quieted: *Four centuries since the discovery of America, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.*

II

Frederick Jackson Turner was wrong. The frontier didn't close in 1893.

III

To understand why the frontier didn't close in 1893, we must understand Butte, Montana, during the 1950s. From the 1880s through the 1920s, everyone called this town the *Richest Hill on Earth* for the copper clawed from its ground. The 100,000 residents looking to strike it rich longed to be called Copper Kings—each and every one of them. And the streets, Main and Montana and Quartz and Galena, were lined with saloons as numerous as the stars (and maybe that many prostitutes on Mercury Avenue alone).

But by the 1950s, Butte had been reduced by fallen copper prices to 30,000 destitute hangers-on. Those who remained resembled the Berkeley Pit, a toxic copper mine that gaped on the dark edges of town, the largest Super Fund site in America.

IV

To further understand Butte during the 1950s, we need to understand our protagonist, Robert Craig Knievel, a teen who drops out of high school his sophomore year because in his dying town he sees no need for education other than what he will learn in mines and bars. He knows nothing of closed frontiers or Turner or the end of western expansion. Robert Craig only knows of a desperate need for money, and he finds it in the Anaconda copper mine. So he sinks himself like so many other Buttians have into the earth, not sure if he'll ever return to the sear of the sun.

Robert Craig stays inside the mine until he loses his job for sending Butte into blackness by driving an earth mover into the main power line, cutting electricity throughout the town. Not that it mattered much, as Butte was mostly a burned out bulb anyway.

V

Soon it is the 1960s and Butte is spider-cracked windows and *For Sale* signs. The saloons, the Helsinki, Silver Dollar, and Freeway Tavern grab the last dollars from the workers' bib overalls in exchange for a night of escape from the mines or the unemployment line. And when the men are lonely, and they always are, they scrub the heavy metals from their faces, wash their hands white, and visit the whores on Mercury.

VI

Robert Craig—our boy-now-turned-a-man—has probably visited every saloon and almost every prostitute, which is not surprising: Robert Craig is from Butte and Butte is a town that during these years teaches people to fly to dark places.

VII

By 1965 Robert Craig looks to his left and sees nothing. He looks to his right and sees nothing. It is only when he looks at a washed-out blue sky that he sees hope. So he takes to the air on a 400-pound Norton motorcycle and launches himself off a ramp and over a crate of rattlesnakes and two mountain lions.

VIII

At that moment, some might say he flies right over Butte and the yawn of the closing frontier itself. If you ask Robert Craig, which no one bothers to do, maybe he'll say, *Jumping is what allows me to become innocent again.* Maybe America and the land—that country that stretches from sea to shining sea with wheat fields and badlands and weary mountains—would say the same thing.

IX

By '66 Robert Craig soars over 12 cars and a cargo van. Then 16 cars. Each time he finds ever more innocence. Back on the ground, Robert Craig looks into the newsman's camera and says, *I want to fly further and further and further* like you (or I) might say, *I don't know how I'd live if you left me.*

BACK ON THE GROUND, ROBERT CRAIG LOOKS INTO THE NEWSMAN'S CAMERA AND SAYS, I WANT TO FLY FURTHER AND FURTHER AND FURTHER LIKE YOU (OR I) MIGHT SAY, I DON'T KNOW HOW I'D LIVE IF YOU LEFT ME.

X

In Vegas on New Year's Eve, 1966, Robert Craig alone might be keeping the American frontier open by accelerating his motorcycle until he reaches a ramp—long and slender and stretching over everything that is shutting (hunting, homesteading, ranching, even dry-field farming), everything that is soon broken (his marriage, estrangement from his son), everything that is or will be dead, until all that remains are noisy factories and deep mines with dark shafts.

Robert Craig launches over Caesar's fountains. He becomes part of a Las Vegas skyway that he could ride to another world.

And for some unbelievable moment Robert Craig is held against that sky until he lands at the top of the ramp, his rear wheel short. Time slows as Robert Craig, our young man with neatly parted hair, is stood up by the impact. He releases the handlebars, and we (the millions watching *ABC Wide World of Sports*) expect him to fall. But, still standing from the bike, his hands are out like Jesus offering a prayer.

The bike rides straight until even Robert Craig can ride no more. He dives toward pavement, earth. Robert Craig rag-dolls, his motorcycle running straight and rider-less.

The announcer says, *Evel has died.* But the announcer, like Turner, is wrong.

It is merely a 29-day coma.

left **Marcy James,** *Evel Knievel at Dumas Brothel Biker Run, Butte, Montana,* 2002, film photograph

XI

1974, somewhere near the nowhere town of Twin Falls, Idaho, Robert Craig feels in his bones that if he doesn't do something big, he'll have nothing but to return to the mines of his youth, which kill so slowly that anything might be better. Maybe he also feels it in his bones, though he could never articulate this, that the frontier (his as much as America's) is all but shut.

There is nothing left to do but throw oneself into the air on a motorcycle.

Robert Craig launches himself and his rocket-bike above the Snake River Canyon. In the air, he thinks that everything above is maybe the reflection of what others would call heaven, the farthest west any of us can ever get. For a moment he is heading home. At least until his parachute prematurely deploys and rather than flying, Robert Craig floats down toward the Snake River and a quick drowning. The rocket's nose kisses barely upon rock and dirt the same color as Butte's.

XII

In Chicago during the winter of '76, exactly 83 years after our frontier has been pronounced closed, Robert Craig crash lands almost into a tank of sharks and announces he will never fly again.

The world hushes.

XIII

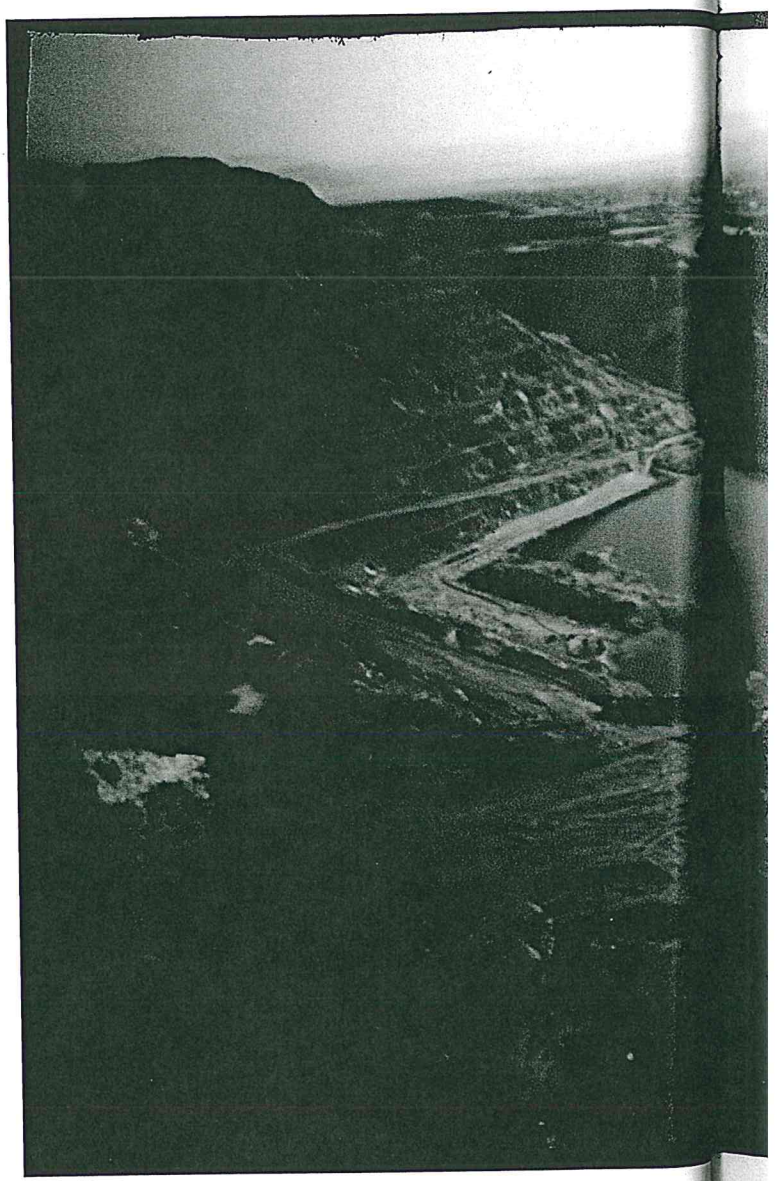
How can we not see the connection between historian and daredevil? Between 1893 and 1976? It's as if Robert Craig is the only thing halting Lewis and Clark from reaching the Pacific. As if Robert Craig is the only thing keeping all the land from being tilled. As if he alone is stopping the last of the forests from being milled. Keeping the last of the ore from being torn from its soft belly. And the only thing left is this leap—this one, burning across the only untamed space left: the sky. This is the sort of courage (or stupidity) that drove us West, that took us deeper into the untamed world, that keeps us on the edge of the American wilderness.

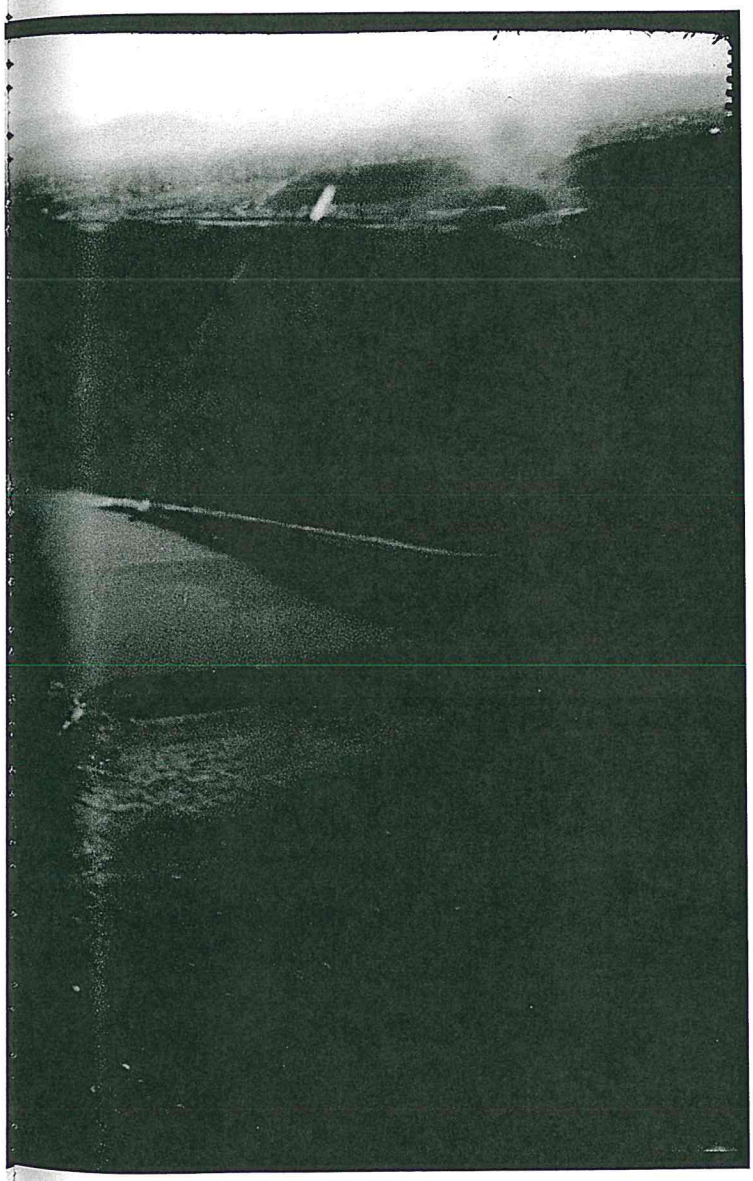
XIV

Then it is 34 years later as if it's a day or a century, and it is November 30, 2007. A fog obscures Florida's gibbous moon, and the air is damp and 68 degrees of gray. Robert Craig's 69 year old body is filled with dust from 40 broken bones. His lungs, that breathed the air where we (the rest of us now living in this world so close to being tamed) so longed to fly, into the sky, toward the red sun, are scarred and sucking oxygen from a silver tank after years of pulmonary fibrosis. He is wheezing and cannot breathe, but this does not scare him.

Nearing the end, he mutters (and this is all true, every goddamn word, I swear to you and every remaining mountain), *I beat the hell out of death.*

AND THE ONLY THING LEFT IS THIS LEAP—





XV

But Robert Craig's death shouldn't be like this.

It should occur in bright-lit Vegas or Chicago or, for godsakes, in some western town where there is a ramp and a road and a man willing to gun a motorcycle. Or on the remote edge of some forest and wild canyon. The end should be during the landing, not in a bed with yellow sheets and down pillows. The frontier should not close 2,473 miles from where the rough Pacific waves crash into rugged earth.

But it does. It ends right here in the swamp of Florida's strip malls, and Robert Craig dies because though Turner was wrong about the end date of the wild frontier, he was right that the first wave of American society, those men and women too unruly to be tamed by the machines of humankind, the factories and suburbs and corporate farms that wipe clean the land and wipe away the soul of wildness within us all, would surely pass.

XIV

Today, 2007, it is snowing where I am, the sixth floor of what was once a glorious hotel, the Finlen Hotel, in what was once a glorious town, Butte, Montana. Lindberg and JFK both slept in these rooms. Now the sheets are threadbare, the mattresses soft.

And me, I'm just passing through Butte. Tomorrow I'll be highway-gone to my apartment on the edge of a faraway town. From my apartment, I can walk or bike to my office. And there I have a desk, a job. I have a direct deposit paycheck that arrives every two weeks like clockwork.

From my Finlen window perch, I think to those years when I lived in a tent, when I wandered this world by thumb or boot or canoe, when my job was to turn tool into wilderness soil. Lingering in my hotel room, I look out my window and see brick buildings painted with old advertisements, the M&M Casino with its greasy food, the Helsinki serving Lucky Lager, the Berkeley Pit swallowing Fintown, the *For Rent* signs, the boarded up windows, the weary prostitutes who have moved on to other hopeless professions.

From this vantage above Butte, it seems, we all have hopeless professions, whether we sell our bodies to the mines or to the workers of the mines or chain our bodies to particle board desks. So I keep looking as far as I can (between all these buildings) until I spot some small blue of sky. And in the sky, I swear, is a rider. (Or is it just the blaze of the sun? A sundog?) And for today at least, millions of us, those of us weary and tired and desperate to halt the quiet, suburbization of our lives, follow this blazed arc in the sky until our flier hits that glare of the sun that some may say is a metaphor for all Frederick Jackson Turner spoke about.

above **Marcy James**, *Continental Pit, view from inside (Butte, Montana), film photograph (from pinhole camera)*

High Desert Journal

Witness to the West

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Spring 2014