



Turning News into Insight  
Insight into Opportunity

## DREAMS OF CALIFORNICATION

Jan 18th 2007

### How a wave of migrants from the west has transformed the Rocky Mountains

"THEY are all right in the metropolitan areas. But if I sell a rural property to one, I would never disclose where he comes from." So says Cody Burns, an estate agent, of the single biggest group of migrants to Utah. Mexican immigrants get most of the attention in Washington, DC.

In the American West, though, they are less numerous and, in some areas, less unpopular than arrivals from California.

Complaining about Californians is an old tradition in the Rockies; but it is reaching a new intensity. Five million people who were born in California now live outside the state. They are America's second-biggest domestic diaspora, after New Yorkers, and the most noticeable. California is by far the most populous state in the West--and still growing rapidly. It has become a demographic machine, drawing in foreigners while disgorging its own population across the deserts and mountains. In the process, it transforms those areas.

The exiles' most obvious impact is on housing. "People from California, who pay a fortune for tiny places, find this to be an appealing market," says Rocky Anderson, the mayor of Salt Lake City. Property prices have soared across America during the past decade. In absolute terms, though, they have risen fastest in cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The price imbalance between the coast and the interior West means that "equity refugees" from California have big buying power. In Daybreak, a development south of Salt Lake City, many of the big houses are sold not to local Mormons (who have the largest families) but to new arrivals from the west. Californians account for more than a quarter of the homes bought in Promontory, an expensive, golf-oriented town just outside Park City, according to CS Financial, a mortgage-broker.

Although Californians' eyes widen when they first see prices in the Rockies, moving to a relatively cheap market can be hazardous. Tom Clark, who is currently helping some 400 aerospace engineers to move from southern

California to Denver, says many worry that prices on the coast will rise beyond their reach. One reason the Californian diaspora is so large is that, once people leave, they often cannot afford to go back.

Still, house prices in metropolitan Salt Lake City rose by 19% between 2005 and 2006--one of the steepest increases in the country. The problem is that local first-time buyers can be priced out of the market. To make matters worse, Californians, who prize privacy and security, often fortify their properties. They may even object to armed men traipsing across their land in search of game.

To sum up this and other affronts, westerners have used a verb. To "Californicate" a state means to turn it into an image of California, with inflated property prices, traffic jams and rampant crime. Occasionally, as in a recent leader in the LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL, a local political shift (in that case, Nevada's vote to ban smoking in restaurants) is described as Californication. And Californians have indeed spread their politics to other states.

"I wouldn't be mayor without them," says Mr Anderson of Salt Lake City's immigrants. And it is true that a list of the mayor's activities in his office reads like a California Democrat's: setting a greenhouse-gas reduction target for the city, blocking a proposed highway and protesting against a visit by George Bush.

Californian immigrants have changed Colorado's politics not once but twice, according to John Hickenlooper, Denver's mayor. First, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, came conservative, often evangelical exiles from Orange County, south of Los Angeles. They brought a Californian enthusiasm for limited government. Ballot measures imposing term limits and restraining tax increases were soon approved by Colorado's voters, together with a fiercely anti-gay measure.

Then, beginning in the late 1990s, a wave of northern Californians arrived to take up jobs in Colorado's growing high-technology sector. Young, well-educated and liberal, they are a big reason Colorado has moved out of the Republican camp in the past few years, says Floyd Ciruli, a Denver pollster. Four years ago Colorado Republicans had the two US senators, five out of seven congressmen, the governor and control of both houses of the state legislature. They now have just one senator and three congressmen. And this week that senator, Wayne Allard, announced that he will stand down in 2008.

#### THE NEW CONQUISTADORS

At one time the Californian exodus could fairly be described as white flight. No longer. Between 1995 and 2000, California suffered the net loss of more Hispanics than whites. Many of them were members of the well-off working class, and were lured by the construction boom in the mountains and desert. Most were barely noticed: a Hispanic in Denver or Las Vegas is generally assumed to have

come from Mexico. A few, though, have become notorious, thanks to California's most despised export--its gangs.

Although Denver does not have a Crenshaw Boulevard, it has a Crenshaw Mafia gang, which is named after a street in Los Angeles. Salt Lake City has a 38th Street gang, which also originated in southern California. Gang graffiti in Salt Lake City occasionally features Californian telephone codes, such as 310 and 714, and allusions to sections of the state's penal code.

A few Rocky Mountain thugs do indeed hail from the west coast, and high-level investigations into drug trafficking often turn up evidence of Californian suppliers. But in most cases, police say, links with west-coast gangs are more aspirational than real. "Los Angeles gangs are the most violent in America and they run the most drugs. If you have pretensions to be a serious gangster, you want to associate yourself with them," says Chris Burbank, head of Salt Lake City police.

Such malign influences, even if they are mostly imagined, pain those who have found homes in the interior. "We came to Colorado because it reminds us of how California used to be," says Hank Baker, a property developer. Yes, goes the local quip--and the new arrivals are gradually turning the West into a version of California as it now is.