

## Frontier Philosophy

J.R. Spivey reports on a bit of wisdom from his travels in the  
West.

For this quarter's edition of *Frontier Philosophy*, we bring you a tale from deep within the Black Hills of the Dakota Territory. My chartered carriage tumbled into the town of Gusterton with the dry summer sagebrush to find nary a soul treading the boardwalks. I turned to Brother Whip and said "Say there, good fellow, has the whole town been run off?" "Not tha' I'm knowin', sir." "Then have you any idea where they might be?" "I'll be damned, sir." I was mightily distressed as you might imagine, being well aware of all the dangers and calamities that do plague this wild country. Despair held me on the verge of giving the town up for ghost when a raucous cheer rose up from the church house at the end of the mainway, such a sound as I was shocked the very walls of the somewhat shabby place did not burst at the seams.

In a fit of sudden heart, I leapt from the Celerity, scrambled down the dusty street, and entered the chapel just as the crescendo diminished. It was chocked full of all manner of frontier types, from ladies bedecked with gaudy peacockery to toothless old coots who smelled of a full night in the gutter, from weather-worn cowhands strapped with six-shooters to beaver-hatted well-to-dos who had taken up residence on the cushioned front pews. The excited air fell from its inflated heights to a character still and oppressive as a slender man took up position behind the elevated podium at the head of the

room. He wore a smart grey vest and pant set with his white shirt sleeves rolled halfway up his forearms. A shining peacemaker sat on his hip with plenty of spare shots encircling his waist. He dabbed his brow with a red checkered kerchief and smoothed his blonde hair back into proper order, though I could not say that I saw any of it out of place. A smirk spread under his tidy matching mustache as he raised his head to address the crowd.

"My oh my, brother Welford. You do me shame with your overestimation of my persuasive talents. And when you spelled out your claims against me so soundly? I say that I'm no more a politicalizer than Gusterton is Washington, though I dare say that our *dear union* might be more than a shred better off if they were a touch more like the fine people of this town. Now, if'n you please keep the din down, mad'ms and messers, I'd like to look at Welford's comparison a little more closely than he'd might like.

"I'll agree with him a rain barrel is good for everyone and that everyone should have one and that you should be generous if you have some and your neighbor don't, but I think it's a step too far to say that your neighbor has a right to your rain. Just 'cause the rain falls on everyone doesn't free my barrel from being mine. I purchased the lot and supplies. I was the one who set up my own timbers, slapped on the clapboards, and shingled

the roof in the hot sun. Before that barrel caught a drop of rain, it would have collected my sweat and blood. Before I threw up gutters, the rain would have had nowhere to go but into the earth and no one would be none the wiser about what rain mighta been caught. You couldn't miss something you never knew coulda been there. I don't begrudge anyone pumping water up from the ground, but when you look at something that wouldn't have been there without me, I dare say I should have some sorta sway over what goes on with it.

"Now, keep it down and let me make it clear what I mean here, in case y'all're not quite followin'. No one before I came here knew there was any gold up in the hills here and y'all thought I knew nothing about nothing. Glad were you to take my money spent on my camp and supplies. No one cared to look and no cared who was up there. But now, all the sudden, everyone and their daddy has someone or something somehow buried up there that cuts them in on part of the profit. Well, I say not until you've put in your fair share of work or offered me something good in return. I'm not planning on hoarding it all for myself, but I don't intend on handing it out for free neither."

The man continued on his impassioned speech, but I must confess that he had roused the crowd to such an extent that I could no longer make out the words. I had apparently stumbled into some big to-do in the town of Gusterton that I only partly

witnessed and for the conclusion of which I wished not to be present. As the rancor rose and fists started flying, I slipped out the doors through which I had just recently entered and returned to my wagon and Brother Whip. "Further down the road now, fair fellow, there's sure to be trouble starting here soon." "Right'n you are, sir." I never did uncover the name of the invested man, but from the news reports that I tracked after leaving Gusterton, there was indeed some considerable violence that rose up and deaths on both sides, but the cause of the tumult was never explicitly stated in the papers. Whether they did strike it rich or not, I suppose, is just another mystery of the Great West, but the wisdom, or at least fine speeches, of the men there I bring to you, dear readers, as another fine edition of *Frontier Philosophy*.

Yours periodically,

J.R. Spivey