

4-1-2010

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Journeys West

Journeys West

Jane and Julian Steward
and Their Guides

VIRGINIA KERNS

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln & London

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Library of Congress Cataloging-
in-Publication Data
Kerns, Virginia, 1948-
Journeys West : Jane and Julian
Steward and their guides / Virginia
Kerns.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references
and index.

ISBN 978-0-8032-2508-4 (cloth : alk.
paper)

1. Steward, Julian Haynes, 1902-1972.
 2. Steward, Jane Cannon.
 3. Anthropologists—Great Basin—
Biography. 4. Archaeologists—Great
Basin—Biography. 5. Indians of
North America—Great Basin—
Antiquities. 6. Indians of North
America—Great Basin—Social life
and customs. 7. Anthropology—
Fieldwork—Great Basin—History.
- I. Title.

GN21.S78K46 2010

301.092'279—dc22

[B] 2009030685

Set in Galliard.

For Ronald

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Preface

During the many years I worked on this book and its predecessor, I made more than a dozen journeys west and had the privilege of seeing most of the places mentioned in the pages that follow. The mountains and deserts of the American West have an astonishing and enduring beauty that nearly two centuries of rough use have not yet destroyed. The native people who live there, and whose ancestors lived on that land for many generations, have also endured despite the odds.

This book tells a story of adaptation and survival, both before and after an ecological crisis in the desert West. It is at the same time an inquiry into ideas and methods in cultural anthropology. The narrative centers on fieldwork that Julian Steward carried out in the West in 1935 and 1936. That research resulted in a classic ethnography known to generations of readers by its shorthand name, *Basin-Plateau*. It told how native people adapted to specific localities in the arid West before American colonization and settlement. The book, which became a foundational work in ecological anthropology, also helped to introduce the concept of cultural adaptation.

Over the years many anthropologists and other scholars have disagreed with some of Steward's ideas and conclusions. The test of a classic work, however, is not whether it is "right" in every respect but whether it continues to be read and to raise questions that lead to more research. Steward's ethnography has met that test. It has provoked so much research and commentary—which continues to reach print in the twenty-first century—that simply commenting on the commentary would require a volume beyond this one.

While this book is an outcome of my research on Steward and the dozens of Indian elders who served as his cultural informants, it also draws directly, if not as obviously, on my own experiences and memories as a cultural anthropologist and teacher. Decades after Steward's fieldwork drew to a close in western America I had an experience of fieldwork with native people in the western Caribbean. Like him, I sought out elders as cultural informants. My informants, like his, had lost their ancestral land to invaders but so many years in the past that firsthand memories of those events had died a century earlier with the first generation of survivors. Exiled to a new and distant land, they adapted and survived—with great hardship. Their past is a variation on a theme that runs through the history of the American West and the Americas in general.

Years after that fieldwork ended, and in the course of a long career in teaching, my students raised questions about all aspects of research, including some perennial queries about objectivity. I thank my students not only for their questions but also for their patience with my musings about the term *objectivity*, a word with varied meanings, and about memory. I also want to thank several university administrators—who to my surprise questioned whether fieldwork qualifies as research. Their doubt is perhaps a measure of how esoteric and poorly understood ethnographic fieldwork remains, even in universities, and despite some well-known critiques by literary critics in the late twentieth century.

I wrote this book as an extended reply to questions I have heard from students and others—and to my own questions. Telling the story has taught me much about the *mélange* of memories, words, observations, and experiences that become ethnography. It has also deepened my admiration of the elders who took part in Steward's research, as well as my appreciation of them as distinct individuals. Every man and woman brought a unique set of life experiences and memories to the encounter with Steward.

In my efforts to learn about each of them I purposely did not seek out genealogical descendants, although I did encounter some over the years. The sheer number of elders and other cultural informants—more than fifty—dissuaded me from that plan. In the unlikely event that I managed to complete the task, I knew that the results would fill volumes, not just a single book. Current concerns, and conflicting views, about family privacy also led me to search for public records about individuals while forgoing family history and oral tradition for the most part and avoiding mention of descendants' names.

I used public records very cautiously, given their gaps, inconsistencies, and errors. I reconciled these as best I could, usually by searching through five or six censuses taken over the course of decades and then choosing the most consistently recorded name or age or other detail of identity. When that failed I tried other means, drawing on what I knew of cultural and historical context. In cases where I had no name—only a set of initials, an estimated age, and an indication of gender—I searched census records and located names by using a process of elimination. Then I looked for supporting evidence that I had found the correct name. The records, as is always the case, were partial and often raised as many questions as they answered.

To reconstruct Steward's fieldwork and his encounters with the elders and others, I pieced together details from a variety of sources. Julian Steward and his wife, Jane, kept a field journal in 1935 and 1936, and their sons, Michael and Gary Steward, kindly allowed me to read it and quote from it. The journal has since been deposited with the Julian H. Steward Papers at the University of Illinois Archives. Because the journal contained so few entries for the second round of fieldwork, in 1936, I drew almost entirely on the records and letters that I located at the Smithsonian Institution, the University of California's Bancroft Library, and other universities. Jane Steward's memories of their earlier travels, in 1935—memories that she shared with me more than fifty years later, but long before I began working on

this book—helped to clarify and extend the written record. Letters that she wrote and received from her parents and other family members during the 1930s helped in turn to deepen my understanding of what she had told me. Those letters, part of a collection of family papers recently deposited at the University of Utah’s Marriott Library, also added new details.

To trace their routes through the desert I studied old road maps. To provide context for places and events I turned to other primary sources, from newspaper articles to photographs taken at the time, and to a range of works by anthropologists, historians, geographers, and other scholars. Seeing nearly all field sites for myself helped to answer some questions I had not even thought to ask—one of the great advantages of naturalistic research.

Names, of peoples and of places, have changed in some cases since the time of Steward’s journeys, and not uncommonly the spellings have changed as well. In some instances I have followed the usage of the 1930s, and in others, that of the present. In general I have tried to avoid confusing readers of this book or offending people named in Steward’s book—a hard balancing act in some cases. I use the word *Americans* to refer to settlers in the nineteenth century, but not to Indians because most American Indians did not attain full rights as citizens until well into the twentieth century.

It was my good fortune to write the first and the last chapters of this book at The Mesa Refuge, a writers’ retreat in Northern California and a place of sustaining beauty and solitude. My first thanks are to Peter Barnes and the Common Counsel Foundation—and to fellow residents at the retreat whose presence and questions affected, in ways both subtle and direct, the shape of the book.

During the two years between residencies, I lived in Utah and wrote most of this book. I am grateful to Mary Dickson for her many insights about Utah life, past and present, and for her friendship.

Forrest S. Cuch, executive director of the Utah State Division of Indian Affairs, provided important guidance about Utah history and Utah Indians. I thank F. Ross Peterson for a tour of Cache Valley during his last year as director of the Mountain West Center at Utah State University and for hospitality during a return visit I made to Deep Springs College in California soon after he began to serve as its president. Elaine Thatcher, program coordinator of the Mountain West Center, offered suggestions and assistance that led me to the Bear River and Bear Lake regions of Utah and Idaho. Patty Timbimbo-Madsen, manager of cultural and natural resources for the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, kindly permitted me to visit the Shoshoni Tribal Cemetery at Washakie, Utah.

I hope that my very deep debt to the late Jane Cannon Steward, and my respect for her and for all of the elders, is evident throughout the book. I also want to thank several people whose names appear only in passing in the text, belying their importance as my other informants: Sidney W. Mintz and the late Robert F. Murphy, Dorothy B. Nyswander, and William C. Sturtevant.

The staff of many museums and archives assisted in various ways, and without their help this would be a different book. I especially appreciate the assistance that William Maher, Chris Prom, and Linda Stahnke provided at the University of Illinois Archives over the course of many years. I am grateful as well to Robert Leopold of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; Stan Larson and Lorraine Crouse of the Manuscripts Division, Marriott Library, University of Utah; Beth Sennett Porter, Eastern California Museum, Independence, California; and students at Deep Springs College, as well as current president David Neidorf, who allowed me to reproduce photographs of Jane and Julian Steward taken there in 1935. I also thank the staff at the following libraries, museums, historical sites, and public agencies: the National Archives, Washington DC; the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; the Paiute

PREFACE

Shoshone Cultural Center and Museum, Bishop, California; the Nevada Historical Society, Reno; the Northeastern Nevada Museum and Historical Society, Elko; the Research Center at the Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City; Special Collections, Salt Lake Public Library; libraries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City; Swem Library, the College of William and Mary; the Shoshone Bannock Tribal Museum at the Fort Hall Reservation in Idaho; Scotty's Castle in Death Valley National Park, California; the Golden Spike National Monument, Promontory, Utah; regional offices of the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management in Nevada and Utah; and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.

I owe a special debt to Don D. Fowler and Nancy J. Parezo, who reviewed the manuscript, and to other scholars and writers who read and commented on it, in full or on specific chapters: Ronald A. Hallett, Mary Dickson, and Dawn Marano. At the College of William and Mary, which supported a portion of the project, I appreciate the assistance of Raquel Nava Cerball and Tom Trovato in preparing the bibliography and illustrations. At the University of Nebraska Press, Matthew Bokovoy, acquisitions editor for Indigenous Studies and American West, and Elisabeth Chretien, associate editor, guided the manuscript through review and into production. Ann F. Baker, senior project editor, and copyeditor Katherine Hinkebein were patient and helpful at every turn during the long process of turning the manuscript into a book.

My husband, Ronald Hallett, was my first and last reader and a true Renaissance man who gave guidance on matters ranging from the literary to the automotive. I am grateful for his unflinching support.

Journeys West

Introduction

Remembering

The story went like this:

Long ago and in a different time, a man and a woman set out on a journey through the high desert. They had just begun a life together when science took them there, to a place of beauty so spare that they saw the bones of the earth. A fierce sun shone each day, and the sky turned from blue to flame to black. Heat ebbed into cool as day gave way to night.

The land that they crossed, much of it still remote, lay between high plateaus on north and south and imposing mountains on east and west. Roads were mere tracings on the surface of a landscape so open and immense that the rare human construction—a ranch house, a fence—had the look of a work in miniature. Names shown on maps, in English or not, told what people prize in an arid land: Deep Springs Valley and the Deep Creek Range, Tonopah and Pah-rump—“pah” meaning water.

In seven months and two trips, they saw as much as they could of that country.

A few years passed, and then a book appeared in print about the desert and the people they had met on their journeys. It told how Indians had once survived in that land—or rather, what elders remembered of an old way of life, and what explorers in the past recorded about the land and the people. One of those explorers gave the desert—America’s largest—the name it still bears, the Great Basin.¹

The book’s title sounded scientific, suitably abstract if also hard to

recall exactly. Even the author sometimes got it wrong. Later readers often used just the first two words of the title, *Basin-Plateau*. Despite its start as a scientific report published by the Government Printing Office, and a slightly awkward title, the book became a classic. It remains in print today.²

The author of *Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Sociopolitical Groups*, a young anthropologist named Julian Steward, had spent seven years of his life in the Great Basin, mostly in eastern California and Utah. That time included seven months of fieldwork with his wife in the 1930s, when they also traveled through Nevada and Idaho. Only one name appears on the cover of the book, but any reader who listens carefully can hear many voices in its pages. Very attentive readers will see that dozens of Paiute and Shoshone elders offered their knowledge and memories. Their initials are scattered throughout the text.

“GR rated pine nuts as most important,” Steward wrote, “because in years of good harvest enough were gathered to last through most of the winter.” In some cases, men and women long dead spoke through descendants, who recalled their grandparents’ words and memories. “TS’s grandfather described a hunt in the Sierra Nevada Mountains west of Owens Lake,” Steward reported, “in which several hundred men from throughout the valley participated.”³

Black-and-white photographs of the open landscape, taken by Steward, appeared as illustrations in *Basin-Plateau*. They show sweeping views of austere mountains and desert valleys and close-up shots of stoic desert plants: Joshua trees, with branches held high as if in supplication for rain; screw-bean mesquite trees the size of bushes, stunted by their chronic thirst; lonely stands of bunchgrass and sagebrush, which simply hold their ground and wait.⁴

There is not one portrait of a person in the book: neither GR nor TS nor any of the elders whose initials attest to their presence. The photographs show a land without people. The look of the desert landscape—the open sky and strong light, the contours of mountain and

valley—had endured into the twentieth century. But a way of living based on hunting and gathering, foraging for wild food on wild land, survived for the most part in memory. People had moved with the seasons in search of food for generations until a flood of settlers entered their country: farmers, ranchers, merchants, miners, and workers who came from other places, mostly in North America but also from points beyond, in Europe, Asia, and Mexico.

The absence of human portraits in *Basin-Plateau* is apt, but only metaphorically. Paiutes, Shoshones, and Utes—The People, *Nimi* or *Neme* or *Nuche*, as they call themselves—did not disappear. They adapted to wrenching changes to their world, including ecological damage done by mass settlement. They had lived far more lightly on the land, and in much smaller numbers than the newcomers. Their survival as hunters and gatherers required it.

Perhaps most destructive to their hunting and gathering grounds were the herds of grazing animals brought by settlers. Cattle and sheep—domesticated animals not indigenous to the Americas—ate native plants that Paiutes and Shoshones and Utes gathered for food and that offered food and shelter for wildlife. As Steward noted in the opening pages of *Basin-Plateau*, the animals “grazed the hills, decimating native food plants.”⁵

John Muir, the naturalist and early conservationist, called sheep “hoofed locusts” because of the ruinous effects of overgrazing on western lands. But the settlers’ herds also devoured a way of life along with the wild plants they ate and the wild game they displaced. More than half a century later, elders remembered that the human intruders came in small numbers at first, followed by more and more who “sat down” instead of moving on, occupying their lands. To borrow from Muir’s famous phrase, they had reason to regard the settlers as locusts in boots and bonnets. For their part most Americans—and the federal government—saw the wild lands as “waste,” and transformations of the land as signs of “progress.”⁶

Times change, and so do ways of speaking and of seeing events of the past. Today it might be said that a sustainable way of living on the land came to a sudden end, a result of unsustainable practices that degraded and damaged the fragile ecology of the desert.

I never met Julian Steward or any of the elders. Some of them died sixty years before I began to write a book about Steward and his ideas, the precursor to this book. He had thought about the environment and how people adapt to it—the links between environment and culture—in ways that seemed unusual for his times. After seeing a desert valley where he spent three formative years as a student, I wondered if his own experience of the desert had shaped those ideas. His insights about land and labor and technology provided the foundation for what he later called *cultural ecology*, a framework for understanding links between environment, the quest for food, and the structure of human groups.⁷

The first person I approached with questions, and one of the oldest, was Julian Steward's widow. She told me that she had gone with her husband on his field trips in the 1930s and had met nearly all of the elders who contributed to his book. When she recalled how old they seemed to her then, she laughed. She was in her twenties at the time of those trips, but when we met, she was a full decade older than some of the elders. Like them she had a keen memory that took us back in time more than half a century.

I spent a week with Jane Steward in Honolulu, where she moved after her husband's death. She had left their home of twenty years, on the Illinois prairie, for a new life in Hawaii. She lived happily in a high-rise building in the middle of the city, not far from the beach at Waikiki.

The muted din of traffic, far below us, drifted in through the open windows, along with the mild Hawaiian air, as we talked about long-ago events in another part of the world. That place of memory—a pale land of limitless space and sand, little water, few people, and searing

sun—stood in complete contrast to the world she saw around her. Honolulu’s beaches, fringes of white sand by limpid blue water, drew thousands of people each day to take part in latter-day sun worship.

Here and there, now and then: we leaped back and forth, from one place to another and one time to the next during conversations that continued for a week. Jane’s memories looped around the events of a long life, as each recollection stirred another. They arose as memories often do, in a welter, not one by one or in strict order.

She had vivid recollections of traveling with her husband in the Great Basin in 1935 but said little about the second field trip, in 1936. Few specific memories came to mind about the many Paiutes and Shoshones whom she and her husband met—except in California, where some were old acquaintances from his student years. She did not mention meeting Shoshones known as Goshutes, or any Utes.⁸ As I later learned by reading their fieldwork journal, Jane spent very little time with most of the elders—a few hours or a few days—which explained why she recalled so little about them. Her husband had a highly nomadic approach to fieldwork. With limited time and a vast region to cover, they rarely lingered in any place for more than a few days, and sometimes only for hours.

Although Jane lived firmly in the present, my questions drew her back fifty and sixty years into the past, to what she saw as another time, when life was very different. “Those were more innocent times,” she said, with a trace of regret in her voice. It was so long ago, she added. Later, as other memories came to mind, she smiled and said that it seemed more like yesterday than half a century ago. She told me what she recalled of the journeys through the high desert with her husband, and about the later years of their life together as well as the early years of her own. I soon realized that it would take time for me to make sense of all these memories—to sort through what she had said and to return with other questions, asking her to explain what I had not understood or had not thought to ask.

Learning so much about Steward's life only deepened the sense that I knew almost nothing about his nearly invisible collaborators and guides. Who *were* those elders whose memories became ethnography? While searching through his papers I had seen several photographs of Paiute and Shoshone men, and a few women, taken during the field trips of the 1930s. Later, using his fieldwork journal and other records, I began to match names with some of the initials; and with his photographs, I put faces with a few of the names. Those faces had the contours and lines of lives spent in the open air, under the sun in all seasons. The expressions ranged from impassive to knowing.

Years passed, but their faces continued to come to mind. Learning some of the names and finding a few portraits did not satisfy my curiosity about the elders as individuals or dispel a strong sense that they had something of value to teach me, if only I knew more about them and their lives. Clearly, Steward had learned much from them in the 1930s and had left a record of their knowledge in his book—but any such record is always partial and a product of its own times. I thought that they had something more to teach us who live in the twenty-first century.

I began to search for photographs and records that could help me to identify all of the elders. Collaborators in a landmark book, they had remained unknown to nearly all of its readers. The search slowly yielded results. Initials became full names, and the outlines of lives—each one unique—emerged. Predictably, I learned more about some than about others, and, as is always the case, my knowledge remained partial. From the start I realized that I would always know far more about Julian Steward, who kept a journal and wrote books and sent and received thousands of letters, than about any one of the elders. I had read Steward's own words. I could hear theirs for the most part only through others' words about them.

As I slowly learned more about Steward's research, I was startled by how much his approach seemed to differ from mine, which I had

accepted, with limited knowledge of its history, as standard practice for what came to be termed *ethnographic fieldwork* in the twentieth century. Like many cultural anthropologists of the later twentieth century, and the twenty-first, I assumed that fieldwork involved intensive and extended contact with a community, not interviews with one or a few individuals at a series of sites. I began to think of Steward as a nomad, while many other cultural anthropologists were sojourners who settle in one place for the requisite year or more as I had done.

Later, after repeated readings of *Basin-Plateau*, I realized that Steward's fieldwork was in the tradition of early journeys to the West, especially the scientific expeditions whose reports he cited in his book. I wondered how that single difference—moving on or staying—affects the questions that cultural anthropologists ask, what they see, and what they know of the people who answer their questions. I had also learned, to my surprise, that Steward paid the elders, and sometimes interpreters, an hourly wage to work with him, and that this was customary at the time. The use of interpreters in fieldwork, as I knew, had for the most part ended long ago. Reciprocity had in nearly all cases replaced payment of a wage.

As I learned more about the elders, I also began to wonder about questions Steward had *not* asked them. He asked how they lived before outsiders occupied their lands. Given his interest in ecology, why did he remain largely silent about the environmental effects of settlement? Why did he say so little in *Basin-Plateau* about how they adapted to an ecological crisis in the mid-nineteenth century, and how they survived conquest and colonization?

The usual explanation is that anthropologists of his day engaged in what came to be termed *salvage ethnography*: documenting nearly “extinct” ways of life before all memory of them vanished. But the aims of Steward's fieldwork in the 1930s, I had discovered, were more complex. He did want to document the past, but above all he was searching for evidence in support of a theory. That aim, as well as his

approach to fieldwork, affected the questions he asked—but as I came to see, so did the times. Today’s questions about the environment—and perspectives on the history of the American West as a history of colonialism—are informed by events, and interpretations of events, that Steward never knew about or that he learned of late in life.⁹

As I understood more about Steward’s fieldwork, asked other questions about the elders, and saw the desert and mountains and the places where they had lived, a series of stories came slowly into focus. They were comprised of the many recollections that elders in the nineteenth century passed on to their descendants; the memories that those descendants, as elders themselves, gave Julian Steward and other anthropologists in the 1930s; the personal memories that Jane Steward recounted to me more than a half century later; and firsthand accounts of places and events that I found in written sources, ranging from the journal that she and her husband kept and letters they wrote to the yellowed pages of handwritten records, typescripts, and old books.

There is the story of their fieldwork in the American West: journeys made in the hard years of the Great Depression by a young anthropologist and his wife who were in love with each other and who at first embraced the romance of the road. For Steward, the journey was a quest for science, yielding results that he later reported in *Basin-Plateau*, about how Paiutes and Shoshones and Utes lived before losing their lands to colonizers in the mid-nineteenth century. He told how they had survived as hunters and gatherers in the high desert, using intimate knowledge of plants and animals and place to make a living from the land.

There is the later story, only hinted at in *Basin-Plateau*, about how settlement of their lands by massive numbers of outsiders—food producers who lived by farming and ranching, as well as miners—caused an ecological crisis for native people. The changes to desert lands soon

destroyed the foragers' food supply, the seeds of wild grasses and the other native plants and animals that had long sustained them. And there is the linked story of how the survivors survived, of their flexibility and resilience as they adapted to a radically changed world, often by using old skills and knowledge in new and creative ways.

Most of the men and women who answered Steward's questions were not only elders. They were also first-generation survivors, as I suddenly realized while reconstructing the outlines of their lives. They had witnessed and lived through the Catastrophe. The severe ecological damage done to their homelands, and the loss of land, formed a central part of their life histories.

Woven into their lives, as I came to see them, is an overarching narrative about major environmental change caused by human activities. I began to wonder if what Steward did *not* report—the hardships that the elders faced when their world suddenly changed, and how they adapted to the change—could tell us something about the possible shape of the future. They experienced an ecological crisis on a local and regional scale, but by a century and a half later the dimensions had increased. The prospect of ecological change on a global scale, in the form of global warming and climate change, finally entered wide public consciousness in the early twenty-first century.

When I left Hawaii I planned to return within the year, armed with many more questions. I had no way of knowing that Jane Steward, vibrant and life loving, was in the last months of her nearly eighty years of life.¹⁰ Like her late husband, who questioned several elders who soon died, I had recorded memories that would have vanished just months later when a life ended. They were memories of a distant time and of little-known places and events.

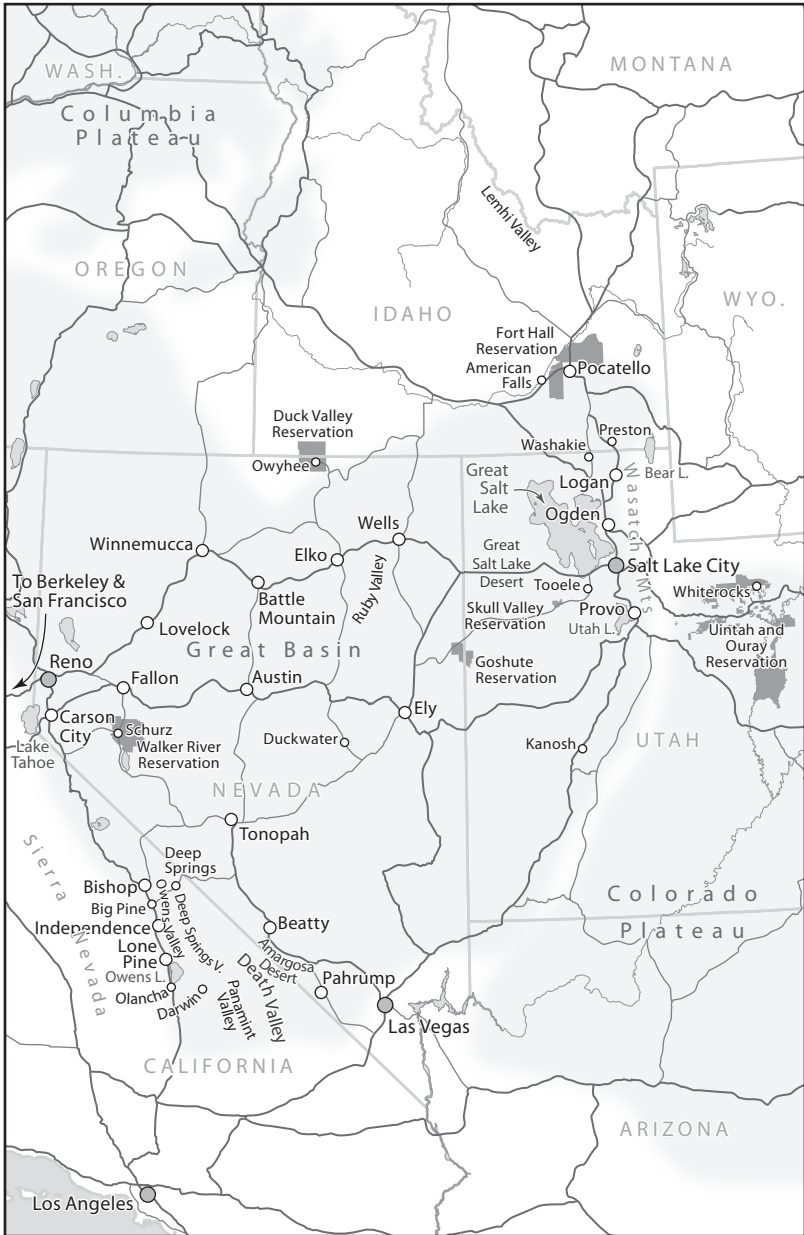
Some of the places, as she told me, had changed almost beyond recognition in half a century, from open desert to city sprawl, a startling mutation based on importing water from faraway rivers. Other

places, as I would later see for myself, remain thinly populated. Many of them retain the desolate and singular beauty that certain travelers in the past, including Julian Steward, admired. To this day the high desert landscape of the Great Basin attracts some people who happen to pass through its vast reaches. Others, disturbed by a lack of green and by the openness and unexpected scale, do not linger and look at a place once known as “the interior of California” and still called by many names: the Sagebrush Sea, Basin and Range, the Big Empty. Western Shoshones, who claim much of it as homeland, call it *Newe Sogobia*, the People’s Land, and *Bia Sogobia*, Mother Earth.¹¹

Although she did not say very much about the elders she met so briefly, Jane did have memories of fieldwork, especially of the first trip, in 1935. She recalled the foods she and her husband ate, how they got water and carried enough to reach the next source, where they stayed, and other details of daily life as they traveled through California and Nevada. In an odd and apt way, her memories ran parallel to her husband’s research, the questions he asked elders about how they had once lived in that arid land.

On our last day together I asked Jane why her husband had turned away from fieldwork after the 1930s. She looked puzzled and considered the question carefully, as if for the first time. Finally she cited complications and commitments of life: children, competing work demands, and ill health. But when I asked how she and Julian had fared during their desert journeys, how she remembered the time and the place—and their time together in that place—she answered at once, with feeling.

“That was Eden,” she said.



i. The Great Basin