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Western

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THE WEST DEFINES EASY definition. It's a paradox—a series of paradoxes.

It's a place and a state of mind, a cardinal direction and a relative one (toward the Pacific, toward the setting sun). It's made up of the Great Plains and the Mountain West and the South-west and maybe the Pacific West. It's a myth and a reality, a historical moment now passed and one still in progress.

"The West" often is used synonymously with "the frontier," but the frontier, like the West, has shifted, from the Ohio River Valley to somewhere farther west, perhaps west of the Mississippi. Or west of the Continental Divide. Or west of the St. Louis Gateway Arch. Or west of the 100th Meridian. Maybe it begins in the Twin Territories of Oklahoma.

The West is a place that has been explored but remains unexplored, where land was said to be open and free. The West is where landscape is monumental—desolate and dangerous, beautiful and pristine, in danger of despoliation. It's the Great American Desert. It's where the skies are big and the landscape vast. Where the wind comes sweeping down the plains. Where the stars glimmer like diamonds on velvet and the full moon is bright enough to travel by.

The West, no matter where its frontier is delineated, has been for many a place to start over or make a stand and for others a place of banishment. Like the land we now call Oklahoma, the West has been said to be populated by no one, yet it's long been inhabited by Native men and women and more recently by Spaniards and others of Europeans descent. In the nineteenth century, Oklahoma was settled again by tribal people who

were removed to Indian Territory, and by the slaves who came with them. By free blacks who built towns like Boley after the Civil War. And by Scots-Irish, Germans, Italians, Jews, Lebanese, and Syrians, for whom Oklahoma held the promise of land good for cultivation or jobs in the mines.

Frederick Jackson Turner, one of the greatest scholars of the West, suggested that the West is a characteristically American place—more democratic, less authoritarian, less class-conscious than elsewhere. Those who ventured west and their descendants believed each generation would be better off than the previous one, especially in the seemingly classless state of Oklahoma, where people more often were judged by what they did than by who their parents were or what they had. Where oil made overnight millionaires and harsh weather made overnight destitutes.

Turner also said that the West is where the culture was imbued with "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical inventive turn of mind; quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things... that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism."

It may be true that the West is the incubator of rugged individualism, but it is also where people come together to build barns, harvest wheat, and take care of their neighbors. Where, on April 19, 1995, Americans saw Oklahomans responding with selflessness, generosity, and resilience to one of the worst national tragedies since the Civil War.

The West always has had its travelers, those of the "restless, nervous energy," and they have left their mark along the

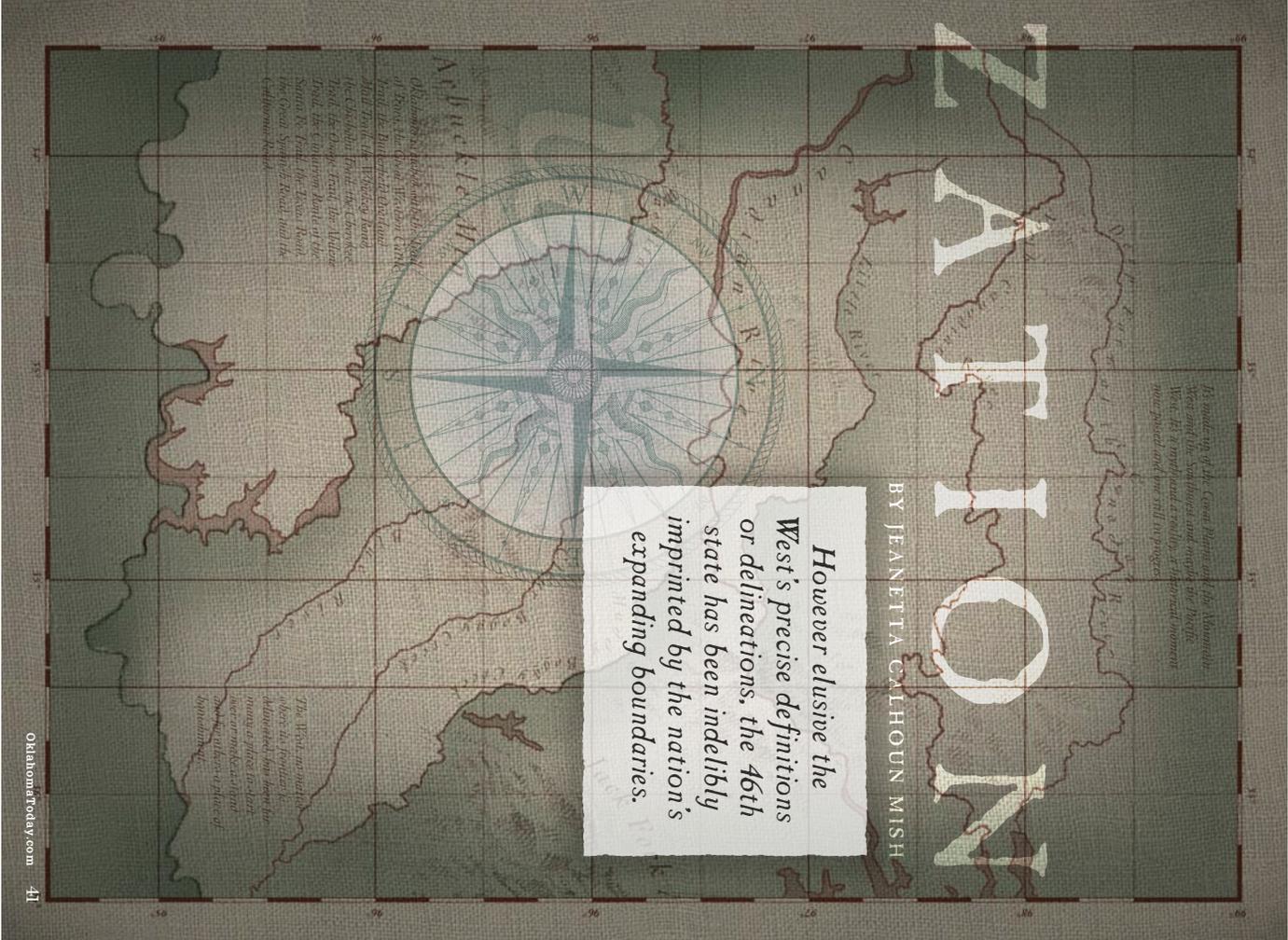
many trails and old roads of Oklahoma. The state is etched with the Trail of Tears, the Great Western Cattle Trail, the Butterfield Overland Mail Trail, the Whiskey Trail, the Christolm Trail, the Cherokee Trail, the Osage Trail, the Abilene Trail, the Cimarron Route of the Santa Fe Trail, the Texas Road, the Great Spanish Road, the California Road, and the Mother Road.

Oklahoma has been investigated by Washington Irving and Thomas Nuttall and George Catlin and French traders and explorers and maybe by Vikings. The state has sent out its own explorers, like Captain H.B. Hilds (his Comanche name was Quanan Washonaga) who was, according to a 1909 article, "the only man who ever accomplished the feat of circling the world—25,000 miles—on a horse." Like Woody Guthrie, who rambled all over the United States and landed in Europe during World War II. And like Gordon Cooper, Owen K. Garriott, Thomas Stafford, William Pogue, and Shannon Lucid, travelers into space.

All in all, the West may find its most varied and elemental expression in Oklahoma, its Indian country, horse country, cattle country, strike-it-rich country. It's where the buffalo roamed and the deer and the antelope play. It's the wild, wild West and the center of tribal worlds. It's a cultural crossroads. It's where we live.

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ILLUSTRATION BY STEVEN WALKER



BY JANETTA CALHOON MISH

However elusive the West's precise definitions or delineations, the 46th state has been indelibly imprinted by the nation's expanding boundaries.

The wandering of the Great Plains and the Mountain West into the nation's core and onto the Pacific West. It's a myth and a reality, a historical moment now placed and now still in progress.

The West, an intricate web of history and adventure, has been here since a place is first named. It's a place of hope and a place of refuge.

Oklahoma is a place where the spirit of the West lives on. It's a place where the spirit of the West lives on. It's a place where the spirit of the West lives on.