

Manifestnation

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It's 107 degrees in Marysville. The orchards are heavy with fruit. In the stifling heat, time passes as slowly as a ripening peach. On the hour bells chime "Oh Shenandoah," the only evidence of time passing at all.

Headless mannequins with enormous breasts line the sidewalk outside Sullivan's Saddlery like a frozen can-can ensemble. Rayon ruffles fluttering in the breeze. A woman in scrubs smokes a cigarette on the corner. At McNally Appliances, white refrigerators wait patiently against a wood paneled wall. Cars idle in the drive-thrus. On the lawn, a sign announces an upcoming NRA dinner and a Blue Lives Matter flag flies from the Silver Dollar Saloon. In the window of DeHaan Trading Post, an ancient paper dollhouse kit fades to blue in the sun. The Sunshine Family Home, A 4-room home you help design & decorate! You can just make out the words.

In the windows of many shops there is nothing at all. Empty storefronts stare blankly across the street at one another. Hotel Marysville has been shuttered since 1986. Diamond Palace is closed. The Tower Theatre marquee is blank. The Woolworth building is barren.

At the Bok Kai temple, a man sleeps on the ground wrapped in a blanket under the pavilion. On a bench next to him is a collection of pale round stones. Red paper lanterns sway overhead. A group of people with street worn suitcases huddle around a takeout container outside of Flyers Gas Station. Homelessness in Marysville is a crisis.

Downtown a sign that reads "Gateway to the Gold Fields" greets the onslaught of interstate traffic funneled through the city. It's a bygone slogan, a rift in time.

Marysville was once a place destined for greatness. In its heyday, the city was on track to become the "New York of the Pacific" and Marysville glittered with promise. Blueprints unfurled like prophecy. The empire-to-be was among California's largest and most prosperous cities, alive with trade and commerce. Steamboats churned at the riverbanks, gears turned in the mill, crucibles glowed hot in the heart of the foundry, and the city hummed with purpose.

What could explain Marysville's extraordinary reversal of fate? How does a city once destined to rule the West fall to obscurity?

Consider that concept. Destiny.

America was built on destiny. Founded on the conviction that colonization of the continent was God's divine plan. The notion predates the Declaration of Independence, but was

crystallized in 1839 when newspaper editor John O’Sullivan put the words Manifest Destiny to print.

“The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness,” he wrote in *The United States Democratic Review*. “In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True.”

You can’t know America without knowing the country’s relationship with destiny. And nowhere in America is this more true than in the American West. By 1845, Manifest Destiny is a rallying cry in the mouth of James K. Polk, the country’s first dark horse President. Leveraged in favor of his expansionist agenda, this gilded rhetoric asserts that by God’s will the white race is destined to conquer the continent.

California is promised to them and it’s a beautiful promise. “The deep, rich, alluvial soil of the Nile, in Egypt, does not afford a parallel,” wrote Lansford Hastings in his then-popular handbook, *The Emigrants Guide to Oregon & California*. To those who dare to make the overland journey, Hastings promises abundant livestock, perpetual spring, purity of atmosphere, and perfect health. It was all for the taking.

And the colonizers took it all. Unleashed a violence on the country that today is still unfolding. Slaughtered thousands of indigenous peoples in a terror plot of the government’s design and dared to call it Destiny. Denied the humanity of the natives to justify their extermination, but by killing them proved that it was the white men who were something less than human. Their will to power, to wealth, to ownership was a madness that gripped them and did not let go. These men who paved the way.



Marysville: the city’s name bears its origins. Delivered to California by a band of settlers, our namesake was an emigrant, a body among white bodies actualizing the Westward Expansion. As hundreds of wagons rolled west, groups formed and dissolved along the way, converging and diverging like starlings. But at the Little Sandy River, a letter from Hastings comes urging travelers to take a shortcut from his book. A faction of pioneers heed this advice, going left where the majority kept right, and so are bonded not by any preconceived arrangement, but by their trust in Hastings and their choice to take the route less traveled.

The going is good, and then the going gets rough. The cut-off sends their wagon train teetering along steep ravines, over shifting dunes, across parched salt flats and volcanic

craggs. When the water supply is exhausted, they chew flattened bullets to keep their mouths from going dry. When the animals grow starved and too weak for their loads, when the oxen bolt, mad with thirst, the travelers walk.

The truth is, Hastings hadn't actually tested the route before publishing his guide. He saw promise in California and by drafting his book had hoped to build a reputation and political career for himself there. In his attempted ascent to power, Hastings failed to consider the consequences of his negligence.

And the consequences, it turns out, are devastating. By the time the Donner Party reaches the Sierra Nevadas in November, the snow on the mountains is already waist deep. What happens there—their snowbound crisis and survival cannibalism—lives on in one of the grisliest chapters of American folklore.

Incredibly, beneath the feet they can no longer feel, the snow and the dirt beneath the snow, is a buried treasure that would change the course of American history. Four hundred million years ago California lay at the bottom of the sea, a sunken place where oceanic faults vented great energies from the Earth's core and underwater volcanoes heaved plumes of magma laced with precious minerals. Tectonic collisions pushed the mineral rich earth skyward and a chain of mountains spanning the Americas were risen like the spine of some resurrected beast. The Sierra Nevada mountains, the site of the Donner Party's extreme suffering, is also an undiscovered temple of gold.

Are you men from California, or do you come from heaven? they ask when the first rescue party arrives.

Among those pulled from the snow is a fourteen year old girl. Meriam Marjory Murphy went by Mary. She would go on to marry Charles Covillaud, a Frenchman who struck gold and acquired land—the beginnings of a city.

Santa Monica, Santa Rosa, if a place in California is to be named after a woman, that woman must be a saint. But when the city name is later held to a vote, residents decide to call it Marysville, after Mary Murphy; not a saint, but a survivor.

Less than five years later, the Gold Rush is in full swing. Hope is a bar of gold swimming in the eyes of so many men. The American Dream is no longer one of hard work and gradual, modest prosperity. It is now a dream of instant wealth. It is a dream of getting lucky. Strategically located at the Feather and Yuba rivers, Marysville flourishes as millions of dollars worth of gold is shipped from its shores. As the Gold Rush peaks in 1852, the

Gateway to the Goldfields is the third largest city in California. Rumor has it Marysville is a contender for state capital.

But Marysville's remarkable prosperity is cut short by the very engine of its success. Hydraulic mining upstream raises the riverbeds and biblical flooding ensues year after year. Steamboats, central to the city's economy, can no longer make their passage. In an effort to save the drowning city, Marysvillians erect a levee system in a ring around the perimeter.

The levee keeps the town dry, but Marysville has inadvertently walled itself in. Unable to expand beyond the levee border, the city's explosive growth is stopped in its tracks. No longer the New York of the Pacific, it will later be called California's Oldest Little City. Marysville is a city frozen in time.

As neighboring cities continue to expand, businesses in Marysville move on to greener pastures, beginning a slow and steady decline of the city's commercial profit. By the 1860s, the Gold Rush is over and railroads are the booming business of the day. The Transatlantic Railroad is revolutionizing the country, connecting East to West. Under more favorable circumstances, the track may have been routed through Marysville. Instead corrupt railway barons monopolize the operation, directing the line to Sacramento to their benefit. In May of 1869, Central Pacific Railroad President Leland Stanford ceremoniously taps the final railway spike in the ground. A gold spike, commemorative. It's a 14 karat nail in the coffin. Sacramento is named state capital in 1879.

By the Great Depression of the 1930s, the next great American migration to California is underway. U.S. stock prices are falling like bombs and as the price of wheat plummets, farmers desperately over-plow the Southern Plains, tearing up the native prairie grasses in an effort to scrape by. When the drought years hit, the crops fail and the farmers watch their land turn to desert. Massive dust storms kick up. "Black blizzards" blot out the sun for days at a time.

Meanwhile, California's agribusiness is booming, fully industrialized. The success of these farms rides on the exploitation of foreign laborers—Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and Mexican workers. These workers have begun to organize, so must be evicted and replaced. Poverty stricken refugees in rattling tin lizzies, arrive at Marysville's doorstep with nothing. They are willing to accept whatever work they can get so that their family may survive. This new source of cheap, easily exploited labor is convenient for the big government backed industrial farms.

Workers move from camp to camp, chasing the harvest. As they starve, they are forced to grow the food for those who can afford to eat. In the summer of 1936, John Steinbeck is making the rounds in an old bakery truck reporting on the Dust Bowl migration on an assignment from The San Francisco News. He spends a good deal of time in Marysville. His focus is on the inhumane conditions of the migrant camps, which are heavily policed by deputized employees.

“A disagreement constitutes resisting an officer,” writes Steinbeck. “A glance at the list of migrants shot during a single year in California for “resisting an officer” will give a fair idea of the casualness of these “officers” in shooting workers.”

The industrial farms have become so powerful that charges cannot be successfully brought against them in court. They're free to rule as they please. Steinbeck summarizes the attitude of the larger growers' associations with a statement made before the judiciary committee of the California Assembly by a member of the Board of Supervisors of Imperial County and active member of the Imperial Valley Associated Farmers group:

“In Imperial Valley we don't need this criminal syndicalism law. They have got to have it for the rest of the counties that don't know how to handle these matters. We don't need it because we have worked out our own way of handling these things. We won't have another of these trials. We have a better way of doing it. Trials cost too much.”

“The better way,” as accepted by the large growers of the Imperial Valley, includes a system of terrorism that would be unusual in the Fascist nations of the world... A continuation of this approach constitutes a criminal endangering of the peace of the state,” Steinbeck concludes.

California's industrial farms are granted federal price supports, legally enforced marketing orders, and massive government expenditures for irrigation projects. The support extended to the migrant workers pales by comparison. Under the New Deal, a few federal migrant camps are established under a pilot program. One of these camps, the Weedpatch Camp, is erected in Marysville. The government camps are an improvement. There is water, toilet paper, some medical supplies. In large part, the camp's inhabitants are free to govern themselves. “As experiments in natural and democratic self-government, these camps are unique in the United States...” writes Steinbeck. “They started as experiments, and the experiments have proven successful.”

When Steinbeck publishes *The Grapes of Wrath*, the book takes the U.S. by storm and for a brief moment in time, the nation engages with the injustices of California agribusiness. But the country's attention is quickly co-opted by WWII. War means jobs; the labor surplus of the Dust Bowl ends. After the war, the program is liquidated.

In 1942, a training camp for WWII infantry divisions is opened in Marysville at the site of an old gold mine. After the war Camp Beale becomes a separation center for the returning troops, where they're held to make sure they are fit to release back into society and then discharged. Some of these men go home, but many of them don't.

As it was during the Gold Rush, Marysville is again a town of men. Business in Marysville picks up, due in part to the establishment of a red light district made to cater to them. Brothels and swank bordellos dominate the south end of town. Marysville becomes a destination again.

“As a kid I remember my mom getting dressed up in her patent leather shoes and patent leather purse and matching gloves and hat and putting me in a basically identical outfit but smaller and we went to Marysville—shopping!” Nancie Greene, a former Marysvillian, recalls.

“On D street there was JC Pennys, Woolworths, a whole bunch of nice, privately owned dress shops and jewelry stores. It was like going to New York shopping. Especially at Christmas, because they had trees with Christmas lights and all the businesses are decked out. Lights on, everything was open late at night for shopping. As a kid it seemed so beautiful and so spectacular and so busy and the kind of place your mom would say, “Now hold my hand, don't let go!”

But then there's a shift, a rise in conservative politics in the late 60s and 70s. In 1969, Nixon runs a law-and-order campaign that wins him the presidency, the New Right is on the rise, and Reagan is governor of California. When he becomes president in the 80s, Reagan revitalizes the conservative ideology, reducing government regulation of the economy, cutting taxes, boosting defense spending, and extolling good Christian values. By the end of the 80s, the red light district is long gone.

The big name stores have also moved on. It's around this time that meth use begins to proliferate in Marysville. The WWII soldiers at Camp Beale were given government issued meth during the war. By the 80s, white supremacist groups and racist motorcycle gangs like the Hell's Angels are manufacturing it. Local farmers are feeding it to their chickens to get two eggs out of a 24 hour laying cycle.

America dips into a brief recession from 1990 to 1991 and the West Coast is among the hardest hit regions in the country. The economy recovers and the Mall of America, the largest shopping mall on earth opens its doors, but unemployment continues to rise through 1992.

That year a former student of a Marysville high school, a 20 year old white male, returns to campus and shoots and kills his senior year civics teacher, along with three students. One of 30 school shootings in the U.S. that year. Ten other students are injured. He holds 80 students hostage in an eight hour standoff with the authorities. In custody he tells police that he was upset after losing his job and angry that he hadn't graduated from high school, which he blamed on his civics teacher who flunked him.

Meth production in Marysville explodes in the 90s. Mom and pop home labs are widespread. At the same time superlabs run by organized Mexican crime groups are producing on a grand scale. Route 99, which passes up beside Marysville running parallel to the Feather River, connects to Interstate 5, a major corridor between Mexico, the US, and Canada. There's big money in this. A major lab is capable of producing 100 pounds of methamphetamine per cooking operation; the street value of this amount of product would net the seller over \$3 million.

As Marysville grapples with these issues, America at large is prospering. It would be the longest period of economic expansion in U.S. history to date. In 1994 the GDP growth surges, stocks quadruple in value. The world wide web is born. The Dot-Com bubble supercharges the economy in '95 and by '96 America sees a full return to steady growth. It's a prosperous time for some, but not all. Through much of the 90s the median accumulated wealth for families at the top 10 percent is about 12 times that of lower-middle-income families.

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And at the turn of the century, this economic inequality goes into overdrive. A report released by the Federal Reserve reveals that in 2001, the median net worth of the top earners was about 22 times as great of those lower-middle income families. It shows that between 1998 and 2001, the net worth of families jumped up to \$833,600 — a 69 percent increase. Meanwhile, the lowest fifth of income earners rose 24 percent, to \$7,900. The 2000 census shows that the median household income in Marysville was \$28,494, 60 percent below the California average. 18.9 percent of the population is living below the poverty line, about 25 percent higher than the CA average.

Meanwhile, American exceptionalism is running high. U.S. leaders are secure in their ideologies and geopolitical strength. The triumph of the country and its dominance seems to them inevitable. It is this hubris that leads to the belief that banks are too big to fail, to the failure to regulate subprime lending.

In 2008, unscrupulous investment banking and insurance practices trigger the most

severe economic and financial meltdown since the Great Depression. The 2008 Great Recession hits the disenfranchised communities of Marysville hard. Between 2008 and 2015, homelessness rises dramatically. In a return to the days of the Great Depression, three large encampments surround the town. And these are Marysvillians—the vast majority of people experiencing homelessness in the county are from the region.

Between 2007 and 2017, the reported number of unhoused people more than doubles, with those experiencing chronic homelessness more than tripling in the area. The highest proportions of people experiencing homelessness have been homeless for 5 or more years. And these numbers are likely underestimated.

It's clear that unemployment is a driving force behind the crisis: in a survey, 44 percent of the unhoused community identify unemployment as the primary reason for their homelessness, followed by 26 percent who say that they are unable to pay their rent or mortgage. Surveys also reveal that a majority of the unhoused community experience mental health issues. Qualitative themes include the stress of seasonal work in agriculture, traumatic childhood experiences, and substance addiction as a means of self-medication—all products of the Marysville environment.

In 2019 an urgency ordinance by Yuba County Supervisors prohibits camping. With little to no warning officials bulldoze the camps, ruthlessly hauling away what little Marysville's unhoused had left. The camp communities organize to file a lawsuit and successfully sue government officials in a victory that nets them a modest compensation deal. But in 2020, on the day that payment checks are distributed, a fire of mysterious origin sets one of the camps ablaze. Police prevent the victims from retrieving their trailers and belongings, and the fire burns the camp to the ground.

Today, financial inequality in America continues to accelerate. Research from leading economist Thomas Piketty demonstrates that the wealth gap is widening exponentially. “The present situation cannot be sustained much longer,” writes Piketty in his book *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. “If the trend continues, the consequences for the long-term dynamics of the wealth distribution are potentially terrifying.”

“The egalitarian pioneer ideal has faded into oblivion,” observes Piketty, “and the New World may be on the verge of becoming the Old Europe of the twenty-first century's globalized economy.”

The rise and fall of Marysville is a hard lesson in the brutal fallacy of the American Dream. At a time in our nation's history where much of the country still believes in the founding

fictions of destiny and equality in America, it's a history worth revisiting. Manifest Destiny hasn't been relegated to the history books. The ideology is still very much alive today. Just last year, then President Donald Trump evoked the term before Congress in his State of the Union Address, this time speaking to America's divine right to, quite literally, conquer the universe.

"In reaffirming our heritage as a free nation, we must remember that America has always been a frontier nation," he told members of Congress. "Now we must embrace the next frontier: America's manifest destiny in the stars."

When he first wrote of Manifest Destiny, John O'Sullivan justified his logic thusly:

"...we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity," he wrote. "It is so destined, because the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny, and that of equality is perfect, is universal."

While equality may have been our country's initial aspiration, ultimately America wasn't founded on a principle of equality. It was founded on greed. On the eternal acquisition of power for those few already in possession of it. But history has shown us that O'Sullivan was right about one thing: that principle upon which America was organized has in many meaningful ways determined its course. Greed and inequality are now threatening to bring the U.S. to its knees. Until we fundamentally alter that central tenet, America's destiny will be fixed.