

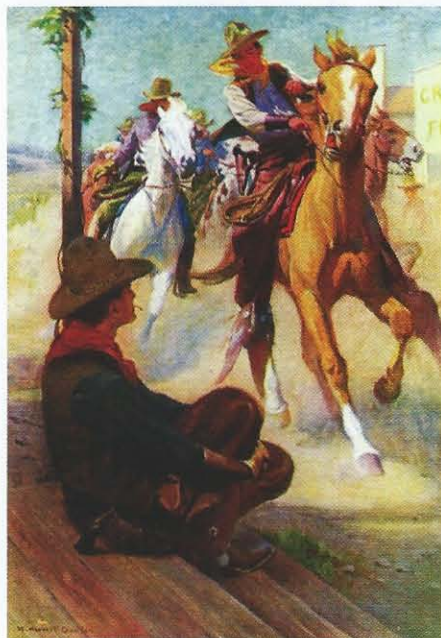
GEOGRAPHY OF *THE LIGHT OF WESTERN STARS*

by Dr. Kevin Blake

The Light of Western Stars has a fascinating geography. Set during the Mexican Revolution on the western flank of the Peloncillo Mountains in New Mexico's "Bootheel" region, astride the state line with Arizona, this region is perhaps as wild and remote today as it was when Zane Grey authored the story one hundred years ago. Zane Grey's setting features many authentic place names—almost every town, valley, and mountain mentioned is accurately located in southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona—but two confounding fictional town names require some geographical imagination.

One of Grey's greatest first sentences portends the key place of geography in the novel: "When Madeline Hammond stepped from the train at El Cajon, New Mexico, it was nearly midnight, and her first impression was of a huge, dark space of cool, windy emptiness, strange and silent, stretching away under great blinking white stars" (p. 1; all page numbers refer to the Grosset & Dunlap editions). Grey describes El Cajon as a rough little town of low, square, flat-roofed adobe structures populated mostly by Mexicans, miners, and cowboys (Figure 1).

But where is El Cajon? Presented with this fictional town name in the first sentence, I realized



my goal in this geographical essay was to explain the spatial and temporal setting for the book as well as illustrate how Grey's penetrating insight into the personality of the place enables this arid landscape to become a central character in the slowly evolving romance between Madeline and her ranch foreman, Gene Stewart.

Fig. 1: Postcard advertising publication of *The Light of Western Stars*, featuring the Harpers edition frontispiece by W. Herbert Dunton. Source: Kevin Blake postcard archive.



The two leading candidates of real towns that could be El Cajon are Animas, NM, a tiny hamlet served at the beginning of the twentieth century by the El Paso and Southwestern Railroad, and its more familiar neighbor to the north, Lordsburg, served by the Southern Pacific Railroad. Grey

writes that it is nearly fifty miles by wagon from El Cajon to the ranch (p. 44) and that the Peloncillo Mountains are southwest of town (p. 46).

The north-south orientation of the Peloncillos place them southwest of both Lordsburg and Animas, though if referring to Animas it would make more sense to say the Peloncillos are west of town. When Link drives Madeline's eastern guests to the ranch from El Cajon, he says the distance by automobile is sixty-three miles (p. 173). Lordsburg is my best guess as the inspiration for El Cajon because if Grey based the location on Animas, it would have made more sense for travelers to debark the train at Rodeo, NM, which is closer to the ranch (Pfeiffer 1991) and on the same side of the mountain range (western) as the ranch. Eastern visitors to this region would be more likely to travel the Southern Pacific, a major transcontinental carrier, than the regional El Paso and Southwestern route that primarily served copper mines and smelters.

As Madeline makes her way to the ranch for the first time she travels around the northern end of the Peloncillo Mountains (p. 58), to reach the ranch located in its western foothills. She learns that "Apaches used to run" in these foothills (p. 52); indeed, the Geronimo surrender site is nearby. Peloncillo means "little baldy," probably a reference to the craggy, dome-like rocky summits of the range (Figure 2). Alternatively, Peloncillo could be a misspelling of *piloncillo*, a regional term for brown, unrefined sugar, in reference to the sugarloaf shape of the summits (Julyan 1996). The Peloncillos reach nearly seven thousand feet in elevation, and at various times the range has also been called the Black Hills and the Guadalupe Mountains, which is also a name applied to a lower mountain range immediately south of the Peloncillos on the Mexican border.

The Peloncillos are one of the so-called “sky islands” of the Southwest—high mountains with greatly different biotic communities than the surrounding arid lowlands.

From the ranch, Madeline can look westward straight across a valley to the Chiricahua Mountains and down across the red Arizona desert into Mexico (p. 54). The ranch is located in New Mexico, since she looks “across the line into Arizona” toward the San Bernardino Valley and, to the south,” the Guadalupe Mountains (p. 58). Arizona’s San Bernardino Valley has a railroad and several specks of towns, the largest of which is Chiricahua (p. 58). The ranch offers stunning westward views of mountains, valleys, sunsets, and, of course, starlit skies. Most powerful in shaping Madeline’s ability to find herself, her work, and her happiness is “the light of that western star”(p. 86), which is “the evening star” (p. 85)—Venus.



Fig. 2: Peloncillo Mountains west of Lordsburg, New Mexico, 1939. Photograph reproduced by permission of Don O'Brien, flickr.com.

Due to some conflicting mileage estimates in the book, it is impossible to exactly locate the site of the cattle ranch that becomes known as Majesty’s Rancho, yet it is New Mexico near (east of) the small town of Rodeo (pp. 105 and 178). Numerous cattle ranches dotted the western slopes of the Peloncillo Mountains in the early 1900s, strategically located to take advantage of the highly nutritious and palatable grama grasses (p. 62). Though Madeline’s outings take her to Aravaipa Cañon (p. 89, northwest of Willcox, Arizona) and the town of Chiricahua (pp. 108-109), the most memorable action occurs in the Peloncillo Mountains. Through the geography of this sky island landscape Madeline achieves her desire for a significant life (p. 3).

Grey’s prose in these scenes is a reminder that geography is more than the study of locations—it is also the study of the character of a place and why that is important. In Madeline’s flight on horseback to her ranch in Chapter 10 to escape Don Carlos’s vaqueros we learn about the atmospheric clarity, dissected terrain, and cactus and mesquite vegetation of the foothill zone. During her subsequent kidnapping she is taken higher in the mountains to a sparse grove of firs before she is rescued by Stewart.

In Chapter 15, *The Mountain Trail*, Grey provides a detailed understanding of elevational zonation in mountains, which is the presence of distinct zones of vegetation, animal life, terrain, and land use caused by the changing environmental conditions (wetter and cooler) higher on mountain slopes. The cowboys lead Madeline and her guests in a climb of the Peloncillos, out

of the ocotillo and yucca and rocks of the foothills (p. 222), higher into the gnarled cedars (p. 225), up to the stormy heights and finally into the firs, pines, and spruces of *The Crag*s (Chapter 16).

When Don Carlos and his guerillas threaten the peace of the outing, we read that the summer mountain camp is only ten miles from the border (p. 272) and one of the cowboys has met a forest ranger (p. 279). This is a reminder that they are likely within the boundaries of what was once called the Peloncillo National Forest (established 1906), now

part of the Coronado National Forest.

Yet the mere presence of American officialdom cannot hold back the influence of the raging Mexican Revolution. The temporal setting of the book is probably 1910-1911. Madeline initially arrives in El Cajon on October 3rd (p. 5). 1910 is suggested as the year of the opening scene by the referenced conflict between Madero and Diaz (p. 38). Madeline’s guests arrive in the same month as the capitulation of Diaz (pp. 101 and 121), which was in May 1911 (p. 167).

In June [1911] they climb to their summer mountain camp (p. 186). Two events throw a bit of doubt into the temporal setting of 1910-1911: when Madeline first sees Stewart, she is reminded of the opening scene of the film version of *The Virginian*, starring Dustin Farnum, a film released in September 1914. Also, Orozco’s rebellion against Madero is mentioned on p. 301, and that actually occurred in 1912.

“Geography...” continued on p. 20

"Geography..." continued from p. 11

The Mexican Revolution looms over the climactic scene of *The Light of Western Stars*. When Madeline decides to rescue Stewart from a rebel firing squad, she and one of her trusted cowboy-gunmen, Nels, ride with another cowboy, Link, in his crazed drive down into the desert to the twin border towns of Douglas (Arizona) and Agua Prieta (Sonora). The foreboding of this event is reflected in how Grey personifies the Chiricahua Mountains on the western horizon: at sunset, backlit, the "grim Chiricahua frowned black and sinister" (p. 351). Setting off by car down the San Bernardino Valley, Link, Nels, and Madeline see the Guadalupe Mountains looming "in the southwest" (p. 356). That is one of the few geographical errors in the book—the Guadalupe, south of the Peloncillos, could only appear on the southeastern horizon. As Link zips past the town of Bernardino, Grey personifies the Chihuahuan Desert with imagery of the challenge it poses to travel: "Beneath them the desert blazed. Seen from afar it was striking enough, but riding down into its red jaws gave Madeline the first affront to her imperious confidence" (p. 357).

The harrowing drive leads Madeline to Douglas, then across the border into Agua Prieta with its "white and blue walled houses, its brown-tiled roofs" (p. 364, Figure 3). In Agua Prieta, Link drives up to the bullring, which was used as a barracks by the rebels (p. 365, Figure 4). To rescue Stewart, Madeline must press on to Mezquital, one hundred miles farther (p. 367). With that distance, it is obvious that Mezquital in this context is a fictional name—there is a town of Mezquital in Mexico, but it is located far from the border, near Durango.



Fig. 3: Agua Prieta, Sonora, real photo postcard panoramic view looking north into Douglas, Arizona, published by Cal Osborn in 1910s. Source: Daniel Arreola postcard archive.

It is an odd circumstance that the first and last towns mentioned in the book are fictional place names. The possible towns Grey refers to with that distance from Agua Prieta are either Cumpas, Sonora, straight south, or Imuris, Sonora, to the southwest. Perhaps Mezquital is Imuris, since Grey refers to the "huge, looming saguaro" cactus (Figure 5), which only grows in the Sonoran Desert, and the drive from Agua Prieta to Imuris would cross from the western edge of the Chihuahuan Desert to the eastern edge of the Sonoran Desert.

One hundred years after the publication of *The Light of Western Stars*, the Peloncillo Mountains are still characterized by border issues, but now they include immigration, drug smuggling, and the cross-border migrations of endangered species, such as bats, the Mexican gray wolf, and the mythical jaguar. Intriguingly, in 1932, when Grey wrote *Majesty's Rancho*, the sequel to *The Light of Western Stars*, he altered the geography of the setting. El Cajon is now Bolton (another fictional name) and though the ranch is still on the west slopes of the Peloncillos, Grey re-locates the ranch to the Arizona side of the state line (Blake 1995). Grey demonstrates throughout his books that he knows the geography of this region well, so perhaps his geographical fluidity with respect to the state line aptly reflects just how little state or national boundaries really mean to the endangered species of this wild landscape of rugged mountains and deserts under the western stars.



Fig. 4: Agua Prieta bullring, real photo postcard, published Doubleday, 1910s. Source: Daniel Arreola postcard archive.

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Fig. 5: Saguaro cactus scene in Sonoran Desert. Line postcard published by Sandoval News Service, El Paso. Printed by Tichnor Brothers, Boston, circa 1930s. Source: Kevin Blake postcard archive.

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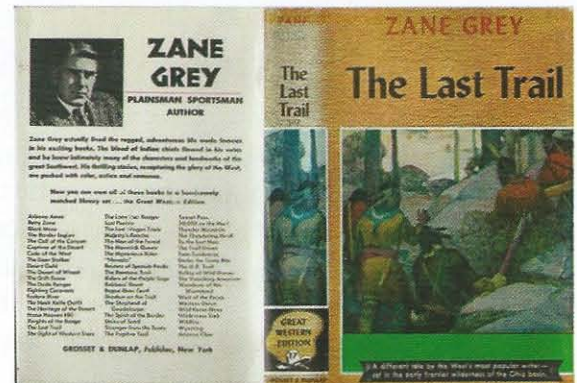
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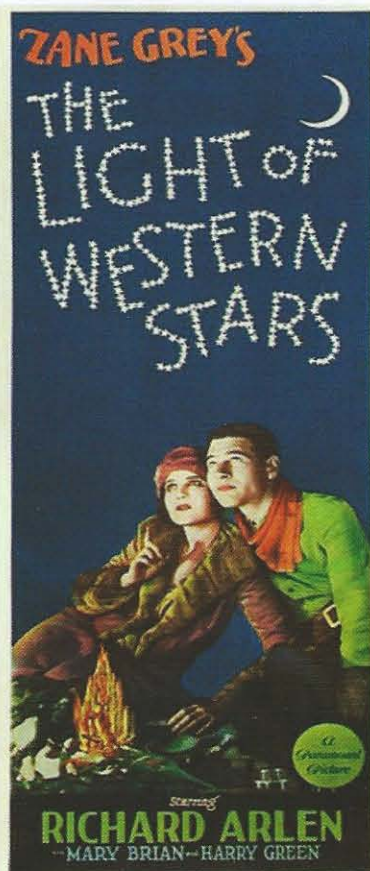


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