

GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE RUSSELL FENCE

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Fences have been an enduring topic of inquiry by geographers, particularly John Fraser Hart, Cotton Mather, Terry Jordan-Bychkov, Jon Kilpinen, and Charles Gritzner. As Hart and Mather aptly pointed out, “[American] fences should not be ignored by the geographer or landscape analyst, for the fence is a significant index of settlement stage and character, as well as often being a clue to the physical environment. Few landscape elements combine so finely the characteristics of the resource base, the cultural matrix and its historical antecedents” (1957, 4).

We are geographers from the Berkeley School, and we became intrigued with a particular style of fence, the so-called Russell fence (Figure 1), in 1999 while working on another project. Our original objective was to document fifty years of landscape change along the highways of western Canada and Alaska using a technique known as “repeat photography” (Figures 2 and 3). The possibilities and perils of this technique have been shown effectively in explorations of landscape change in the American Southwest (Hastings and Turner 1980; Bahre 1991), and there is a rich tradition of the use of repeat photography in many studies (Rogers, Malde, and Turner 1984).

The baseline photographs and their locations for our study came from George R. Stewart’s *N.A. 1: The North–South Continental Highway* (1957). Stewart was an English professor who began teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1920s, when such greats as Carl Sauer were shaping Berkeley’s geographical tradition. In our opinion, Stewart was also very much a geographer. His book features thirty-eight photographs he took along the Trans-Canada, Cariboo, Hart, and Alaska Highways in the early 1950s. They are accompanied by short essays on the photographs’ subject matter, histories of the region (particularly the evolution of transportation), and several maps drawn by Erwin Raisz.

For his essay on the “Dry Belt,” which describes the transitional zones of vegetation and land use along the Cariboo Highway, Stewart photographed an area just south of Lac La Hache, British Columbia (Figure 2). Here he introduced readers to the Russell fence, a Western fence type that evolved in the Cariboo and Chilcotin region of central British Columbia (Figure 4). Interestingly, nearly one-third of the “Dry Belt” discussion is devoted to the Russell fence. Stewart described its typical form, admitted that he was unable to establish the origin of the name “Russell,” noted that this type of fence was characteristic of the region, and speculated that it

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