

*Grand Canyon National Park covers 1,100 square miles and has an altitude from 2,000 to 9,000 feet. The two centers of tourist interest, the North Rim and the South Rim, are a mere 10 airline miles apart, but 215 road miles distant from each other. This view is from Bright Angel Point on the North Rim of the canyon. Photograph gift of the Union Pacific Railroad.*

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*Through Utah  
and the Western Parks:  
Thomas Wolfe's  
Farewell to America*

BY RICHARD H. CRACROFT

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**B**Y MAY 1938 THOMAS WOLFE, renowned for his sweeping autobiographical novels about Eugene Gant (*Look Homeward, Angel*, 1929, and *Of Time and the River*, 1934), was rapidly approaching a state of total exhaustion through his feverish attempt to complete what promised to be his greatest novel yet — a massive, more objective work dealing with the apprenticeship of a new hero, George Webber. In addition to this creative strain of churning out the more than five-foot stack of typewritten manuscript, Wolfe remained distraught from his recent break with Charles Scribner's Sons and with his long-time friend and Scribner editor, Maxwell Perkins. Toward the middle of May, however, Wolfe had finally begun to feel that his gigantic novel (which editors later conjectured might well have gone into as many as five or six volumes) was approaching some kind of final form, and (to use one of Wolfe's images) light had begun to appear at the tunnel's end. Thus, when given the opportunity



*Thomas Wolfe  
(1900-1938)  
Photograph gift of  
Charles Scribner's Sons.*

Dr. Cracraft recently resumed his position as assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University after a leave of absence taken to complete his graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin.

to lecture at Purdue University, Wolfe accepted eagerly, and he told friends of his intention to follow the Purdue address with a train trip across the United States and a much-needed vacation in the Pacific Northwest.

During the week before his departure, Wolfe worked day and night overseeing the typing and assembling of his manuscript. After binding it in a tentative sequence, he packed and delivered it into the safekeeping of his new editor, Edward C. Aswell, of Harper's, who was eager to read the manuscript for which he had advanced — without a prior reading — \$10,000 against future royalties. Wolfe finally gave permission to Aswell, assuring him that it was far from finished. He wrote Miss Elizabeth Nowell, his agent, of his action adding that "It would be a crime if I were interrupted or discouraged now!"<sup>1</sup>

As he headed for a warm welcome at Purdue, and as he turned west for Denver on the Burlington "Zephyr," Wolfe little realized that thirty-eight years were all that fate had allotted him, and that he would never again work on the book which had cost him so much life.

After another warm reception by Denver friends (Wolfe had been there in 1935), the author received an impressive taste of "big sky" landscape on the train trip from Denver to Boise, via Wyoming.<sup>2</sup> He described Boise to Miss Nowell as being "set in a cup of utterly naked hills," in "an enormous desert bounded by infinitely-far-away mountains that you never get to." Though his home was in the mountain country of Asheville, North Carolina, Wolfe was awed by the vast dimensions, by "the tremendousness and terror and majesty" of the West.

In the same letter he mentions an unsuccessful attempt to locate novelist Vardis Fisher, a former colleague in the English Department at New York University, and then a resident of Boise. But he notes that "what I've seen to-day explains a lot about [Fisher]."<sup>3</sup>

Arriving in Portland on June 7, Wolfe soon renewed his friendship with fellow-writer Stewart Holbrook, who arranged that Wolfe be invited to several parties given by the local literati. At one of these parties Wolfe met Edward M. Miller, Sunday editor of the *Portland Oregonian*, and learned that Miller and Ray Conway, manager of the Oregon State

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Nowell, *The Letters of Thomas Wolfe* (New York, 1956), 766.

<sup>2</sup> After a lecture delivered before a writers' conference in Denver in 1935, Wolfe took an automobile tour from Denver to Santa Fe. From New Mexico he traveled to California and by train across Nevada, through Salt Lake City and St. Louis to New York. See Desmond Powell, "Of Thomas Wolfe," *Arizona Quarterly*, I (Spring, 1945), 28-36, for an account of Wolfe's trip from Denver to Santa Fe.

<sup>3</sup> Nowell, *Letters*, 768.

Motor Association, were planning a whirlwind automobile tour through all of the national parks of the Far West, their purpose being to demonstrate for thrift-conscious motorists that the trip was possible in a limited time and on a limited budget. Miller asked Wolfe to come along. For Wolfe, who could not drive an automobile himself, this seemed, as he wrote Miss Nowell, "the chance of a lifetime and . . . I'd be foolish not to take it."<sup>4</sup> Before the start of the trip, however, Conway, having been warned by friends of Wolfe's legendary appetite for food and liquor, and of his irregular sleeping habits, insisted that Wolfe promise to forego heavy drinking, get up promptly in the morning, and limit his food and lodging expenses to a reasonable amount, inasmuch as the Motor Association was underwriting the expenses of the trip. Wolfe agreed.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, Wolfe determined to keep a running account of the trip. He purchased a three-hundred-page record book (five and one-half inches by eight and five-eighths inches) such as he had often used to write much of his earlier work. Inside he wrote "A Western Journal by Thomas Wolfe," and headed the first page of the jottings with, "A Daily Log of the Great Parks Trip." Wolfe recorded copiously, but not as much as he thought. Though he later wrote Miss Nowell that "I've filled a big fat notebook with *thirty thousand words*,"<sup>6</sup> and to Aswell that "I have already made *fifty thousand words of notes on this journey*,"<sup>7</sup> Wolfe was typically hyperbolic, for the journal contains about *11,400 words*<sup>8</sup> — still a respectable amount of words for a two-week automobile tour!

Almost never written in complete sentences, but rather in a series of phrases separated by dashes, the log presents, in numerous lyrical passages, how, from June 20 to July 2, 1938, Wolfe, Miller, and Conway, in a white Ford, visited all of the major parks of the West: Crater Lake, Yosemite, General Grant, Sequoia, Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Zion's Canyon, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Glacier, and Mount Rainier.

It is a fascinating log of a trip which thousands of Americans have since made in an equally brief period of time. But Wolfe's reaction to the trip is not typical, and the log, containing few of the typical tourist jottings as to miles, expenses, highway numbers, and gas stops, is a moving

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 769.

<sup>5</sup> V. L. O. Chittick, "Thomas Wolfe's Farthest West," *Southwest Review*, XLVIII (Spring, 1963), 96.

<sup>6</sup> Nowell, *Letters*, 774. The italics are the author's.

<sup>7</sup> Edward C. Aswell, "Note on 'A Western Journey,'" in Wolfe, *A Western Journal, A Daily Log of the Great Parks Trip, June 20–July 2, 1938* (Pittsburgh, 1951), v.

<sup>8</sup> Nowell, *Letters*, 774 fn.2. Aswell says in "Note on 'A Western Journey,'" that "When he said, 'I have written fifty thousand words,' he meant: 'I have written only a little; in fact, I have just started.'"

and colorful geographical and human document. Although it is easy to place the scenery and to follow the exact routes taken by the party throughout the trip, that which clearly emerges is Wolfe's enthusiasm and affection for his land and his people; for his aim was to get the feel of the country, to experience America, to proceed with his grandiose plan of experiencing and recording, in his future works, the whole "hemisphere of life and of America."<sup>9</sup> His Whitmanesque vision makes his travel account a worthwhile impressionistic record of a sensitive and expansive artist who loved, above all things, America and the American Dream. A closer look at the trip, with emphasis on the account of two fascinating days spent in Mormon country, will give better insight into the author's love affair with America, and will present further evidence that Thomas Wolfe, only three months before his untimely death (if death

<sup>9</sup> Aswell, "Note on 'A Western Journey,'" in Wolfe, *A Western Journal*, v.

*Grand Canyon, a colossal chasm 280 miles in length, a mile deep, and 12 miles wide, was discovered in 1540 by thirteen men of Coronado's Spanish expeditions. The canyon became a national monument in 1908 and a national park February 26, 1919. This scene is from the North Rim of the canyon. Photograph gift of the Union Pacific Railroad.*



is ever timely), was still very much — some critics to the contrary — an author who had many books to write.

The trip was a rapidly spinning kaleidoscope of sights, sounds, and impressions. Thus, the first day the three visited Mount Hood, the Cascade Range, and Klamath Lake, where they lodged that night. By 6 A.M. they were off again, a record for the chronic late-riser Wolfe, and drove from Klamath to Mount Shasta, and from there to Redding, Sacramento, and the San Joaquin Valley, and to their lodgings that night in Yosemite, where they settled, lyrically, amidst,

. . . a smell of smokes and of gigantic tentings and enormous trees and gigantic cliff walls night black all around and above the sky-bowl of starred night — and Currys Lodge and smoky gaiety and wonder — hundreds of young faces and voices — the offices, buildings [,] stores, the dance floor crowded with its weary hundreds and the hundreds of tents and cabins and the absurdity of the life and the immensity of all — and 1200 little shop girls and stenogs and new-weds and schoolteachers and boys — all, God bless their little lives, necking, dancing, kissing, feeling, and embracing in the great darkness of the giant redwood trees — all laughing and getting loved tonight — and the sound of the dark gigantic fall of water.<sup>10</sup>

After a quick tour of the park the next morning, the trio drove out the South Wawona gate for Bakersfield and on to Mohave, where they stayed that night before attempting the desert the following morning. After a hot day of travel on June 23, the men arrived at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, called “Big Gorgooby” by Wolfe, and the Bright Angel Lodge. But while he was impressed with the canyon in the late twilight (“a fathomless darkness peered at from the very edge of hell with abysmal starlight — almost unseen — just fathomlessly there”) he is more concerned with descriptions of the self-conscious ranger, with a young geologist, and with an “Eastern cowboy with Fred Harvey [a canyon merchant] hat and shirt and cowgirl with broad hat, and wet red mouth, blonde locks and riding breeches filled with buttock.”<sup>11</sup>

From the South Rim of “Big Gorgooby” the three drove through the Painted Desert, the Vermilion Cliffs, across Navajo Bridge, to the beauties of the North Rim, where they were entertained while dining by the “inevitable theatrical performance” of the young park employees.

The following morning (June 25) Wolfe, Miller, and Conway enjoyed the North Rim until 11 A.M., when they climbed into the white

<sup>10</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 9–10. The page references in the footnotes to the *Journal* are to the Pittsburgh edition, not to the pages of the original, which are also provided in this edition. The writer has faithfully followed the edition in reproducing Wolfe’s punctuation (or lack of it — especially in the omission of commas and apostrophes), and spelling; only where it seemed necessary for clarity has the writer inserted punctuation in brackets.

<sup>11</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 17–18.



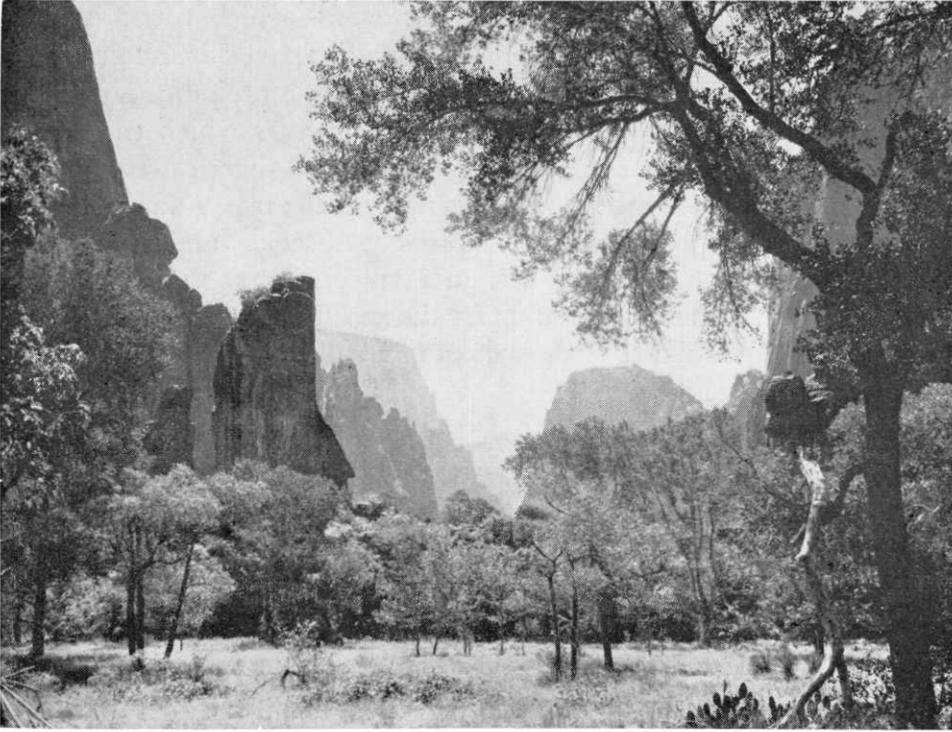
*Mukuntuweek Canyon became a national monument in 1909. In 1919 the monument was changed in name to Zion and enlarged. The following year the monument attained the status of a national park by act of Congress. This photograph is of the Great White Throne, which rises 2,400 feet above the canyon floor. Photograph gift of the Union Pacific Railroad.*

Ford and headed into Utah, and Kanab, “the Mormon town,” and “Perry’s [Parry’s] Lodge — a white house, pleasant and almost New England, and the fiery bright heat, the little town, and greenness here, and trees and grass, and a gigantic lovely cool-bright poplar at the corner.”<sup>12</sup> From Kanab the party drove to Zion’s Canyon, and Wolfe piles word on word to formulate a picture of its colorful hues,

. . . no longer fierce red and vermilion now, but sandy, whitest limestone, striped with strange stripes of salmon pink — scrub dotted, paler — Now in the canyon road and climbing, and now pink rock again, strange shapes and scarings in the rock, and even vertices upon huge swathes of stone, and . . . through a tunnel, out and down and down, and through the great one spaced with even windows in the rock that give on magic casements opening on sheer blocks of soapstone red, and out again in the fierce light and down round dizzy windings of the road into the canyons depth.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–23.



*Zion National Park, 230 square miles in size, was discovered in 1776 by Fathers Silvestre Vélez de Escalante and Atanasio Domínguez. Altitude of the canyon rises from 3,940 to 8,740 feet. This photograph is of the Temple of Sinawava. Photograph from the Utah Writers Project, Utah State Historical Society.*

At the bottom of the canyon, Wolfe is greatly impressed by the swimming pool, which he describes with almost mystical vision: “O miracle! . . . O pool in cottonwoods surrounded by fierce blocks of red and temples and kings thrones and the sheer smoothness of the bloody vertices of soapstone red — did never pool look cooler, nor water wetter, wetter more inviting.”<sup>14</sup>

Leaving Zion’s, the party drove toward Bryce Canyon and through, . . . farms and green incredible of fields and hay and mowing and things growing and green trees and Canaan pleasantness and a river flowing (the Sevier) and (by desert comparison) a fruitful valley — and occasional little towns — small Mormon towns — sometimes with little house[s] of old brick — but mostly little houses of frame, and for the most part mean and plain and stunted looking.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26.

“Mean and plain and stunted” are words which reveal Wolfe’s attitude toward anything Mormon, for Wolfe arrived in Utah with a vigorous dislike for the Mormons and their faith, a prejudice not earlier apparent in his letters or works. Still, the feelings which the author had for Utah scenery were deep, and his journal descriptions of Utah and her people are among the best recorded on the trip — far better, for example, than his treatment of Yellowstone, Glacier, and most of the other parks and states visited. His antagonism against things Mormon seemed to clash with his admiration for the accomplishments of the Saints and the lovely fruitfulness of their mountain valleys which stirred a creative tension in his soul.

Turning off the main road for Bryce Canyon, the party talked briefly with a road repair flag man, who remarked patriotically that “we have no deserts here in Utah.” Wolfe sneers to his log: “Is Zion then a flowering prairie, and are Salt Lake and the Bonneville Flats the grassy precincts of the King’s Paradise[?]”<sup>16</sup>

The travelers arrived in Bryce at 7 P.M. and headed immediately for the canyon rim and a first impressive view of Bryce:

. . . the least overwhelming, dizzy, and least massive of the lot — but perhaps the most astounding — a million wind-blown pinnacles of salmon pink and fiery white all fused together like stick candy — all suggestive of a child’s fantasy of heaven and beyond the open semi-green and semi-desert plain — and lime-white and scrub dotted mountains.<sup>17</sup>

Following dinner and the usual postcards, the three went to the curio shop where, “with some difficulty,” they bought beer in cans; Wolfe drank two, “feeling more and more desolate in this most unreal state of Utah.”<sup>18</sup> Typically, Wolfe struck up a conversation with a “quaint old blondined wag named Florence who imitates bird calls and [with a] dark rather attractive woman . . . who sold curios and who had life in her — and was obviously willing to share it.”<sup>19</sup> Before retiring, Wolfe observes the young people around the lodge, “looking rather lost and vaguely eager [a condition Wolfe was ever fond of describing] . . . , as if they wanted something that wasn’t there and didn’t know how to find it.”<sup>20</sup> This thought touched off “some depressing reflections on Americans in search of gaiety, and National Park Lodges, and Utah and frustration,” after which he retired for the night.

<sup>16</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

Sunday morning, June 26, Miller and Wolfe strolled to the rim of Bryce Canyon, which looked, writes Wolfe,

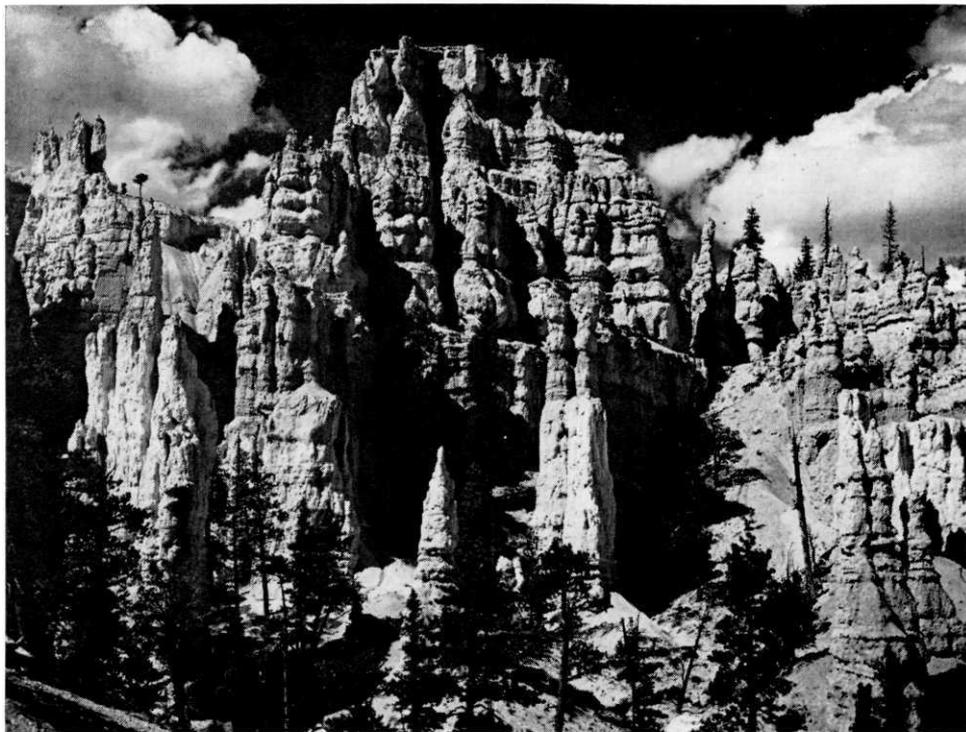
. . . fragile compared to other great canyons[,] “like filigree work”, of fantastic loveliness. Great shouldering bulwarks of eroded sand going down to it — made it look very brittle and soft . . . — something like the effect of sugar candy at a carnival — powdery — whitey — melting away.<sup>21</sup>

Again, however, he is even more interested in an old man, his wife, and daughter, a girl who was knowledgeable on geology. After breakfast, Wolfe focused on the young waitresses, maids, and bellhops of the hotel as they gathered before the lodge to sing “Till we meet again” to departing guests, with,

. . . one of the dour looking school teachers dabbing furtively at [her] eyes, and the bus departing, and emotional farewells, and the young folks

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

*Bryce Canyon was discovered by fur trappers in the 1800's, became a national monument in 1923, and was made a national park (Utah National Park), June 7, 1924. In 1928 the canyon was renamed Bryce Canyon National Park after Ebenezer Bryce, the first permanent settler on the Paunsaugant Plateau in 1875. The park covers 56 square miles and has an altitude of 6,600 to 9,105 feet. Hal Rumel photograph.*



departing back to their work, and bragging exultantly "We got tears out of four of 'em this morning. Oh, I love to see 'em cry; it means business." <sup>22</sup>

"And," writes the sensitive Wolfe, "for me the memory of the dour faced teacher dabbing at her eyes and stabbing pity in the heart and something that can not be said." <sup>23</sup>

From Bryce Canyon the party turned north for Salt Lake City, through the ever-richer, ever-greener valleys made fruitful by the labors of Mormon irrigation methods, which fascinated Wolfe. He writes of "the miraculousness of water in the west, the muddy viscousness of irrigation ditches filled with water so incredibly wet — the miracle of water always in the west." <sup>24</sup> He comments on the "touch of strangeness" in the Mormon architecture and conjectures that the odd "turn of the shop gables" is "temple-wise perhaps," and writes of the Mormon towns as reflecting his own bias, as being architecturally "graceless, all denuded, with the curious sterility and coldness and frustration the religion has." <sup>25</sup>

Always interested in American place names, Wolfe increasingly writes of the land as the land of Canaan and the Promised Land, and of Richfield ("so named because of the fat district") as a "blessed land of Canaan irriguous — by L.D.S. made fertile, promised, and 'This is the place' — Jacob, Levan, Nephi, Goshen — the names Biblical in Canaan — or Spanish Fork and American Fork — names like the pioneers." <sup>26</sup> He praises Utah Lake, the rich land, the cherry orchards, the mountains, the "thriving look" of Provo with its smelter plants and poplars and cottonwoods and roses and, again, notes the "graceless lack of architectural taste." <sup>27</sup>

As he anticipates his visit to Salt Lake City, a sense of urgency sweeps into Wolfe's log-book. Everything seems to be pointing north to Zion — the mountains, the increasing richness of the land, even the traffic; everything is "marching, marching Northward between hackled peaks, is sweeping, sweeping Northward through the backbone of the Promised Land, is sweeping onward, onward toward the Temple and the Lake." <sup>28</sup>

Rounding the point of the mountain between Utah and Salt Lake valleys, Wolfe describes Salt Lake Valley as half-desert,

<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 30–31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

. . . half burgeoning to riches and the irriguous ripe of the sudden green, and walled immensely on three sides by the hackled grandeur of the massive hills — but to the West, the massive peaks also but desert openness and the saline flatness, the thin mist lemon of the Great Salt Lake.<sup>29</sup>

As the party enters Salt Lake City, Wolfe writes of,

. . . the Capitol — with its dome — looking like a capital and dome always do — So into Salt Lake — sky-scrapers, hotels, office buildings, an appearance of a city greater than its growth and in 4 directions the broad streets sweeping out and ending cleanly under massed dense green at the rises of the barren magic hills — so into town, past a fantastic dance hall [Coconut Grove] “the worlds biggest” — stores, streets, blocks 600 feet in length, and Sunday hotness, brightness, emptiness.<sup>30</sup>

Then, again, Wolfe conveys his impression of Mormonism as he describes the city exuding “the old feeling of Mormon coldness, desolation — the cruel, the fanatic, and the warped and dead.”

This feeling is heightened in Wolfe, when, after eating at the Rotisserie restaurant, the three visit the Hotel Utah, then cross to Temple Square. Wolfe’s judgment of the ubiquitously admired temple is startling, for he speaks of it as “the harsh ugly temple, the temple sacrosanct, by us unvisited, unvisitable, so ugly, grim, grotesque, and blah — so curiously warped, grotesque, somehow so cruelly formidable — then the great domed roof of the Tabernacle like a political convention hall.”<sup>31</sup> Touring the temple grounds, Wolfe speaks harshly of the “statues of the twin saints Brothers Smith, with pious recordings of their fanaticisms,” and of the museum, the first cabin, and “the pompositives of bronze rhetoric — the solemn avowals of ‘the finding of the plates’ for the Book of Mormon.”<sup>32</sup>

But the impressive showplaces of Mormonism are not for Wolfe, and after visiting the Lion House, the Beehive House, and other sites sacred to Latter-day Saint history, Wolfe, totally unresponsive to the richness of the historicity of his surroundings, cries to his journal, “enough, enough, of all this folly, this cruelty and this superstition,” and the three leave the City of the Saints behind.

Even driving amidst the beauties of Bountiful, Wolfe cannot cast off his antagonism for Mormondom, and in describing the rich, fertile orchards against their lovely background of “hackled peaks,” he again reveals his tension in writing of the “cruelty of Mormon in it, but with a quality its own that grips and holds you now.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Wolfe is highly impressed by the orchards, “the like of which was never seen before,” and with the “air of prosperousness” of Ogden and the “ever greater orchards, groaning with their fruit,” and Brigham, “another thriving and exciting lively town” with its “strange tabernacled form of the Mormon temple with its 8 gables on each side.”<sup>34</sup>

But it was Logan and its environs which provided the “greatest beauty of the day,” and Wolfe rejoices in coming “suddenly,” upon a “magic valley plain, flat as a floor and green as heaven and more fertile and more ripe than the Promised land.” Cache Valley was for him,

. . . the most lovely and enchanted valley of them all — . . . a valley that makes all that has gone before fade to nothing — the very core and fruit of Canaan — a vast sweet plain of unimaginable riches — loaded with fruit, lusty with cherry orchards, green with its thick and lush fertility and dotted everywhere with the beauty of incredible trees . . . — a land of peace and promise of plenty.<sup>35</sup>

At Logan he experiences a “curious tightening of the throat” as he recalls a friend “who has lived here, loved it and its canyon, and went out like a million other kids like her, from all this Canaan loveliness to her future, fame and glory in the city,”<sup>36</sup> an exodus which Wolfe himself had once undertaken.

Leaving Utah, the three drove through Preston to Pocatello and the Bannock Hotel, where they slept that evening, “fatigued by the crowded beauty, splendor and magnificence of this day.”<sup>37</sup> So ended Wolfe’s visit to Utah — a visit curiously mixed with an awe for the state’s rugged lands and greenness wrenched by toil from the desert and a revulsion for what he saw as the sterile fanaticisms of Mormonism.

The following morning (June 27) the three drove across the Teton passes to Jackson and the Grand Tetons — about which splendor Wolfe says little — to Yellowstone, where they ended the day with a drink in the bar of the Great Inn, where merry people were singing “We



<sup>34</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

*Temple Square as it appeared in the 1930's when Thomas Wolfe visited Salt Lake City. There has been a great deal of construction on this block since that time. Utah State Historical Society photograph.*

don't give a damn for the whole state of Utah."<sup>38</sup> Throughout the Yellowstone circuit Wolfe constantly compares the landscape and foliage with that of "Mormon land"; he sees the area around Mammoth Hot Springs, for example, as being "not so green as Mormon land," and the trees at another spot as "like those before in Mormon land but by some miracle transformed into this Itselfness."<sup>39</sup> That evening they ended their rapid tour of Yellowstone Park at Bozeman, Montana.

On June 29 the party traveled to Glacier National Park and lodged at McDonald Lake Hotel. The following day they drove through the lake region of Flathead Lake, Pend Oreille Lake, and the Columbia River, staying that night at Spokane, where Wolfe, who insisted on paying for his own food, settled his account with Conway — the whole trip costing him less than \$50.00.

<sup>38</sup> From Old Faithful the usually verbose Wolfe sent a postcard of the Old Faithful Geyser to his friend, novelist Hamilton Basso, on which he wrote, "Portrait of the author at the two million word point." (Nowell, *Letters*, 773.)

<sup>39</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 51.



*Salt Lake City Main Street looking north in the 1930's. The Rotisserie, where Thomas Wolfe dined, is on the east side of the street. A horseshoe-shaped sign shows where the restaurant is located. Hal Rumel photograph.*

On Friday, July 1, the party drove through Grand Coulee, along the Columbia to Yakima and on to their last night's lodgings at Mount Rainier. Here, Wolfe, who had grown increasingly fond of Miller and Conway, was thrilled to discover that Conway had scaled Mount Hood 225 times and Mount Rainier 40 times. He thrilled to Conway's tales of accidents, rescues, tragedies, and near-tragedies in braving the peaks. Wolfe was moved to expressions of deep affection for his companions, and the next morning wrote that when he greeted Conway they shook hands with "quiet greetings, a feeling that our trip was almost done, and in me a sense of the tremendous kindness and decency and humanity of the man."<sup>40</sup>

From Mount Rainier the party drove through Tacoma to Olympia, where, reluctant to take leave of each other, they visited the old State Capitol. Here Conway and Miller gave Wolfe the map and the Tour Book, in which they wrote their names. "And at last," writes Wolfe nostalgically, "farewell — and they are gone, and a curiously hollow feeling in me as I stand there in the streets of Olympia and watch the white Ford flash away."<sup>41</sup> It was July 2, 1938. The trip was over.

Conway and Miller returned to Portland, where Miller would write two articles on the trip, "Gulping the Great West," for the July 31 and August 7, 1938, issues of *The Oregonian Magazine*. Wolfe traveled by bus to Seattle, where he found, among other letters, a heartening telegram from Aswell, reading:

Dear Tom: Your new book is magnificent in scope and design, with some of the best writing you have ever done. I am still absorbing it, confident that when you finish you will have written your greatest novel so far. Hope you come back full of health and new visions.<sup>42</sup>

The visions never deserted Thomas Wolfe, but his health did — and soon. On July 5 he sailed on the *Princess Kathleen* for Vancouver, British Columbia. While en route he apparently contracted pneumonia (friends claim he picked up the fatal germ from a sick drunk who shared a pint of whiskey with Wolfe on the boat). Very ill, Wolfe returned by train to Seattle, where he attempted for five days to nurse himself in his hotel room. Friends finally discovered how ill Wolfe really was and removed him to a private hospital. His puzzling condition steadily worsened. Finally, accompanied by his sister, Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, he was

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>42</sup> Nowell, *Letters*, 774 fn.1. The wire was dated July 1, 1938.

carried across the country to Johns Hopkins Hospital, where he underwent surgery on September 12. Wolfe's brain was found to contain a solid mass of tubercular cells, apparently released into his blood stream by an old lesion on his right lung which had been infected during his pneumonia. He died on September 15, 1938, of cerebral infection, without ever fully regaining consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

From the mass of manuscript left in his keeping, it fell to Edward C. Aswell to edit *The Web and the Rock* (1939), *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), and *The Hills Beyond* (1941), three impressive works which would help in establishing Wolfe as an important, though controversial, American author. Not until 1951, however, were some of Wolfe's notes on *A Western Journal* published by the University of Pittsburgh Press.

It is another of literature's frequent tragedies that Wolfe was unable to live to weave his western adventures into his fictional sweep of America. He had written to Miss Nowell during the trip, "I'm getting a swell story out of this,"<sup>44</sup> and following the tour he wrote her enthusiastically:

The trip was wonderful and terrific. . . . The national parks, of course, are stupendous, but what was to me far more valuable were the towns, the things, the people I saw — the whole West and all its history unrolling at kaleidoscopic speed. I have written it all down in just this way — with great speed — . . . and looking some of it over, it occurs to me that in this way I may have got the whole thing — the whole impression — its speed, variety, etc. — pretty well. . . . Perhaps it's not ready to use yet or won't be for a year or two, but I'll have it down . . . . I thought I'd call it "A Western Journal."<sup>45</sup>

His tour of the West had invigorated him, had rejuvenated his faith in his expansive American Dream, and on July 4, he wrote to Aswell that "My fingers are itching to write again."<sup>46</sup> But he would never write again, and his *Western Journal*, and particularly the sections on Utah, remain the final variation on his favorite theme — that a tension exists between the loveliness of the American landscape and the tragic stumblings and fumbblings of her unworthy possessors.

Thomas Wolfe's awe before the sublimity of Utah's canyons and deserts, peaks and valleys, and his wonder at the desert land bursting to life under the hoes of her Mormon settlers repeat his sweeping fascination with American landscape and its powerful burgeoning from beneath

<sup>43</sup> For full accounts of Wolfe's last days in the Northwest and at Johns Hopkins see Chittick, "Thomas Wolfe's Farthest West," *Southwest Review*, XLVIII; Nowell, *Letters*; and Elizabeth Nowell, *Thomas Wolfe: A Biography* (Garden City, New York, 1960).

<sup>44</sup> Nowell, *Letters*, 772.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 774–75.

<sup>46</sup> Aswell, "Note on a 'Western Journey,'" in Wolfe, *Western Journal*, v.

the tools and rough boots of the unenlightened pilgrim and pioneer. And his repugnance for the Mormon culture and people, “sterile,” “fanatical,” “strange,” “graceless,” and “cruel,” as he saw them, repeat Wolfe’s long-standing distaste for American cultural sterility and wrong-headedness amidst the rich beauties of the land.

With him such tensions were fruitful, and readers and scholars may well conjecture as to how Wolfe’s unusual impressions (facts were not always important to him) of Utah and the Mormons would have emerged in his intensely autobiographical novels. That he would have used his Utah impressions seems certain, not only because of his consistent and near-encyclopedic use of his own experiences, but because in Utah as in North Carolina, Massachusetts, and New York, Wolfe marveled at the paradox of fecundity amidst sterility, and he was awed by Utah, as he had been by life, by “the pity, terror, strangeness, and magnificence of it all.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Wolfe, *Western Journal*, 70.

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Next day we strolled about everywhere through the broad, straight, level streets [of Salt Lake City], and enjoyed the pleasant strangeness of a city of fifteen thousand inhabitants with no loafers perceptible in it; and no visible drunkards or noisy people; a limpid stream rippling and dancing through every street in place of a filthy gutter; block after block of trim dwellings, built of “frame” and sunburned brick — a great thriving orchard and garden behind every one of them, apparently — branches from the street stream winding and sparkling among the garden beds and fruit trees — and a grand general air of neatness, repair, thrift and comfort, around and about and over the whole. (Mark Twain, *Roughing It* [Hartford, Connecticut, 1872], 109.)