

From Mapping Stables to Mapping a Myth: Thinking about the Cartography of Horses

Frank Whitehead

“What we are concerned with, then, is the long *history of space*, even though space is neither a ‘subject’ nor an ‘object’ but rather a social reality – that is to say, a set of relations and forms. This history is to be distinguished from an inventory of things *in space* (or what has recently been called material culture or civilization), as also from ideas and discourse *about space*. It must account for both representational spaces and representations of space, but above all for their interrelationships and their links with social practice.”¹

Henri Lefebvre probably did not think much about horses. Or, specifically, he probably did not think much about the history of mapping horses. The French philosopher, within his seminal work on *The Production of Space*, called for a rethinking of space as a matter of historical inquiry. He argued that a history of space as a social product must simultaneously consider the ways in which a society conceptualizes space, how it makes symbolic use of space, and how that conceptualization and symbolic use is informed by (and in turn informs) the society’s spatial practice. The history of mapping horses in the United States, especially from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century, operates as a uniquely useful vehicle for considering the transformation in American production and conception of particular spaces. More specifically, this paper will examine the disappearance of horses from representations of urban space, and how this disappearance coincided with (and perhaps triggered) the sudden deployment of horses in maps as symbols of the American West as a representational space.²

Horses, or at least representations of the physical structures in which they were housed, appeared regularly in atlases of American cities throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. One such atlas, published in 1875 by Griffith Morgan Hopkins, depicted a multitude of the constructed spaces and spatial practices of Providence, Rhode Island. The atlas contained seventy-nine maps, based on official records, private plans, and government surveys of the city’s multiple wards. On plate T, consisting of a map of a portion of ward three, a total of over forty of the small black squares and rectangles are crossed with thin diagonal lines.³ These relatively unremarkable blocks in the map, with the discrete cross marks, are meant to indicate the location of the multiple stables that house the innumerable working horses of the city. Randomly select any other map from Hopkins’ atlas – or any map from any city atlas of the late nineteenth century – and dozens of these inconspicuous symbols are sure to emerge. Crossed boxes appear scattered across George Washington Bromley’s 1895 atlas of Boston, many labeled with titles such as “Boarding Stable” and “Boston Cab Company.”⁴ In the 1905 Sanborn-Perris fire

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 116.

² It may be important to note that the history of the cartography of animals has received relatively little scholarly attention, and the history of the cartography of horses in particular is nearly non-existent. In 1969, zoologist Wilma George published *Animals and Maps*, a survey of some of the earliest cartographic depictions of animals from across the world. Horses appear often in her selected examples, including in what she describes as “the earliest known map of an inhabited site...from northern Italy...dated at approximately 1500 BC.” Yet, George’s analysis is limited to determining the extent of the knowledge possessed by early cartographers of the animals depicted in their maps. She offers no extended investigation of the ways these early mapmakers defined or constructed the spaces they mapped by the inclusion of animals within their cartographic representations. See, Wilma George, *Animals and Maps* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

³ See Figure 1.

⁴ See Figure 2.

insurance maps, numerous crossed rectangles are shown attached to much larger rectangles, such as the “St. George Stables” connected to The California hotel.⁵

The abstract representation of the presence of horses was not solely a fixture of city-specific atlases of the late nineteenth century. Working horses were mapped on a national scale as well. For example, the majority of the maps within the 1883 edition of *Scribner’s Statistical Atlas of the United States* offer cartographic representations of the data provided by the recent 1880 census. Plate 113 within the “Livestock and Products” section of the atlas includes a map that depicts the “Horses, per Square Mile, by State.”⁶ This otherwise standard map of the forty-eight states is organized so that those containing the most horses per square mile are shaded the darkest. A quick glance at the map reveals that the regions with the heaviest concentration of horses in 1880 were clearly the Midwest and Northeast. Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio are shaded the darkest tinge of burnt orange, with other states such as Iowa, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and New York only slightly lighter. By contrast, Western states such as Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah do not seem to be shaded at all. The table to the left of the map reveals that this disparity is not simply the result of the enormous size of Western states, with Illinois shown to contain the most total horses at over one million, and Arizona ranked forty-sixth with just 6,700 head.

Following the Civil War, during the height of the industrialization of American urban centers, horses served as an integral part of the spatial practice of citizens of Boston, Providence, San Francisco, and every other American city. As historians Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr have stated, “the nineteenth century city represented the climax of human exploitation of horse power.”⁷ Horses were put to work by urban elites as well as the rural poor; they were housed in city stables as well as country barns. Historian Ann Norton Greene has noted that “by the end of the century, a bird’s-eye-view of the nation would show horses everywhere, working in cities...on streets and roads, alongside canals, around forts, ports, and railroad depots.”⁸ Maps such as those included in the Scribner atlas, the Sanborn-Perris fire insurance maps, and numerous city atlases provided an abstract human construction of that bird’s-eye-view, and, in a way, they did show horses everywhere. The creators of these representations of space made careful note of the physical urban spaces occupied by horses: the stables in which they lived, the trains on which they were transported, and the streets in which they worked.

However, horses did not remain a constant presence in these urban spaces. As McShane and Tarr have noted, “The utilization of the urban horse as a living machine declined in the years around 1900... The final result, of course, would be the nearly full substitution of other technologies for the horse.”⁹ The slow yet unremitting decline in the number and use of horses in the twentieth-century American city unsurprisingly resulted in a change in why and how mapmakers deployed horses in maps. Rather than simply constructing a representation of the spaces horses inhabited and the spatial practices horses were crucial to, certain twentieth-century cartographers – especially those who produced pictorial maps – began to utilize horses as one particular symbolically useful object and image.

⁵ See Figure 3.

⁶ See Figure 4.

⁷ Clay McShane and Joel A Tarr, *The Horse in the City: Living Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 1.

⁸ Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.

⁹ McShane and Tarr, 165.

As horses were pushed out of the increasingly industrialized city by new technologies, they became a symbol of the American West as a pre-modern, natural space for American authors, poets, artists, and filmmakers. Literature scholar Jane Tompkins notes a correlation between “their gradual appearance, first in dime novels, then in major best-sellers and in films” with “the disappearance of horses from daily life” for many Americans. Tompkins cites this connection as evidence of a distinctly American desire for the “antimodern, antiurban, and antitechnological,” which horses fulfill. In Westerns, horses serve as a “connection to nature, to the wild...to power, motion, size, strength, brought under human control and in touch with the human body.”¹⁰ It is clear that horses in pictorial maps of the American West served the same function. Mapmakers, aware of their potential as anti-modern symbols of a connection to nature, inserted illustrations of horses as representations of a distinctly anti-urban and anti-technological space. As Greene elegantly explained, “the decline of the horse as a source of power was accompanied by an increase in its traditional power as a symbol of natural and mystical forces.”¹¹ Fatefully, at just the historical moment horses were beginning to be assigned this symbolic status, the American West arose as an imagined space specifically defined by its pre-modern, natural qualities.

As historian Richard White has noted, “For more than a century the American West has been the most strongly *imagined* section of the United States.”¹² More than simply an artificially delineated geographical or material space, the American West has become what Lefebvre would define as a representational space. These are spaces “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate.” They “embody complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not.” They “overlaid the physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” and were “directly *lived* through [their] associated images and symbols.”¹³ The construction of the imagined or mythic American West, as with any other representational space, was neither sudden nor automatic. As literary historian Richard Slotkin has observed, “over time, through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, ‘icons,’ ‘keywords,’ or historical clichés.”¹⁴

Unsurprisingly, one of the “deeply encoded” symbols of the imagined West came to be the image of the horse, often depicted with a cowboy astride. According to White, “Americans imagined the West – that most modern of American sections – as the premodern world that they had lost. In it life was primitive but also simple, real, and basic.”¹⁵ Horses – as the very thing that industrial technology replaced – became the most obvious and simple “icon” of everything “simple, real, and basic.” In penny newspapers, dime novels, literature, film, television, and especially maps, horses became shorthand for the imagined West.

Just as their disappearance from cities was a slow process, the shift from mapping representations of the horse in urban spatial practices to mapping horses as icons of the pre-modern was not instantaneous. For example, twenty-two years following the publication of the Sanborn-Perris fire insurance maps, artist Harrison Godwin created and published the pictorial

¹⁰ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 89-94.

¹¹ Greene, 278.

¹² Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 613.

¹³ Lefebvre, 33-39.

¹⁴ Slotkin, 5.

¹⁵ White, 621.

“Map of San Francisco Showing Principal Streets and Places of Interest.”¹⁶ Godwin scattered cartoonish illustrations of the people and activities he considered characteristic of specific spaces within the city. The map does not contain any crossed squares, but horses are nevertheless represented throughout the map in a variety of ways. Within the corner of the map labeled Potrero, near the location of the famous Cow Palace arena, Godwin inserted an image of a bucking horse in the act of dislodging his cowboy rider, who seems to have just successfully roped a steer. On the opposite side of the map is a pioneer family, depicted arriving in the newly established Yerba Buena, led by a cavalry officer astride his loyal mount. These two specific horses in Godwin’s map operated as symbols of a particular history of the Bay Area, a history which placed the Bay Area firmly within the bounds of the socially constructed imagined West.

In another portion of his map, Godwin inserted horses in the working-class Richmond District and the upper-class Pacific Heights neighborhood, the former pulling a cart and the latter carrying an elderly woman. In contrast to the Cow Palace and historical cavalry horses, though, these two working horses serve as representations of the contemporary spatial practice of San Francisco, and the class dynamics therein. The horse cart driver is depicted as yelling “RAGS, BOTTLES, SACKS!” as the dust of the dirt street blows behind him. The elderly woman is portrayed as moving at a much more leisurely pace, with a large (seemingly) expensive hat and well-groomed horse. Despite their class differences, though, both are portrayed in relation to new industrial technologies and modes of transportation. A bright red car zooms past the slower cart horse, while an electric streetcar seemingly pushes the woman and her mount out of the city’s center. In this depiction of the tension between the disappearing working horse, new realities of urbanization, and new representational functions of the equine image, Godwin’s map serves as one of the earliest examples of a clear transition in the spatial understanding and cartographic representation of horses in the United States. Like the actual working horses of early twentieth-century Western cities, Godwin’s carthorses remain part of the picture, but not for long.

As the century progressed and urban spaces became nearly empty of horses, pictorial cartographers increasingly utilized the equine image exclusively as a symbol of the imagined West. By the 1930s, representations of an urban spatial practice involving horses had disappeared entirely from pictorial maps. Compared to other artistic forms such as literature and film, maps offered a uniquely useful method of deploying the horse as an iconic figure. As Katharine Harmon rhetorically wonders, “Is there any motif so malleable, so ripe for appropriation, as maps? They act as shorthand for ready metaphors: seeking location and experiencing dislocation, bringing order to chaos.”¹⁷

Since the 1920s, numerous pictorial cartographers have continued the tactic displayed by Godwin and utilized the malleability of maps to strategically insert the image of the horse to provide “order” in a region with a distinctively “chaotic” past. By placing representations of horses west of the Mississippi River in pictorial maps of the entire nation, artistic cartographers could succinctly convey to the audience a history of the West free of conflict, urbanization, or technology. For example, in 1970, an anonymous artist produced a creatively abstracted pictorial map of the relation between New York City and the rest of the United States, in which a single image of a bucking horse is inserted to represent Texas.¹⁸ A space dominated by a history

¹⁶ See Figure 5.

¹⁷ Katharine Harmon, *The Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 10.

¹⁸ See Figures 10 and 11.

of conflict (such as the Mexican-American War), urban centers (such as Houston and Dallas), and technology (such as NASA mission control), is suddenly defined as a pre-modern, natural space simply by the appearance of the figure of a horse.

Cartographers utilized the horse as a symbol of the imagined West in smaller-scale maps of the region and specific Western cities, as well. Within these representations, mapmakers often limited their placement of horses to specific locations associated with rodeo, a history of cattle ranching, or other uses of horses congruent with the idea of horses as pre-technological or natural. Cities such as Cheyenne, Salinas, and Pendleton, known for their popular traditions of rodeo, were commonly represented on maps by an image of a cowboy and his horse.¹⁹ The region between St. Joseph, Missouri and San Francisco commonly included illustrations of the horses of the Pony Express.²⁰ In artist Jo Mora's pictorial map of San Diego, horses appear multiple times within the depiction of significant historical events around the border of the map. Within the map itself horses are represented spatially only on the outskirts of town, in the act of either herding cattle, dislodging their cowboy rider, or resting underneath a sign labeled "Old Town." Horses are curiously absent within the city center itself, seemingly replaced by the technological wonders of trains, automobiles, and subdivisions.²¹

In *The Production of Space*, within his review of the "implications and consequences" of his proposition that "(social) space is a (social) product," Lefebvre observed that "natural space is disappearing." He was careful to mention, though, that it had not disappeared entirely. Instead, Lefebvre argued that natural space remains "the background of the picture; as décor, and more than décor, it persists everywhere, and every natural detail, every natural object is valued even more as it takes on symbolic weight [...] Even the powerful myth of nature is being transformed into a mere fiction, a negative utopia: nature is now seen as merely the raw material out of which the productive forces of a variety of social systems have forged their particular spaces."²² Although Lefebvre's definition of what constituted "nature" likely did not include domesticated horses, his observation nevertheless applies directly to the transformation of mapping horses in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. At one time a crucial piece of urban spatial practice and representations of urban space, horses gradually became décor. As they were replaced by industrial technologies, horses took on a symbolic weight, especially among pictorial mapmakers. As symbols of the preindustrial, the pre-urban, the natural, horses served as an indispensable force in the production of a uniquely powerful representational space: the imagined West.

Frank Whitehead is a doctoral candidate in U.S. history, with research interests in the cultural history of the North American West, environmental history, and human-animal studies. He is beginning work on a dissertation that will examine the history of American rodeo in the twentieth century using a variety of methodological approaches. He also currently serves as the graduate program coordinator for the School of International Languages, Literatures, and Cultures.

¹⁹ See Figures 6, 7, 8, and 9.

²⁰ See Figure 6.

²¹ See Figure 12.

²² Lefebvre, 30-31.

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Appendix

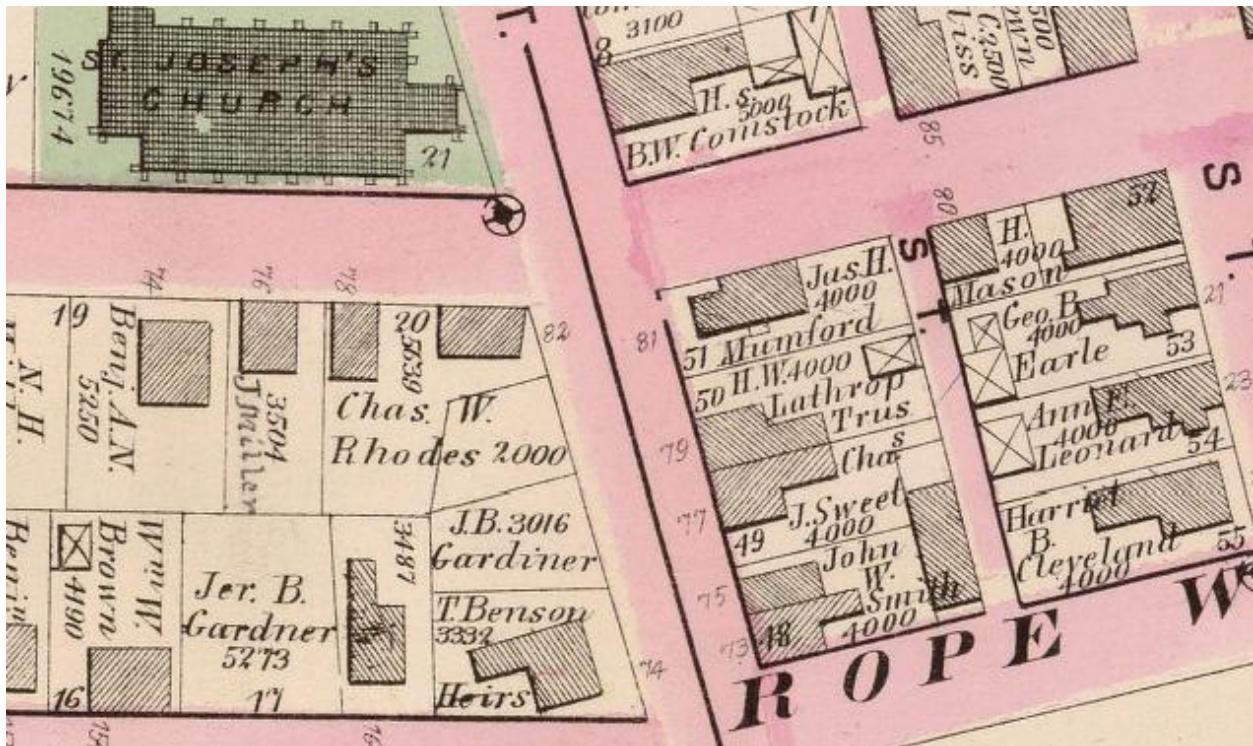


Figure 1. Griffith Morgan Hopkins, City Atlas of Providence, R.I., 1875, detail of Ward 3. Note the number of individual stables, represented by the rectangles with diagonal lines through them. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.



Figure 2. George Washington Bromley, City Atlas of Boston, 1895, detail of Ward 7. Note the relative size and location of the Boston Cab Co. stables. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

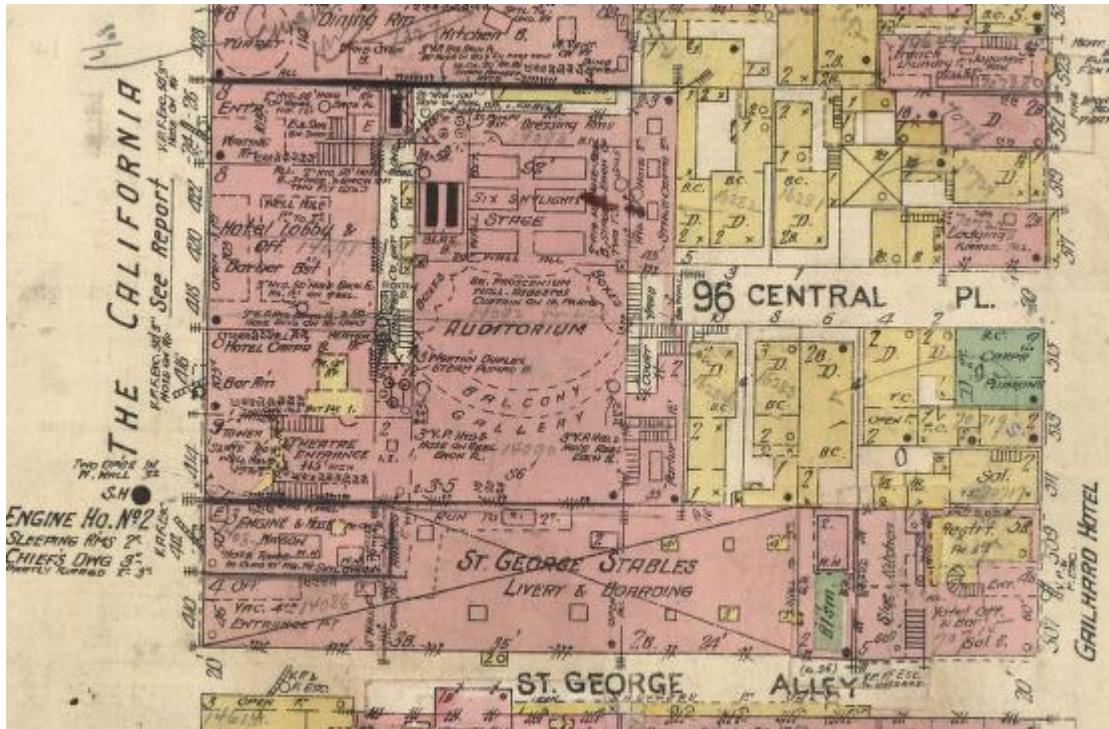


Figure 3. Sanborn-Perris Map Company, San Francisco fire insurance map, 1905, detail of page 26. Note the size of the St. George Stables, relative to the adjacent hotel and auditorium. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

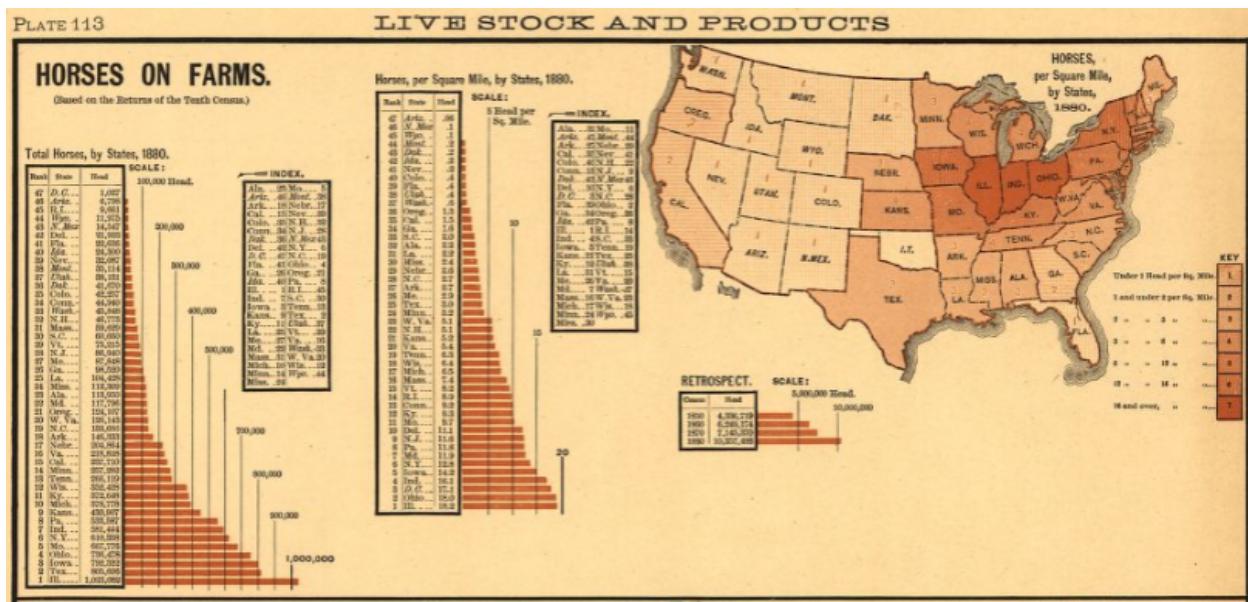


Figure 4. Scribner's Statistical Atlas of the United States, 1883, detail of plate 113. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/a40001834/.

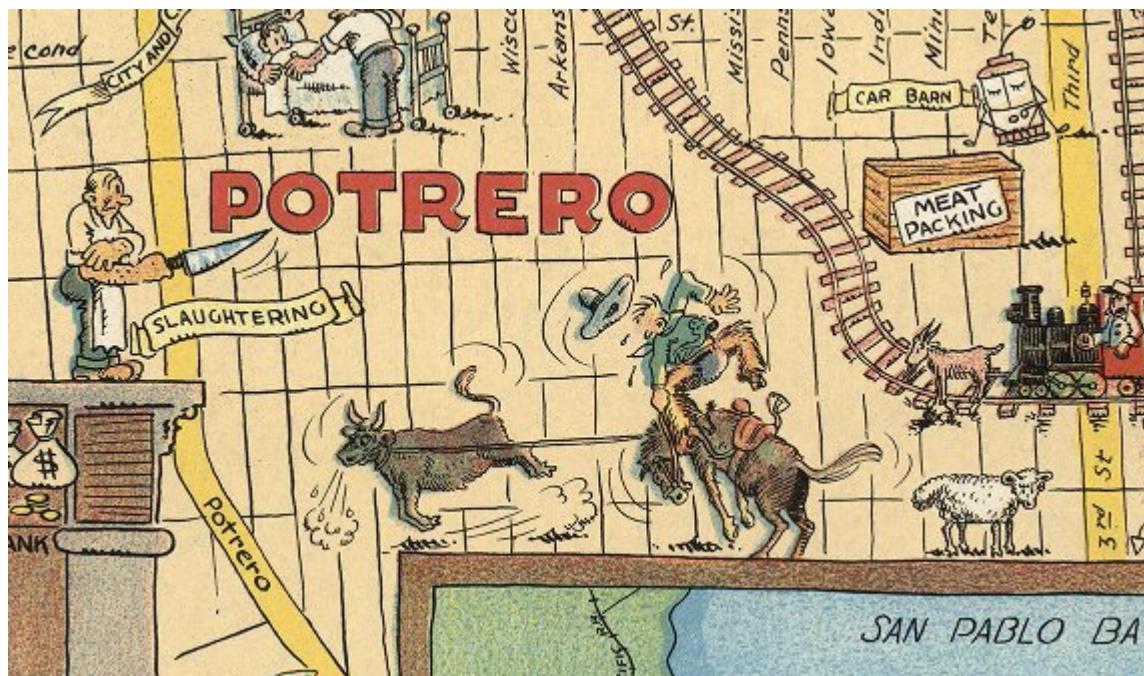


Figure 5. Harrison Godwin, "Map of San Francisco Showing Principal Streets and Places of Interest," 1927, detail. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

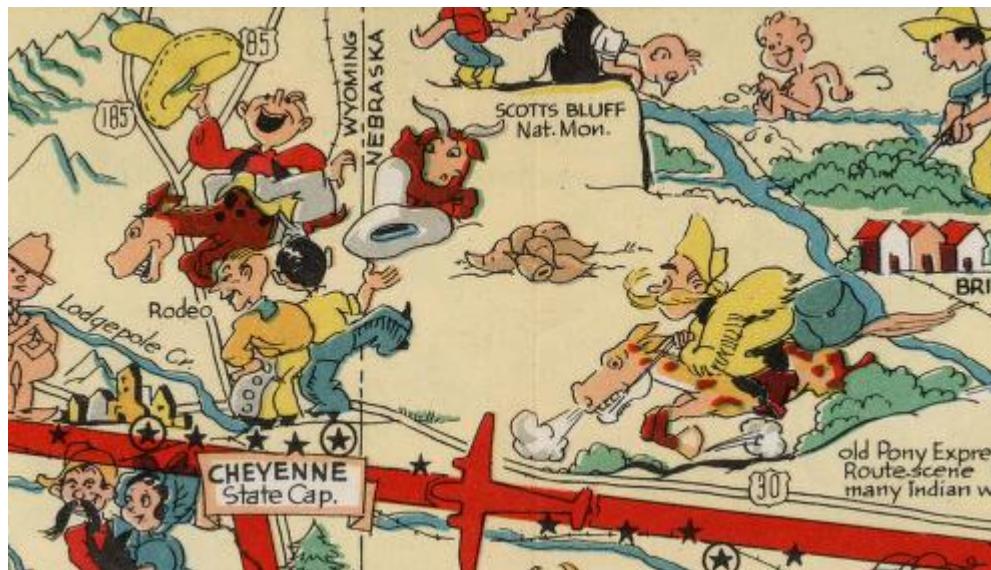


Figure 6. Ruth Taylor White, United Airlines route map, 1939, detail. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

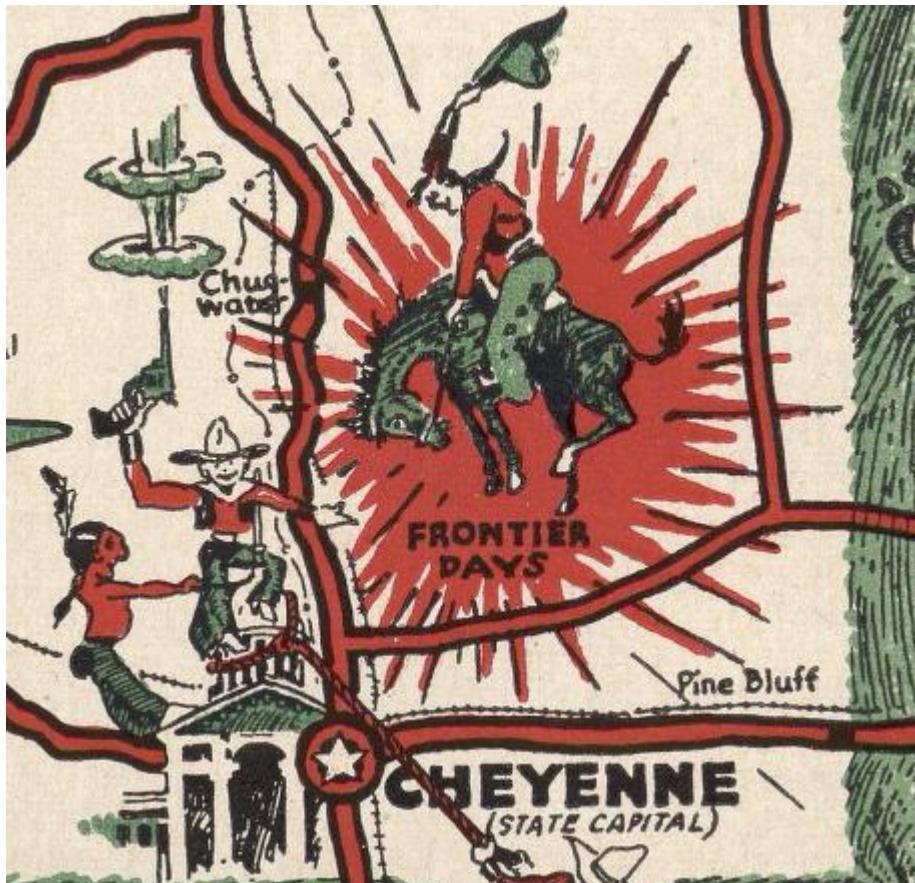


Figure 7. Tom Carrigen, Paint-Brush Map of Wyoming, 1953, detail. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

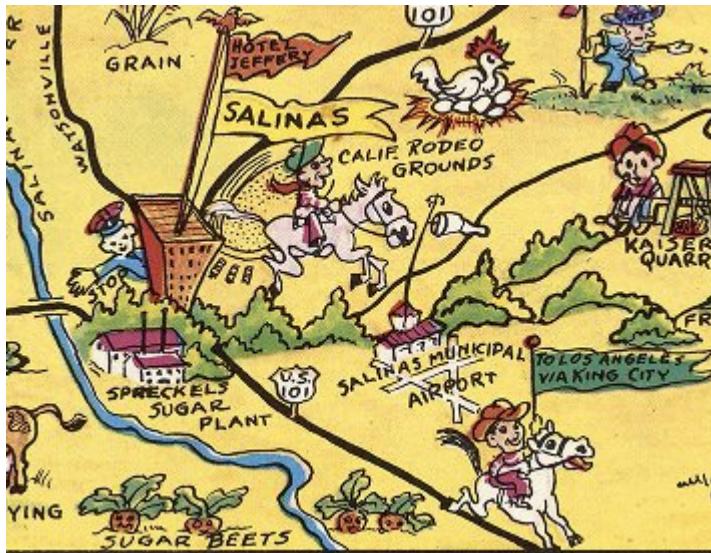


Figure 8. John Courtney Sandefu, Cartograph of Monterey Bay Region and Salinas Valley, California, 1958, detail. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

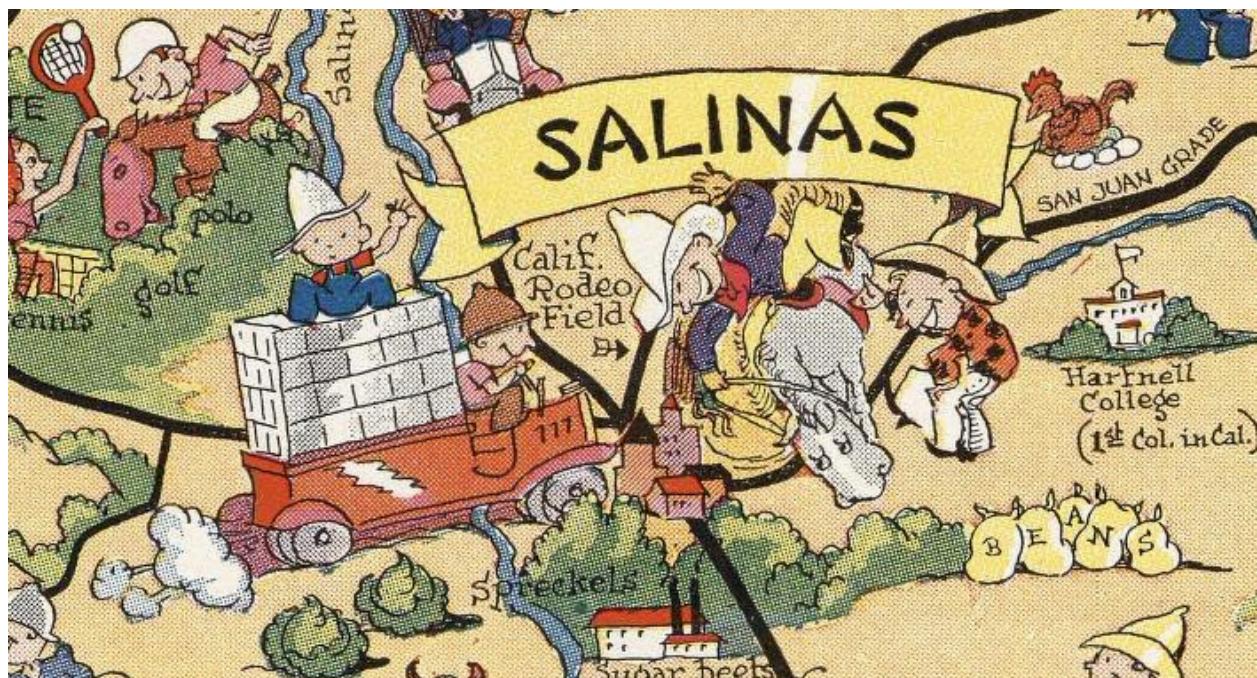


Figure 9. Ruth Taylor White, Monterey Bay Region, 1932, detail. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.

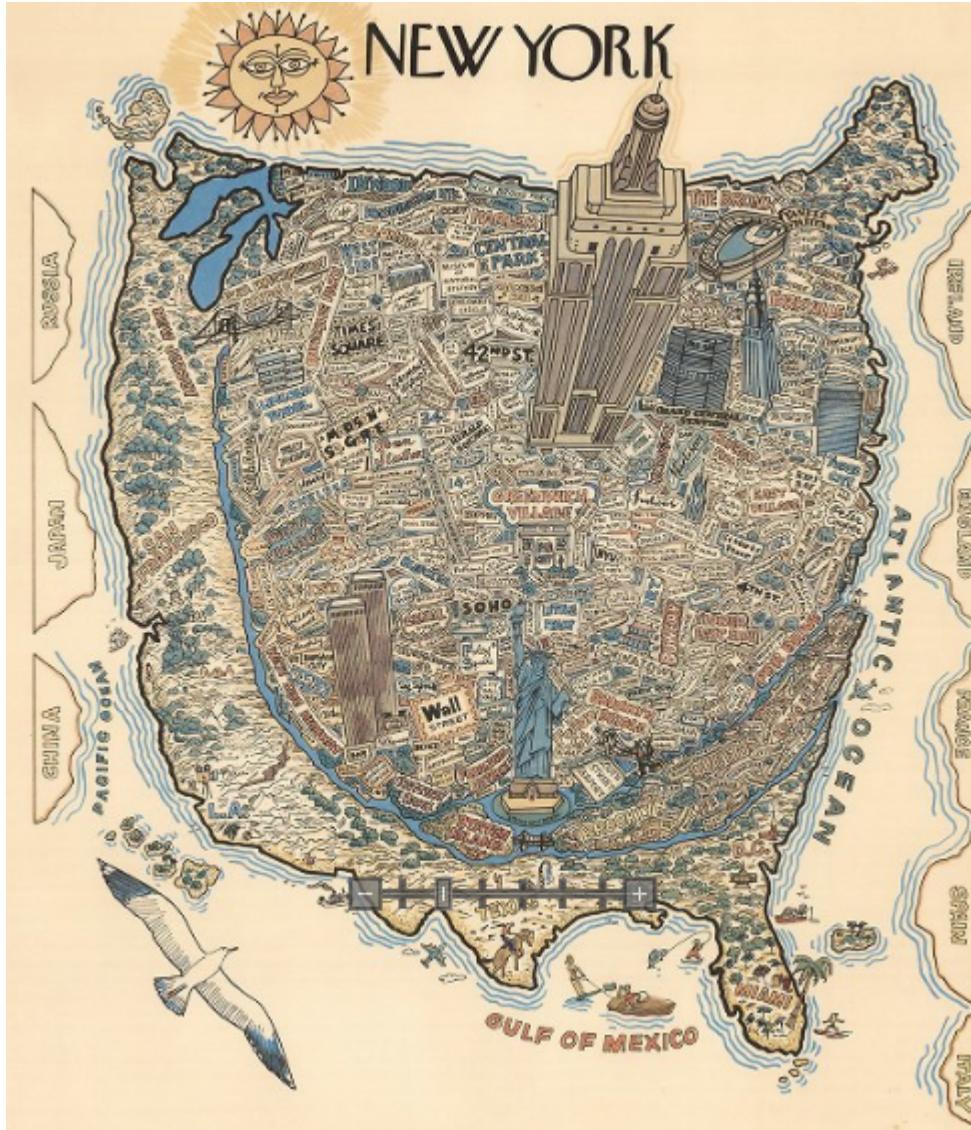


Figure 10. Anonymous, Pictorial map of New York City and the United States, 1970. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.



Figure 11. Anonymous, Pictorial map of New York City and the United States, 1970, detail.
Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.



Figure 12. Jo Mora, "City of San Diego," 1928. Courtesy of the David Rumsey Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.