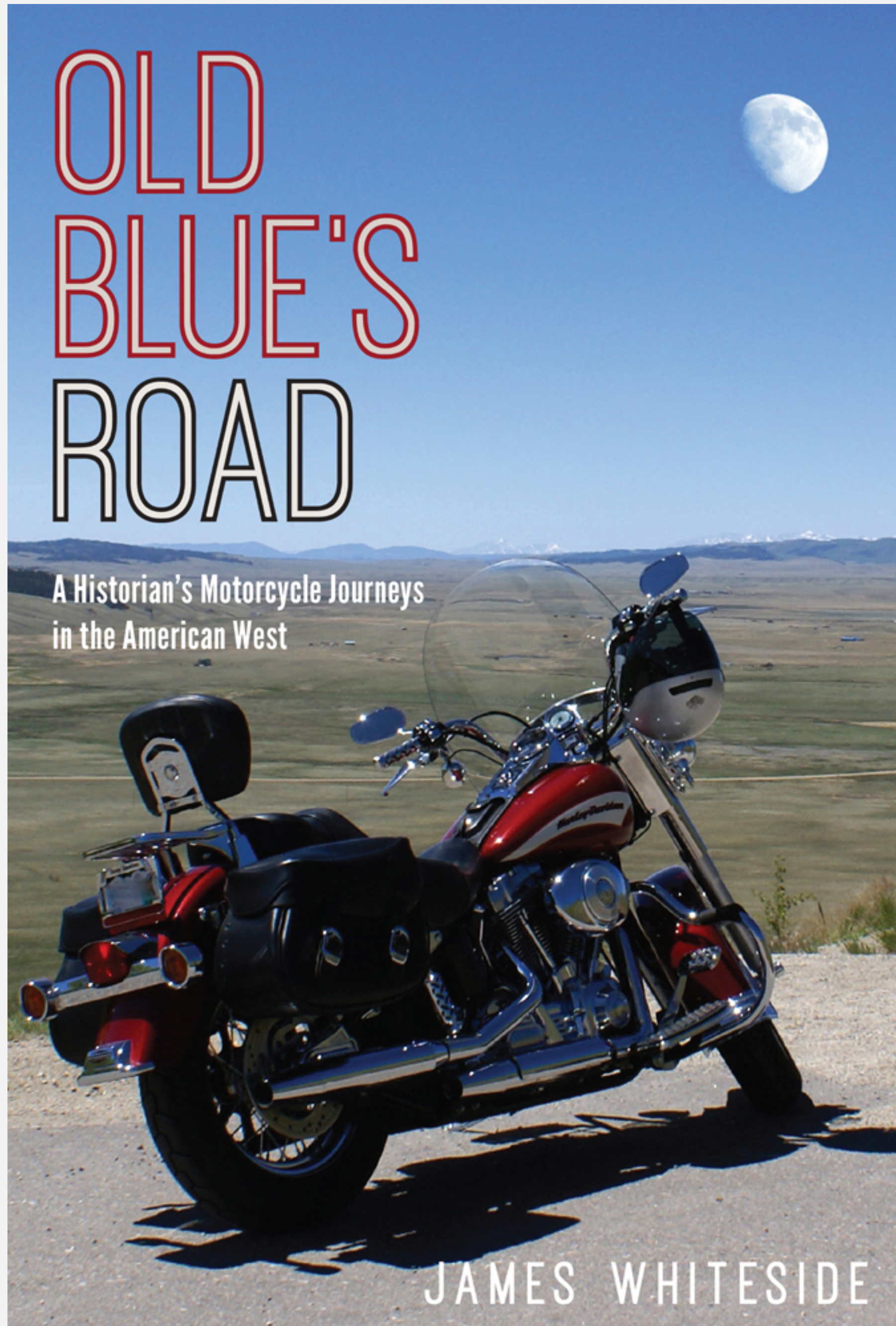


Old Blue’s Road: A Historian’s Motorcycle Journeys in the American West

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Author: James Whiteside

Publishing: *Old Blues Road: A Historian’s Motorcycle Journeys in the American West*. By James Whiteside. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2015. 282 pages. Black-and-white photographs. 5½” x 8½”. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer: Craig Leavitt

As a preschool child, retired University of Colorado Denver history professor James Whiteside identified so strongly with the Lone Ranger that he insisted to teachers and relatives that he was in fact the fictional masked man of 1950’s radio and television fame. As an adult, Whiteside’s fascination with the iconography of the imagined West gave way to serious study of the much more complex and nuanced reality. He has combined his keen grasp of Western history with his love for motorcycle travel in a compelling new book, *Old Blue’s Road: A Historian’s Motorcycle Journeys in the American West*. Named for his trusty Harley Davidson, “Old Blue,” Whiteside’s tome rewards readers with its deft mixture of the time-honored American road book and cogent insights on the “important processes of human, economic, political, cultural, and environmental development. . . that both define the region as a place and link its history intimately with the larger history of the United States and the world” (7).

The first chapter, “Family Reunion,” traces a journey to Victoria, British Columbia,

with insights about mining conflicts and Chief Joseph’s Wallowa Nez Perce tribe dispensed along the way. Chapter 2, “The Great Basin,” considers Indian tribes of the Columbia River, the westward migration of Mormons, and contemporary efforts of a right-wing preacher and his disciple to paint Southern slavery as a rather benign institution. “Four Trails, Two Rivers” offers reflections upon highlights and lowlights

of early Colorado history—the discovery of gold and the reprehensible massacre at Sand Creek—as well as a meditation on the complex intersection of Hispanic, Native, and Anglo cultures in the American Southwest. In “Four Corners,” Whiteside relates the rise and fall of Ancestral Puebloan communities to the boom-and-bust cycles that characterize modern Western history, and notes that “the landscape of the Four Corners region is dramatic evidence of how the Earth rearranges itself, that the world is both eternal and transient” (141).

The conceit of using present-day road trips to frame historical discussion is most effective in Chapters 5 and 6, entitled “Warrior Trail: Triumph,” and “Warrior Trail: Catastrophe,” respectively. Tracing the heroic but ultimately futile resistance of Native American tribes to the inexorable encroachment of Euro-American settlers and their military protectors, these chapters weave together narrative and analysis with astute observations on contemporary historical memory and the difficulties of official commemoration of controversial events. Visiting the famous site of “Custer’s Last Stand,” Whiteside bristles at objections from some white visitors to the 1991 addition of an Indian Memorial and the renaming of Custer Battlefield as Little Bighorn National Battlefield. Responding to charges of “revisionism” from whites who seem frustrated at losing control of history, he writes, “I do not object to being called a revisionist; in fact, I embrace it. However, I think *inclusionist* is a better term. Renaming the Little Bighorn Battlefield and building the Indian Memorial there does not erase Custer and his men from the scene or from history. Instead, it includes all the other people who were there. And that more truly respects America’s history and democratic values” (207).

In his travels, Whiteside meets many vivid characters who help to illuminate the histories of the unique places they inhabit. But *Old Blue’s Road* does not offer easy nostalgia about the West. The author who once idolized the Lone Ranger now looks past the mythologized West to share his insights about the complex social, environmental, political, and economic forces that have shaped its true history. His strong, clear prose and engaging technique of blending history with travel will win over both the serious student of the West and the more casual reader. *Old Blue’s Road* is heartily recommended to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the region.

Reviewer Info:

Craig Leavitt is a recent MA graduate in history at the University of Colorado Denver, a former Koch Fellow at History Colorado, former editor of University of Colorado Denver’s *Historical Studies Journal*, and the former content manager for the Center for Colorado & the West’s website. He has published a history of the historic African-American resort at Lincoln Hills in Colorado Heritage and coauthored a book chronicling the history of Denver’s Hilltop Heritage Association. He coauthored *Colorado Newspapers: A History and Inventory, 1859–2000*, published in 2015 by the Colorado Press Association. Leavitt is also the coauthor of *Herndon Davis: Painting Colorado History, 1901–1962*, to be published in 2016 by University Press of Colorado.