

James Michener's Greeley, *Jefferson*, and *Centennial*

by Robert E. Gatten, Jr.¹

The years that James A. Michener spent in Colorado early in his career had a pronounced and well-known influence on the development of his novel, *Centennial*. Less well known, however, is the relationship between his time in Greeley and an earlier unfinished novel, *Jefferson*, about the same area, and how that abandoned story relates to *Centennial*. I will explore those topics here.

Greeley and *Jefferson*

James Michener arrived in Greeley in 1936 to begin his work at the Colorado State College of Education (now the University of Northern Colorado), having been attracted by its progressive approach to education. He taught social studies at the college's High School and earned his M.A. degree. Michener took a leave of absence during 1939-40 to teach and continue his graduate studies at Harvard before returning to Greeley for the next academic year.²

During his four years in Greeley and year at Harvard, Michener published 11 papers in professional journals on educational methods in social studies.³ He thought deeply about social science education, and was active professionally at the national level, helping prepare a chapter in a textbook, editing social studies books, and speaking to various groups.⁴

Michener was a member of Greeley's Angell Club, a group of local leaders and faculty members who met to discuss current events.⁵ There he met Floyd Merrill, editor of the *Greeley Tribune*, and Merrill's influence would be long lasting.⁶ Merrill and Michener traveled widely around Colorado and beyond, and the memories of what they saw remained etched in Michener's memory. Early in their friendship, Merrill voiced his hopes for the types of books he would like to see written about the west and later asked Michener why he had never written a book about Colorado.⁷

The 1940s were a decade of change and maturation for Michener. In 1941, he resigned from his position at the college to become a senior associate editor of high school textbooks at Macmillan Book Company in New York City⁸. While serving in the Navy in the Pacific during World War II, he wrote *Tales of the South Pacific*, which was published in 1947 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for that year. By the spring of 1948, he had finished the manuscript of his second novel, *The Fires of Spring*, and was beginning work on a new novel set along the Front Range of the Rockies.⁹ His success led him to a quandary: should he give up his job at MacMillan and become a full-time writer?¹⁰ In March, he retreated to Colorado for two weeks, visiting Greeley and staying in a cabin in Poudre Canyon high in the mountains to mull over his future.¹¹ The next year, he took the plunge and resigned his position at Macmillan and headed back to the Pacific on assignment for *Holiday* magazine.¹²

Back home in 1950, “inspired by (his) memories of the west,” Michener resumed work on his novel about the West.¹³ During his earlier years in Greeley, when he traveled far and wide, often with Floyd Merrill, he took a number of photos: “A very important collection of slides and negatives of photographs taken in the years 1936-1938, showing my interest at that time in dryland farming, water problems, rural life in Colorado and the west, Indian affairs, and especially the life of Mexican workers in Chihuahua region. . . It was the persistence of these images that kept the ideas vital.”¹⁴

Jefferson was to be a story set in an imaginary state much like Colorado, with plains to the east, mountains to the west, and part of the western slopes of the range (see Fig. 1). The creation of a large, complex, fictional landscape, depicted on a map in his own hand, was a first for Michener, and he would use the technique again and again.

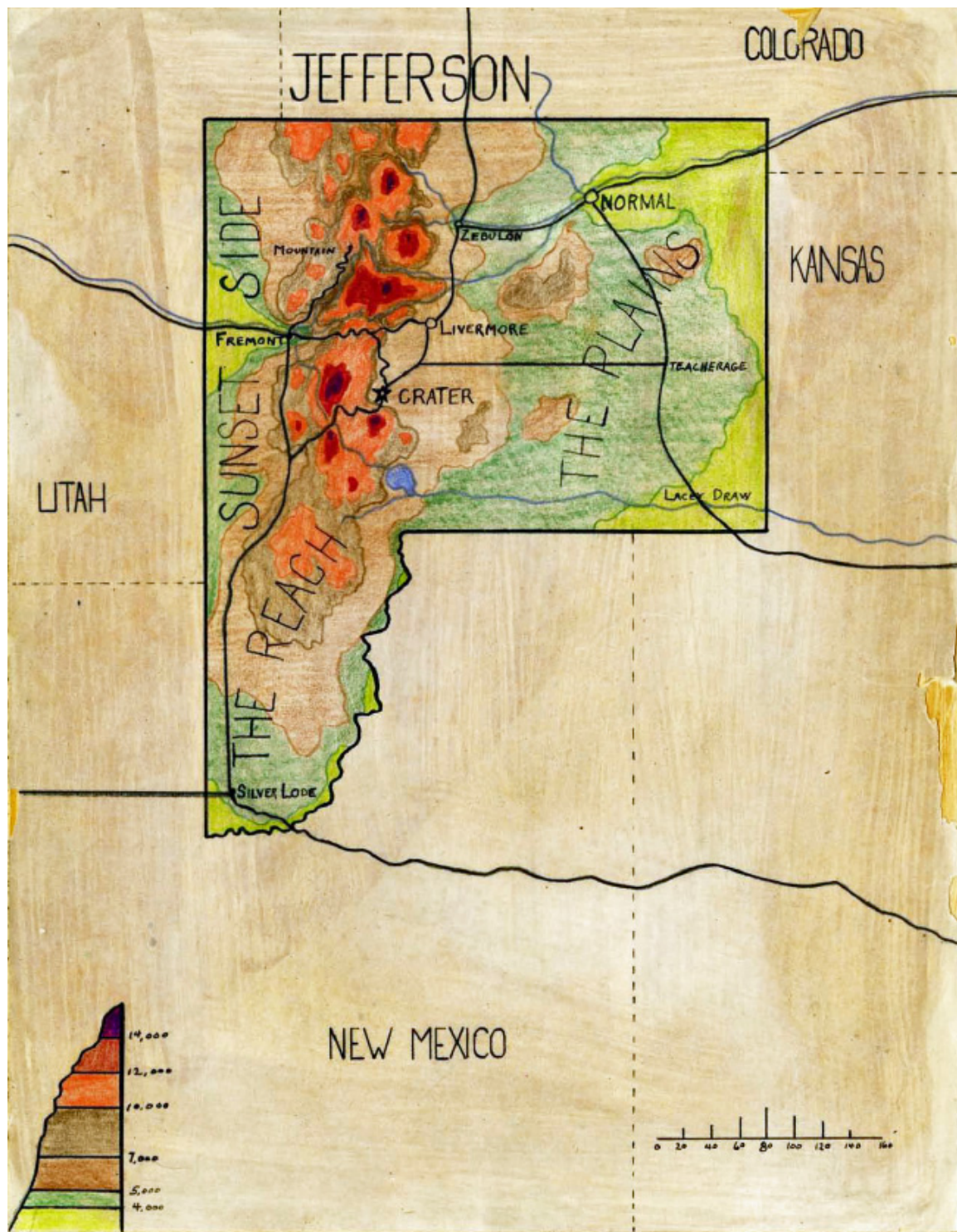


Fig. 1. Jefferson, as drawn by James A. Michener.¹⁵ The scale bar represents 160 miles.

As in the writing of his other novels, Michener began by outlining the time frame, characters, and settings for *Jefferson*: 1936-1948, 30 people, and all the locales shown on his map. He also created a timeline for the main character, Betty Benson, from her birth in 1917 until the ending of the novel in 1948. Michener completed a single chapter of 80

unnumbered, typewritten pages, entitled “Livermore,” that covered the years 1945-1946 in the life of Betty Benson in that fictional city, located just east of the mountains, much like Greeley.¹⁶

Betty Benson was a teacher of social studies at the high school in Livermore. The chapter is filled with themes that clearly reflect Michener’s life in Greeley:

- “Livermore was run with a minimum of trouble by paternalistic sugar-beet bankers . . .” The sugar beet industry was extremely important in Greeley, and Michener taught its importance each semester.¹⁷
- Betty Benson taught the development of American Democracy, much as Michener had done.¹⁸
- Betty realized that she and the other teachers were not teaching the students what they needed to know and therefore teaching was “so sterile a job and teachers so unappreciated. They did not merit appreciation. They had not earned respect.” Similarly, Michener and his colleagues at College High School were pioneers in abandoning traditional curricula and teaching students what they needed to know to have a full life.¹⁹ In his social studies classes, Michener had the basic objective of developing thinking citizens rather than cramming students full of historical facts.²⁰
- Betty observed the ugliness of campus politics, including administrator – faculty tensions. Michener surely experienced such things in his years in Greeley and Harvard.
- Much of the drama in the story concerns the outrageous, illegal sexual exploits of high school students; the failure of parents, teachers and churches to attend to the realities of adolescent development and behavior; the resulting citywide scandal; and the improvements that followed, championed by Betty Benson. Likewise, Michener was an early proponent of sex education in high school, and he obtained permission of parents and students to teach this subject, with demonstrable success.²¹ The inclusion of such a dramatic thread throughout *Jefferson* is not surprising, given Michener’s semi-autobiographical treatment of adolescence in *The Fires of Spring*, published in 1949.
- Betty Benson experimented with teaching Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. In her first year, the students could not appreciate the romanticism in the book because of their jaded view of sex. But the next year, after the sex scandal broke, she tried it again and there were “no snickers in the class that year.” Michener owned a copy of this book and used it when he taught at the Hill School in Pennsylvania (1929-1931), and was so impressed that he inscribed in it his own composition, *Ode to Tennyson*.²²
- Betty’s school superintendent coerced her into ghostwriting a book on educational

philosophy and methods, and despite a promise to list her as co-author, all she got was a tiny acknowledgement of assistance. By the time Michener wrote *Jefferson*, he had edited a book on educational approaches in social studies, co-authored another one, published two novels, and had years of editorial experience at MacMillan, so he knew the world of publishing intimately.²³

- Early in Betty's life, before the events in the chapter centered in Livermore, her father had killed her mother's lover. After he was released from prison, her father killed her mother and then committed suicide. In a case that occurred during the span that Michener was in Greeley, a 60-year-old retired farmer in Longmont shot and killed his wife and then himself.²⁴ In both the fictional and real cases, the weapon was a shotgun.
- The most riveting part of the manuscript involves Betty and a lively antagonist. During the summer an itinerant preacher, knowing of the sex scandal, came to town, holding tent revivals where he scolded, prayed, and took up large collections from the townspeople of Livermore. He attacked a local minister as the anti-Christ and hoped to get him thrown out so he could replace him. He called on children to come to the front and be saved. After three hours of observing the "purification," Betty Benson rose from her seat and called "Stop this!" and urged the children to go home. The preacher shouted for others to throw Betty out and called out for God to strike her dead. The next day the preacher started a smear campaign against Betty. That evening the preacher brought up embarrassing events from Betty's past, including the murder-suicide of her parents; Betty challenged him as being evil and wanting to disrupt the community for his own interests. She was supported by others in the audience who exposed him as a fraud. The preacher left town, and Betty and the local minister tried to bring the town back to sanity. Michener witnessed events like these. Summers in Greeley were enlivened by appearances of Harvey Springer, a fiery evangelist who held tent revivals near the college campus.²⁵ Michener recalled that the evenings were characterized by venomous preaching and "wild-eyed young women screaming while coming down the aisles to be saved." From the pulpit, Springer railed against Greeley's churches and college professors, especially Michener for his urging of fair treatment of Mexican farm workers. The members of the Angell Club mounted a multi-faceted defense involving editorials in the *Greeley Tribune*, sermons from local pulpits, and discussions in campus classes and church groups. The plan worked, and Springer was driven out.²⁶

Betty Benson had varied, complex fellow teachers at Livermore High School:

Miss Clark, the mathematics teacher: "a graceless woman of 49, faded like a violet kept between covers of a family Bible. She had watery blue eyes, indefinite hair that straggled about her head, and a gaunt neck. Her hands were unusually large, and they could do nothing."

Miss Henderson, the girl's athletics teacher: "A young woman of 25 . . . splendid in appearance, too, a remarkably clean, square shouldered girl with red hair,

excellent features, and very trim legs. . . (Her eyes) were deep and beautiful, with flecks of inviting green, but they were insecure, shifty, afraid, unhappy.” Miss Fosterholm, the science teacher: “She was well past sixty. . . Her hands were gnarled and her broad, squat face was weatherbeaten from many years of life on the plains. . . She was a very stupid woman and should never have been allowed to teach children. She was a born gardener and could make anything in the world grow . . . except children.”

It is interesting to ponder whether any of Betty Benson’s fellow teachers were modeled on Michener’s colleagues at College High School more than a decade earlier (Fig. 2). And might Harriett Stull, the social studies teacher with whom Michener worked, have been the model for Betty Benson herself? Michener never said.



Fig. 2. James A. Michener and some of his colleagues at College High School: Top Row: Michener; Elizabeth Kendel, mathematics; Sarah McRoberts, athletics; Bottom Row: Edith Selberg, science; Harriett Stull, social studies.²⁷

Michener abandoned *Jefferson* in 1950.²⁸ Why did he do so? He said: “I got fairly well into the writing, and the hundred or so pages remain among my papers; perhaps some day someone will unravel the relationships between this 1950 attempt and the final 1974 novel. Why did I abandon the project? I had not yet written any of my long novels; that wouldn’t come for some years. I lacked the technique for the kind of book I wanted to do. Most of all, I realized that it would be folly to attempt a novel about the west while living in the east (in Bucks Co., PA), and it was not feasible then for me to move back to

the Platte River. . . It would be close to two decades before I would feel mature enough to tackle this American novel . . . I knew that somewhere in my filing cabinet rested the stump of what could become a powerful novel on the west, and I was confident that if the proper time arrived, I could come back and nurse life out of these roots.”²⁹

Jefferson and Centennial

The roots of Michener’s blockbuster 1974 novel are firmly anchored in his experiences in Greeley from 1936-1941 and in his earlier attempt with *Jefferson*: “Its principal parts had been churning in my mind for many years. I’d written out some of them in the abortive 1950 attempt, and I had identified almost every item in my 1970 outline.”³⁰ Of the genesis of *Centennial*, he said: “I awoke with a complete concept for the novel which, in a sense, had its genesis in the fall of 1936, and which I had attempted to write in 1950.”³¹

John Kings, who worked closely with Michener in research for *Centennial*, wrote that “*Jefferson* was to cover a period between 1936 and 1946 (sic), and his outline shows that in that brief span he intended to include chapters on many of the subjects that reappeared in *Centennial*: The Plains, Woman on the Plains, Mexicans, Sugar Beets, The Sheriff, Irrigation were all there. He put a great deal of preliminary work into the novel and then turned away from it, but the images remained, strengthened, if anything, over the years, became refined, expanded, and woven into a time frame twenty times longer than the mere decade he had chosen for *Jefferson*.”³²

Michener said the following about the relationship between *Jefferson* and *Centennial*: “It (*Jefferson*) would have contained many of the characters, sometimes in different guise, and at least a dozen of the specific dramatic scenes that are in *Centennial*. . .”³³

However, my reading of *Centennial* and the manuscript for *Jefferson* reveals only a few similarities between them. The map that Michener drew for *Jefferson* (Fig. 1) has mountains, plains, rivers, and towns, much like the map that Michener sketched and J. P. Tremblay drew for the front end papers of *Centennial*.³⁴ The state of Jefferson encompassed some 148,000 square miles (Fig. 1) whereas the central setting for *Centennial* (including only the space shown on the map entitled *The Setting*) covers only 6,400 square miles.³⁵ But the story of *Centennial* covers a much bigger geographic range, encompassing much of North America, as the maps at the beginning of each chapter show.³⁶

Jefferson contains a single central character, Betty Benson, and 29 others whereas *Centennial* has about 70 main characters.³⁷ None of the characters in *Jefferson* is identifiable in *Centennial*. *Jefferson* was to span 12 years, whereas the main narrative of *Centennial* begins in 1756 and ends in 1974; if one starts counting with Michener’s description of Colorado geology, the time span covered in *Centennial* is 3.6 billion years. The manuscript for *Jefferson* has 80 pages and by my calculation about 28,000 words; *Centennial* has 909 pages and by my count about 440,000 words.³⁸

In my view, the only theme common to both books, and an important one, is the nature and meaning of American democracy. In *Jefferson*, Betty Benson is deeply distressed by the wartime deaths in the Pacific of young men in her life, and she talks with her students about “the spirit of America, the vision that men have when they fight.” Several of the central themes of *Centennial* (the waves of immigrants to Colorado over the centuries, the difficulty of life on the dry plains, coming to terms with racism, and concern for the environment) are absent in *Jefferson*.³⁹ Michener wrote *Centennial* as a birthday gift to the American public; he believed that “each of us must affirm his own commitment to the future.”⁴⁰ Michener “was endeavoring to write a book about the American experience” in all its many aspects.⁴¹

The only dramatic element common to *Jefferson* and *Centennial* is murder-suicide. In *Jefferson*, the victims included Betty’s parents. In *Centennial*, it involved a family caught in the misery of the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression.

The 1950 manuscript has a narrow focus, centering on the life of a single person, whereas the long novel has an immense conceptual framework that involves multiple generations and a consideration of many major themes in American history. The impact on the reader of *Centennial* is very great, but is much less so for *Jefferson*. Yet the two narratives are linked by the land on which they are set.

Michener said “In 1972, when I started the actual writing of *Centennial*, I had already lived with the Platte River for thirty-six years, and I wanted all men and women who read my account of its wandering across the plains to become as familiar with it as I was. The mountains had been my associates for three decades, and they would be characters in any story I elected to tell. Especially the prairie, reaching to the horizon in all quarters, had been an object of love, and I intended to write of it in that way. These were the components of a tremendous universe, one that I wanted every reader to share. I wanted the west that I would be writing about to be real, and to achieve this, the reader had to follow the trails I had followed to see the land as I had seen it.”⁴² Those trails began in 1936 in Greeley.

Acknowledgements: This project would have been impossible without the generous and patient assistance of the staff of the James A. Michener Archives at the University of Northern Colorado: Jay Trask, Kay Lowell, Shirley Soenksen, and Eve Measner. Thank you for your warm hospitality and help.

¹ Emeritus Professor of Biology, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro; 3507 Smoketree Drive, Greensboro, NC 27410, bob.gatten@gmail.com

² Hunt, John W. 2010. The Evolution of James A. Michener from High School Teacher to Writer: The Formative Years. *Vitae Scholasticae* 27(1):43-60.

³ Groseclose, David A. 1996. *James A. Michener: A Bibliography*. State House Press, Austin, TX, p. 139-140.

⁴ Hunt, p. 51-56.

⁵ Michener, James A. 1992. *The World is My Home: A Memoir*. Random House, New York, p. 176-178.

⁶ Hayes, John P. 1984. *James A. Michener: A Biography*. W. H. Allen, London, p. 55-56, 216-220.

⁷ Michener, James A. 1974. *About Centennial: Some Notes on the Novel*. Random House, New York, p. 11-17.

⁸ May, Stephen J. 2005. *Michener: A Writer's Journey*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 48.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 79-80.

¹⁰ Hayes, p. 77.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 77-79. May, p. 80.

¹² Hayes, p. 88-90.

¹³ Michener, *About Centennial*, p. 18.

¹⁴ The Writing and Publishing of *Centennial*, Subseries 43: Slides and negatives of Colorado people and places etc. James A. Michener Papers, *Centennial* Collection (JM001), Archival Services, James A. Michener Library, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado.

¹⁵ File folder labeled "Betty Benson," James A. Michener Papers, *Centennial* Collection (JM001), Archival Services, James A. Michener Library, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado. Courtesy University of Northern Colorado Archives.

¹⁶ The original manuscript typed by Michener, with his editorial changes in ink, is in the James A. Michener Papers, *Centennial* Collection (JM001), Archival Services, James A. Michener Library, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado.

¹⁷ Michener, James A. 1938. Bach and Sugar Beets. *Music Educators Journal* 25:29, 43. Hayes, p. 54.

¹⁸ Larson, Robert W. 1989. *Shaping Educational Change: The First Century of the University of Northern Colorado at Greeley*. Colorado Associated University Press, Boulder, p. 165-167.

¹⁹ Hayes, p. 53-55.

²⁰ Michener, James A. 1938. A Functional Social Studies Curriculum. *Curriculum Journal* 9:163-164. Michener, James A. 1938. Improving the Social Studies by Practical Means. *Colorado School Journal* 54(2):19-20.

²¹ Michener, James A. 1938. Sex Education: A Success in our Social-Studies Classes. *The Clearing House* 12(8):461-465. Larson, p. 165.

²² Michener, James A. "Ode to Tennyson." Inscribed in *Idylls of the Kings* by Alfred Lord Tennyson. 1911. Charles E. Merrill Company, New York. Textbook Collection Used by James A. Michener, 1929-1931 (SC 1-14), Archival Services, James A. Michener Library, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado.

²³ Groseclose, p. 5-6.

²⁴ "Longmont Man Slays Wife, Self." *The Greeley Daily Tribune*, May 13, 1938, p. 1.

²⁵ "Gospel Meetings will be Held on Tuesday" with "Cowboy Evangelist Harvey Springer" preaching on "Rebellious Wives and Slacker Husbands." *The Greeley Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1938, p. 2.

²⁶ Michener, *The World is My Home*, p. 177-178.

²⁷ *Bulldog* (Yearbook of College High School, Greeley, CO), 1937, p. 33-34.

²⁸ May, p. 202.

²⁹ Michener, *About Centennial*, p. 18-19.

³⁰ Michener, *About Centennial*, p. 51.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 23.

³² Kings, John. 1978. *In Search of Centennial: A Journey with James A. Michener*. Random House, New York, p. 21.

³³ Michener, *About Centennial*, p. 18.

³⁴ Michener, James A. 1974. *Centennial*. Random House, New York, front endpapers.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 50, 110, 172, 244-245, 352, 430, 500, 556, 632, 672, and 730.

³⁷ Fremont-Smith, Eliot. 1977. "A Piece of Cake." *New York Magazine*, September 2, 1974, p. 62.

³⁸ Hayes, p. 230.

³⁹ Michener, *About Centennial*, p. 52-57.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 53.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 49-50.