Frank Bergon, who grew up on a ranch in Madera County, California, has compiled this collection of essays profiling friends and acquaintances who reside or once lived in California’s San Joaquin Valley. Through their stories he examines numerous topics, including the economic challenges confronting California’s rural communities, structural problems in the region such as racism and poverty, the consequences of suburban and urban expansion, and the state of California’s environment. Including men and women of different races and ethnicities who make their livings through various professions, he offers diverse viewpoints in giving his subjects the opportunity to speak about their experiences growing up in, moving to, or passing through California’s Central Valley. In highlighting specific aspects of their lives and how they connect to the various larger issues he focuses on that affect the region, Bergon demonstrates how history has shaped the present in this largely rural region, with certain elements of that history fading away while others remain intact or evolve.

One goal Bergon seeks to accomplish with the book is to give a voice to farmers and ranchers who Bergon says are often unheard and feel “misrepresented in books and the media to the point of being dismissed and unseen” (p. 62). He succeeds through recounting the talks he had with his subjects, most having grown up on farms and ranches and some of whom went on to own their own or find employment in agribusiness. Among the primary people readers meet is Fred Franzia, who rebelled against elite wine culture and produced a two-dollar wine for the masses. Working for Franzia is Sal Arriola, who relocated to the United States with his parents, undocumented immigrants from Mexico, when he was three years old. He graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara and pioneered computerized agriculture management in the grape industry. Bergon interviews Mitch Lasgoity, who lived on a ranch his grandfather bought in California after leaving Basque country and now owns 33,000 acres of ranchland himself. He concludes with accounts of conversations he had over the years with another good friend, Darrell Winfield, the primary Marlboro Man, who worked briefly in the San Joaquin Valley before ultimately settling on a ranch in Wyoming. Using their tales for contemporary context, Bergon discusses how the San Joaquin Valley is changing, in part due to long-term historical trends and in part due to more recent developments. One of the most significant problems he identifies is that the way of life centered around farming and ranching is disappearing because of environmental changes, suburbanization, and less interest in agribusiness. He points out that the potential for a new Dust Bowl in California is mostly a manmade disaster caused by overuse of available water by farmers in the arid valley that has occurred over more than a century, but also claims that it has been exacerbated by more recent government policy and environmental activism. Suburban sprawl and city growth compound the problem by replacing farmland and straining the already thinly stretched water supply. Furthermore, the rural economy is threatened by fewer people pursuing careers in farming or ranching, preferring other professions. The only shortcoming in Bergon’s effort here is that he is critical of those who write about the rural West for too often focusing on the large agribusiness operators and not the smaller ones, yet most of those in agribusiness he writes about own or work for large-scale operations. Consequently, the few examples he offers of small-scale op-
erations make it difficult to fully appreciate the impact changes are having on such farmers and ranchers. Bergon also seeks to explore other aspects of life in the region. Dr. Albert Wilburn, Nancy Gray, and Joe Alverez speak about diversity and their mixed feelings about the racial tolerance, or lack of it, that they experienced growing up in the San Joaquin Valley. Relatedly, Bergon discusses with Irene Waltz, a Native American woman, the trouble she had finding identity in the region because the San Joaquin Valley largely lost its Native heritage. Bringing further attention to the plight of Native Americans, Bergon’s former colleague, Louis Owens, detailed the extreme poverty he and many Native peoples endured. Finally, in addressing racial diversity, Bergon introduces Heather, a young Korean woman he met on an airplane who described her experience moving between Asian and white communities and struggled with both an abusive home life and first marriage. In telling these stories, Bergon briefly delves into the region’s history as it relates to the lives of the different people he talked with to show how the past shapes the experiences of people in the present. California’s colonization by Spain, control by Mexico, and conquest by the United States impacted life for Mexican and Native Americans in the San Joaquin Valley. Immigration through California’s statehood has drastically altered its demographics, bringing in people from all parts of the world, with Bergon giving special attention to Asian immigration. California has also attracted migrants from around the country, and the Dust Bowl migration, specifically, has figured prominently in the family history of both white and black Americans. Herein lies the most significant scholarly value of the book, with Bergon demonstrating the intimate connections between past and present on a personal level.

While Bergon tells great stories about these individuals, he fails to support with much more than opinion his main claim, that in California’s Central Valley the distinctions between Old and New West break down “to create America’s True West, a country where the culture of a vanishing West lives on in many contemporary Westerners, despite the radical technological transformations around them” (p. 1). The rural West in particular is closer, in his mind, to the Old West because beliefs in the power of individual resilience and the future rewards of hard work, which he says are held by every group that has settled there, persist due to core beliefs changing more slowly than in urban areas, even if the beliefs are harder to maintain in the new millennium. Ultimately, in his words, “what abides in the San Joaquin Valley is an Old West code of toughness and hard work that I saw my grandparents and parents continue to believe in: a communal allegiance to Western dreams of freedom and opportunity, an optimistic fortitude coupled with physical endurance, a respect for work with your hands, a disinclination to complain or give up, all the time knowing that the demands of the code in confrontation with the harsh cyclical reality of agricultural disappointment might leave you crushed. Or possibly renewed” (pp. 9-10). In making these claims, Bergon attributes a mythic uniqueness to the West that numerous scholars have debunked. Beliefs in individualism, the rewards of hard work, freedom and opportunity, et cetera, are not exclusive to or even verifiably more prevalent in the West. And there certainly has not been a disinclination to complain or give up in the West, as historically Westerners have been vocal complainers and leaving an area in response to hard times has been a common practice among the region’s residents. In attempting to make his case about western qualities, he includes people from different backgrounds who faced varying levels of adversity and overcame them, but they are largely selected from among his own successful friends who possess the character traits he wants to attribute to the region as a whole. Although Bergon perpetuates western mythology with such assertions, there is value in this for the student of the American West in the popular imagination. It is enlightening to see how these myths persist and take on new significance in the twenty-first century.

Still, Bergon is hardly uncritical of all western myths. He rejects one common myth about the West in discussing the region’s exhibition of populist anti-government anger among people who see the government as restricting their prosperity. He writes, “Even in the Old West, communal values prevailed. The brigades of mountain men trapping from the San Joaquin River to the Rockies and early cowboys on trail drives in California or Texas depended on each other, the natural world they lived in, and the government of their country for protection and economic support. The true story of the American West is not of independence but of interdependence” (p. 199). As he acknowledges, the American West has never merely been what the mythmakers have made it out to be.

Whether one is familiar with California’s Central Valley or not, Bergon’s essays are an enjoyable read. As a native Californian myself, I relate to some of the topics Bergon discusses as they shaped my own experience growing up in the Central Valley town of Vacaville, north of where Bergon’s family settled, as this once rural community situated between San Francisco and Sacramento.
grew into a sizeable suburb. Carved out of land once owned by Manuel Cabeza Vaca just two years after the US conquest of California, Vacaville was one of the leading producers of fruits and nuts in the state. I watched the town evolve as the orchards up the street from my childhood home were replaced by subdivisions, the cornfields my mom drove past taking me to school became shopping centers and office complexes, and the odor of onions that wafted across town from the onion-processing plant disappeared when the facility closed down. The town still embraces aspects of its past. For example, Fiesta Days is a weekend-long celebration of the town’s Mexican heritage linked to Memorial Day and local farmers sell their crops at the farmers market. Overall though, Vacaville’s rural past and connection to the “Old West” is fading away. In recounting the stories of people who have also witnessed such evolution, the book provides many significant insights on how the past and present come together in California. For both leisure reading and for scholarly endeavors, *Two-Buck Chuck & The Marlboro Man* has a lot to offer.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54027

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.