



Opening Lines

January 8, 2006

From "Predatory Bureaucracy: The Extermination of Wolves and the Transformation of the West" by Michael J. Robinson (University Press of Colorado, \$24.95), who will speak and sign his work at 2 p.m. Saturday at the Tattered Cover, LoDo, 1628 16th St. in Denver. (303) 436-1070

"How does civilization exterminate a species, extinguishing a unique evolutionary lineage that trails back like paw prints in the sand for tens of thousands of years? For some species, extermination was a facile and all too quick affair. The passenger pigeon, following a mass migration carved by instinct into each bird's genes (as if etched into the wind itself), succumbed to an anarchistic army of frontier riflemen.

Exterminating the wolf was another matter. Canny, adaptable, and determined to survive and breed, members of the lobo tribe refused to melt away before the fur trappers and

poisoners of the frontier, seemed to get the better of the cattle barons, and would not disappear even with high bounties on their hides. The cultural code of the pioneer — to kill what couldn't be dominated, an imperative as ineluctable as DNA — failed against the wolf.

But that same code, divested of its populist frontier context and transplanted into the very system of centralized government that replaced the frontier, eventually accomplished what bounties, ranchers and fur trappers could not. In fact, exterminating the wolf in the American West proved so challenging that the enterprise brought into being new political institutions and financial relationships — which turned out to be at least as resilient as the wolf itself.

The United States Forest Service began killing wolves as a way of currying favor with its ranching constituency. Then the job was taken

over by the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey, which developed an ever-growing list of species to be wiped out and collected money for that task from states, local governments and private associations. National Park Service rangers and idealistic young men who were part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps distributed millions of poisoned baits to kill not just wolves and coyotes but also the pesky prey animals whose numbers the predators would otherwise have controlled. And the federal Grazing Service, precursor to the Bureau of Land Management, helped funnel part of the fees paid for grazing on the public domain to the extermination campaign."

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