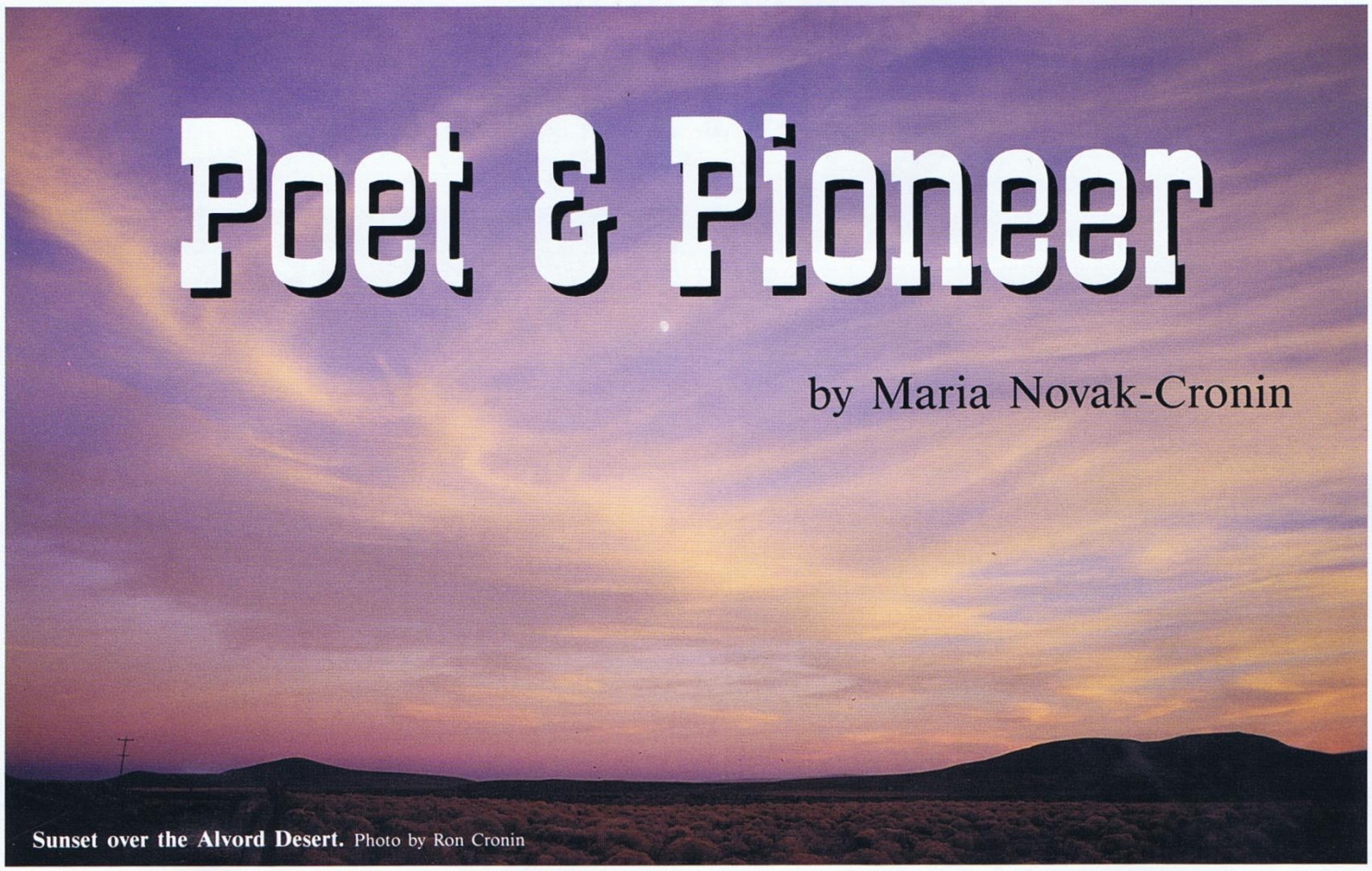
Poet & Pioneer

by Maria Novak-Cronin



Sunset over the Alvord Desert. Photo by Ron Cronin

C.E.S. Wood and Bill Hanley in the Oregon Desert

Have you not heard the utterance of the guardian rocks
And the low psalming of the mountains,
The bare hills, flashing skies and clouds?
The hushed communion of the brotherhood
Under the snow?

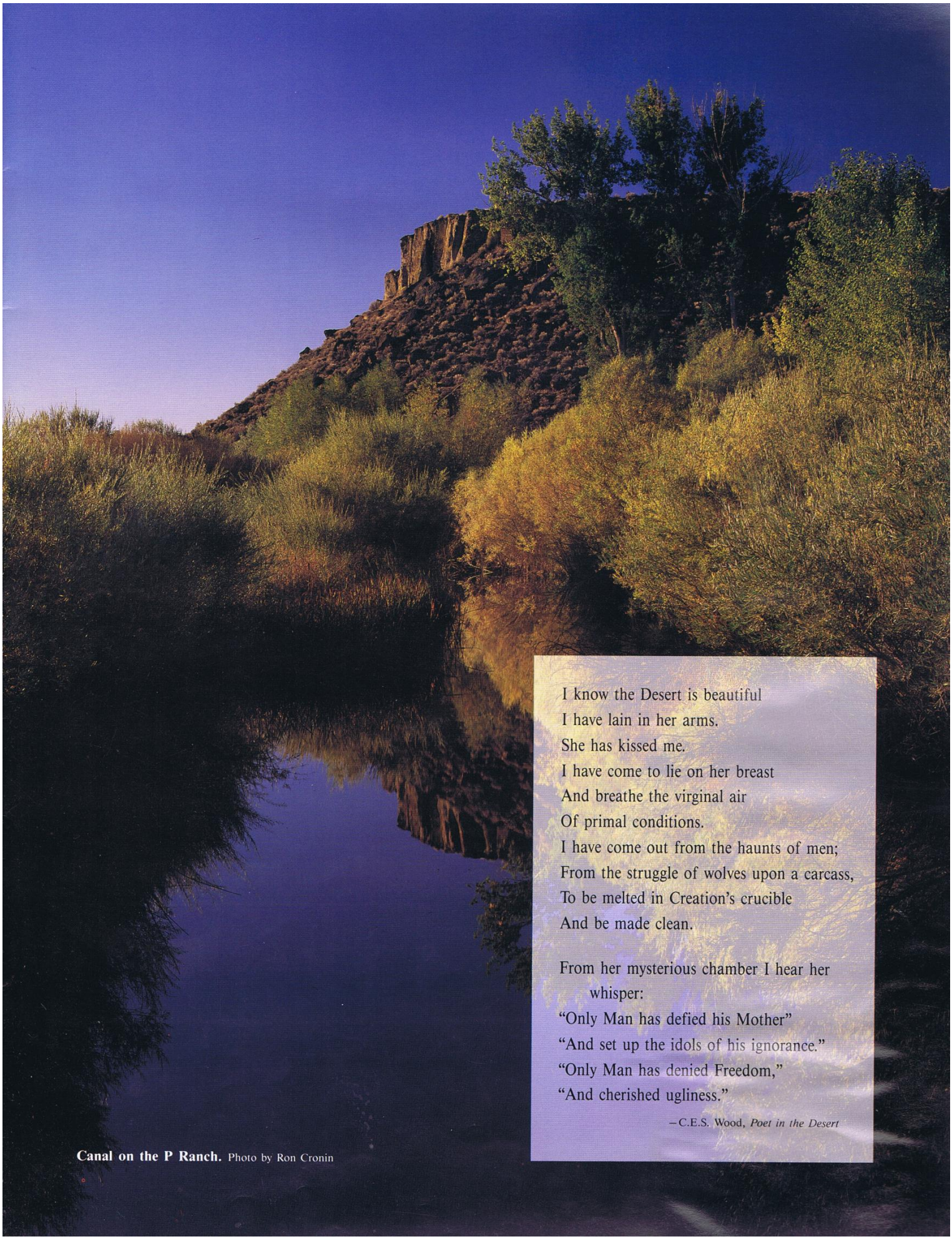
—C.E.S. Wood, *Poet in the Desert*

Those who seek to take the measure of the Oregon desert—to plumb her sage-scented secret places and harness her resources—must come armed with patience and wisdom; a dose of wit and humor tucked under a hat also helps, for the desert guards her austere beauty fiercely.

Two who came to know and love the Oregon desert were unlikely companions. Colorful William Danfort "Bill" Hanley, cattleman, developer, and sagebrush philosopher, was born to pioneer parents in the Rogue Valley. To his future, he brought little more than ambition, determination, a father's sound advice, and a nimble mind. It was enough.

Charles Erskine Scott Wood enjoyed the advantages of a well-bred, well-connected, well-educated

C.E.S. Wood. Photo courtesy Ecola Educational Associates



I know the Desert is beautiful
I have lain in her arms.
She has kissed me.
I have come to lie on her breast
And breathe the virginal air
Of primal conditions.
I have come out from the haunts of men;
From the struggle of wolves upon a carcass,
To be melted in Creation's crucible
And be made clean.

From her mysterious chamber I hear her
whisper:
"Only Man has defied his Mother"
"And set up the idols of his ignorance."
"Only Man has denied Freedom,"
"And cherished ugliness."

—C.E.S. Wood, *Poet in the Desert*

Canal on the P Ranch. Photo by Ron Cronin

easterner. Son of the surgeon general, West Point graduate, chronicler of Indian wars and lawyer, Wood brought to the desert a rich store of world-wise and war-tempered sophistication wrapped around the restless soul of a poet.

Although the two first met on a business footing, Hanley's lifetime of practical experience in the Oregon desert, coupled with his natural gift for storytelling, recommended him to Wood, whose need to interpret an intensely personal meaning of the desert was a major focus of his later years.

Their shared passion for the Oregon desert made them fast friends.

Hanley and Wood forged their friendship at the turn of the century—a time when the pioneering period of Oregon history was drawing to a close. Both men were visionaries in their own way, first-hand witnesses to forces that gobbled up whole cultures and imposed the order of barbed-wire grids and paper contracts over what had been vast wilderness.

Although Hanley was born a few days' ride to the west, it was Wood—then a lieutenant in the U.S. Army—who first encountered the "glittering death spaces" and seductive beauty of the Harney Basin. Four years before, teenaged Hanley sought his fortune driving a herd of Rogue Valley cattle toward the "big" country to the east, Wood followed his orders of transfer north from Camp Bidwell, California, to Vancouver Barracks, Department of the Columbia, Washington Territory.

The trek, in 1875, took Wood through a stark and startlingly beautiful topography whose effect upon his soul proved profound and persistent. Years later as Harney County's most powerful cattleman, Hanley would welcome Wood first as guest and soon as good friend on business and pleasure trips to the desert ranches he owned or managed, giving Wood the chance to work out on paper and canvas what the landscape meant to his artist's heart.

Hanley knew the land like few other men, having grown up with it literally and figuratively.

Born in 1861 at his father Michael's farm, "The Willows," just northeast of Jacksonville, Hanley at an early age showed the kind of ranching ambition that would guarantee him success. Impatient to make his mark, Hanley quit school at age nine and went to work cowboying for his father, who owned extensive spreads on Butte Creek, in the Applegate Valley and in the Klamath Basin. As a boy, Hanley flung himself into ranch work, and at the tender age of twelve his father made him foreman of the Butte Creek ranch.[1]

He worked another five years for his father, adding to his store of experience managing cattle, range, and men before setting off at age seventeen with a handful of young companions and a gift herd of 200 seed cattle to find rangeland of his own. His father accompanied the young men to the crest of the Cascades and bade Hanley farewell with the following charge: "Go till you find a big country, for you will never get any bigger than the country you are in."[2]

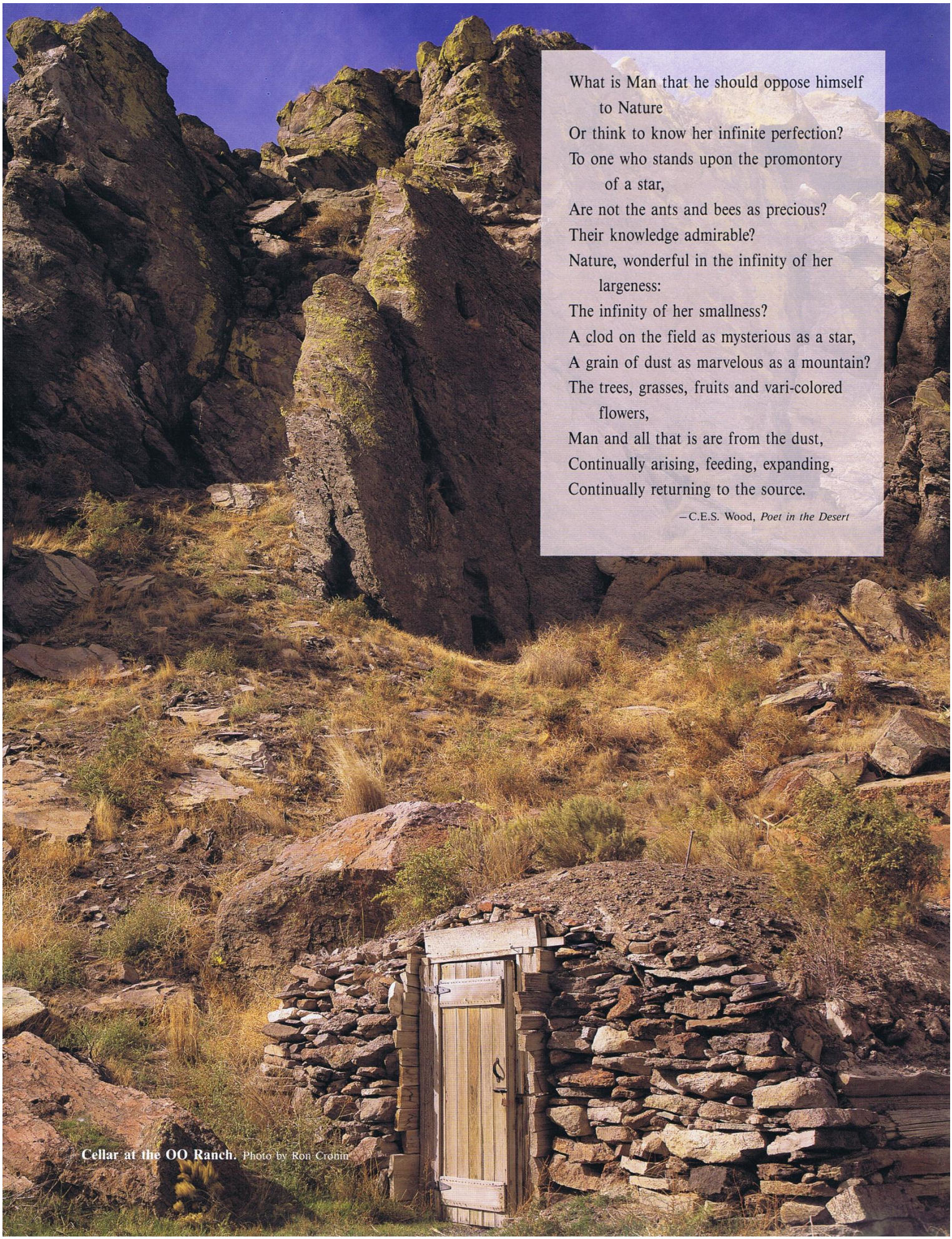
The advice summed up Michael Hanley's legacy to his son. He gave Hanley "a chance to get seasoned man-wisdom—the most wonderful influence in my whole life," Hanley later recalled. "When I look back, I always feel there was something super in his knowledge of natural things and how to handle them. . . . Always had humor. . . . Solution to a problem always comes out of humor. Those that have it are fortunate."[3]

His father's words planted in his mind and a grubstake of cattle under his care, Hanley followed the path of his older brother Ed into the endless open spaces of the Harney country, where he would meet Peter French, John Devine, and other California cattle barons who had driven vast herds north in search of good range and elbow room.

Bill Hanley. Photo courtesy Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc.

At the end of his first cattle drive to the Silvies and Blitzen River valleys in the Harney country, Hanley met some of the legendary Californians. "They were all well-dressed, showy men, wearing bright colors—all roamers of space in light countries love color—and there was I, riding up to them, a boy tramp, all ragged and dusty, in his shrunk shirt, with a straggly bunch of desert-worn cattle." These aristocrats welcomed the weary Hanley and sat him down to a good meal. "It was just sympathy," he recalled, "for I was on the last edge of being protected by clothes, was sunburned, my lips cracked and sore and my mount as wore down as I was."[4]

Hanley never forgot this welcome by the lords of the range.



What is Man that he should oppose himself
to Nature
Or think to know her infinite perfection?
To one who stands upon the promontory
of a star,
Are not the ants and bees as precious?
Their knowledge admirable?
Nature, wonderful in the infinity of her
largeness:
The infinity of her smallness?
A clod on the field as mysterious as a star,
A grain of dust as marvelous as a mountain?
The trees, grasses, fruits and vari-colored
flowers,
Man and all that is are from the dust,
Continually arising, feeding, expanding,
Continually returning to the source.

—C.E.S. Wood, *Poet in the Desert*

Cellar at the OO Ranch. Photo by Ron Cronin

A strange and marshy hot springs along Silver Creek near Harney Lake, long a stopping place for aboriginal peoples, attracted Wood in 1875 on his way to Vancouver Barracks, and again in 1878 during the Paiute-Bannock War. On his first visit, Wood found this oasis with its teeming waterfowl and luxurious grasses enchanting. On his return, however, the horrors of warfare with the Indians checked his enthusiasm. In a journal entry dated June 24, 1878, he wrote: "I visit Bernard's battle ground alone. Debris of the camp. Graves of the men . . . I found an old squaw crouching under the fierce sun and motionless as if dead . . . What weary days they must have been."[5]

The place still held its enchantment, however. The next year, Hanley laid his bedroll at this same site as the lives of Wood and Hanley intersected geographically at OO Springs, later Hanley's OO Ranch.

The young cattleman had been gathering strays all by himself for two weeks in the lonesome country to the west and south when he descended to the abandoned ranch site at the springs. "Slept that night for the first time at the OO," he recalled. "Nothing there. The Paiutes . . . had burned down the buildings, but there was water! It came out from under the mountain in great quantities, clear and warm. . . . Woke in time to see the sun come straight up out of the desert—the most wonderful sight. . . . I said then, lying there, 'I'll have this for mine someday.' And so he did, and swapped stories with Wood years later about the days when Indians still inhabited that part of the country.[6]

If Hanley seemed bred for the role he would play in the wide-open Harney Basin country, Wood, nine years his senior, came to his more circuitously. His stiff-necked, authoritarian father used his position as the Navy's surgeon general to get his son C.E.S. into West Point for a military career. But the young Wood seemed to have enjoyed the bright social life that swirled around the young officers at the academy at least as much as the soldiering.

And Wood's experiences as an officer during the Indian campaigns in the West caused him in later years to question the military values he had been taught, reinforcing instead Wood's own evolving credo of philosophical anarchism and personal freedom gleaned from the writings of Thoreau and other American thinkers.

His contacts with Native Americans also left an impression upon Wood that led during his reflective later years to a stronger appreciation of their cultural achievements, some of which he compiled in an ethnographic study called *A Book of Tales,* published in 1891, and in related magazine articles.[7]

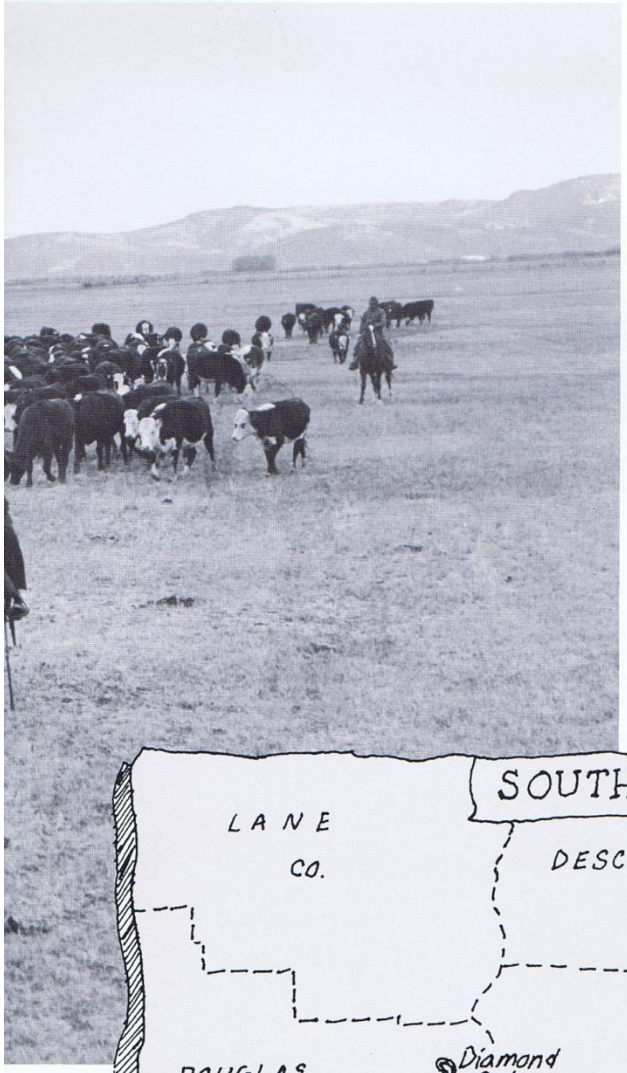
Indeed, it had been Wood who transcribed the immortal "I will fight no more forever" speech of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce upon his surrender in the Bear Paw Mountains of Montana.

Bill Hanley leads a cattle drive. Photo courtesy Ecola Educational Associates

But Wood left the West in 1880 to accompany his commander back to West Point and the stimulation of urban life. Not so Bill Hanley, who was just getting down to his life's work on the Oregon desert.

The teenaged Hanley's first cattle drive from the Rogue Valley ended when he and his partners let the herd stop on a long, grassy stretch of the Silvies River just south of the present community of Burns. Here, the young pioneers put up wild hay for the winter and settled down to the business of making their herd prosper. Hanley returned to Jacksonville the following spring and brought a hay mower and rake—among the first in Central Oregon—with him when he returned to the Silvies spread that would become the Bell A Ranch.[8]

Owning such useful equipment made Hanley an important figure among the sparse ranching commu-



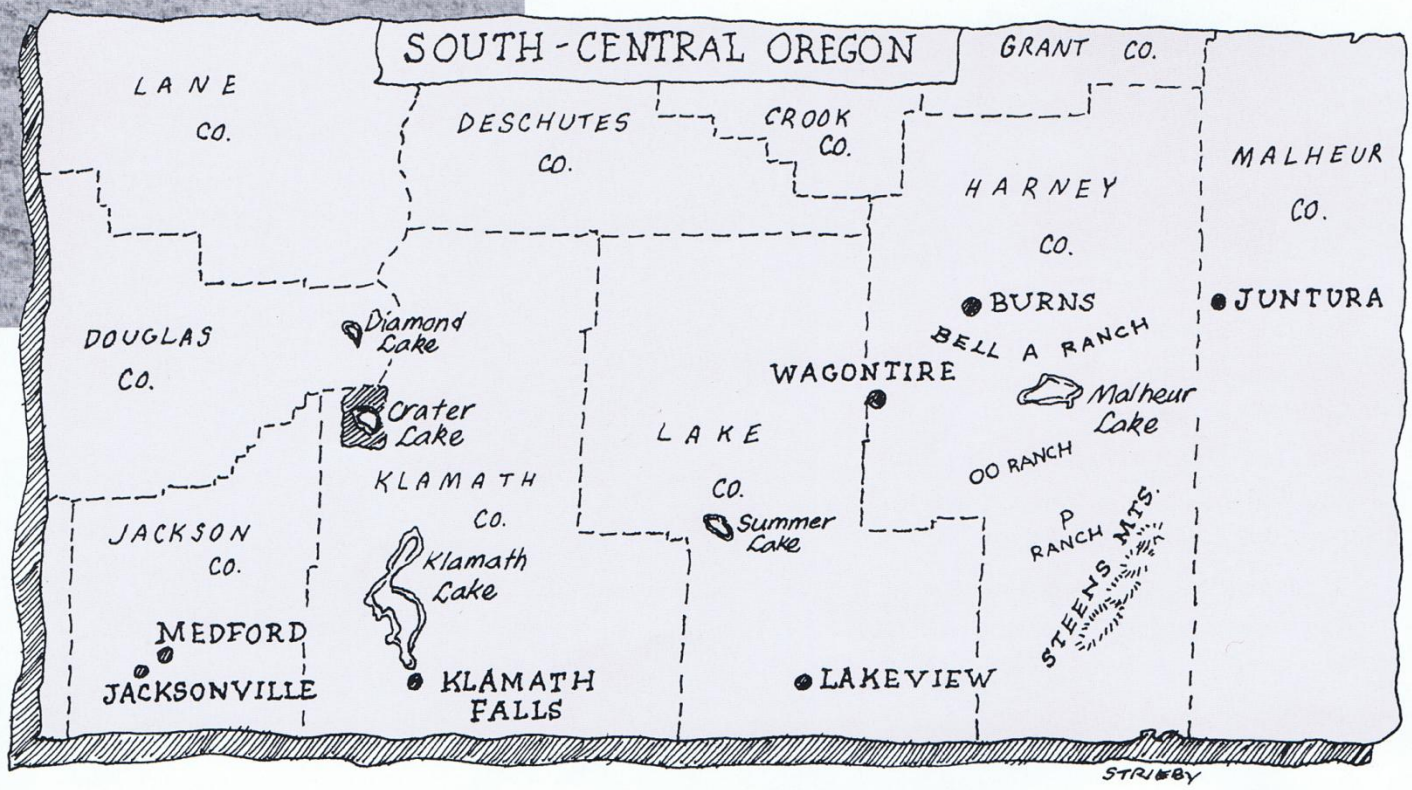
nity. Many of the ranchers suffered severe stock losses in the winter of 1879, putting the carrying capacity of the Harney rangelands in question and giving Hanley's ranching genius a chance to work.[9]

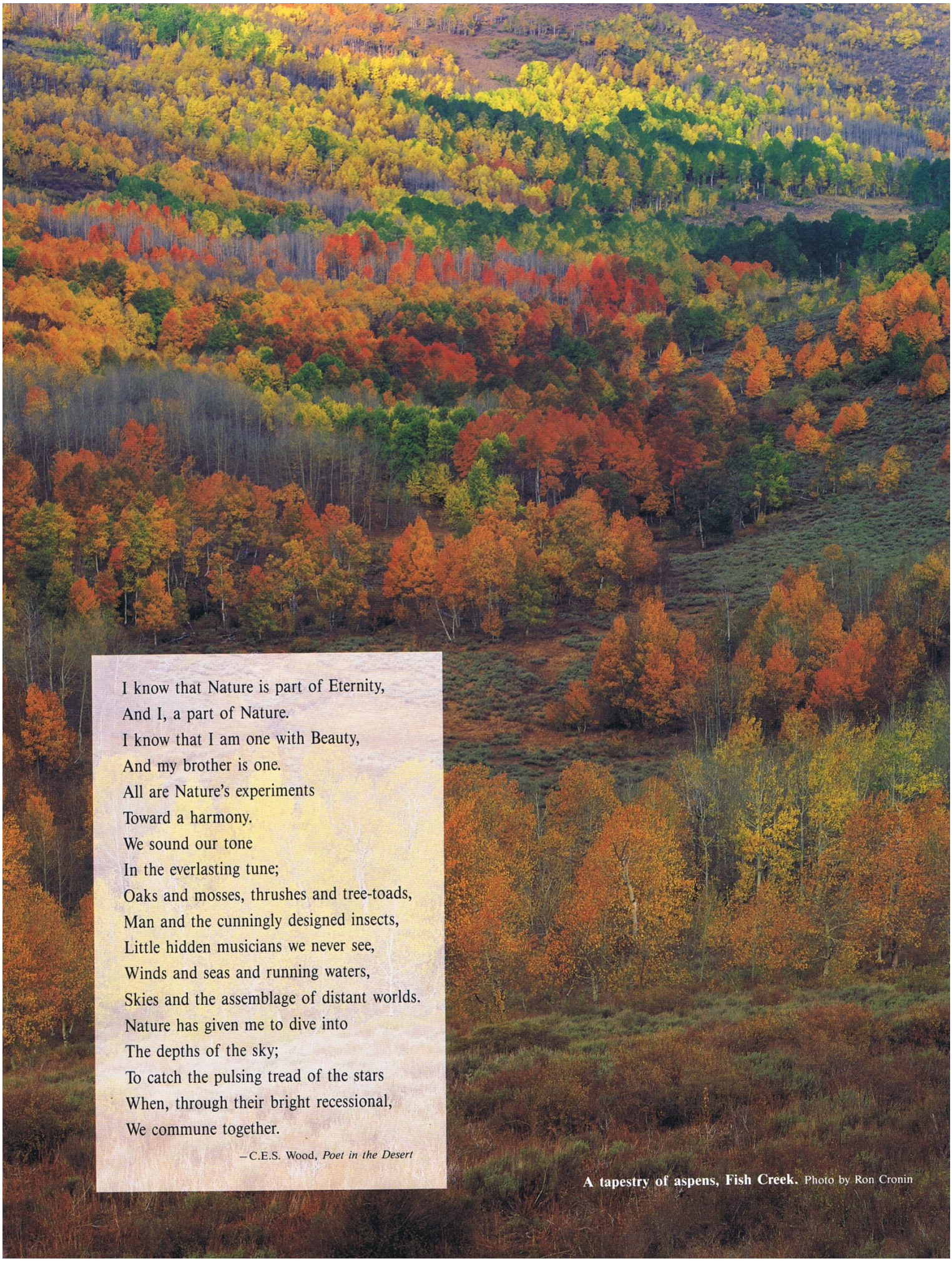
Hanley knew how to cut and cure hay, having learned much from his father's early experiments with hay and alfalfa production. Not only had Hanley cut hay for many of his neighbors, he also understood the importance of advance planning and progressive management, in addition to "cow sense," in making a success of beef production.

With his brothers Ed and John already established in the Harney country, the Hanley boys were in a position to buy lands from other discouraged settlers during the hard times and consolidate their holdings.

In 1882, Hanley sold most of his cattle interests to John Devine, the Californian, and returned to the Rogue Valley a young man with a lot of money in his pocket. Just as he prepared to set out for the desert again with a fresh herd of cattle, however, his father fell ill, and Hanley remained in the Rogue Valley tending the family farms and ranches until his father died in 1889.[10]

Freed of his obligation to his father, Hanley made plans to return to the desert and did so in 1892 in a buggy with his new wife, Applegate native Clara Cameron Hanley, at his side. They returned for good





I know that Nature is part of Eternity,
And I, a part of Nature.
I know that I am one with Beauty,
And my brother is one.
All are Nature's experiments
Toward a harmony.
We sound our tone
In the everlasting tune;
Oaks and mosses, thrushes and tree-toads,
Man and the cunningly designed insects,
Little hidden musicians we never see,
Winds and seas and running waters,
Skies and the assemblage of distant worlds.
Nature has given me to dive into
The depths of the sky;
To catch the pulsing tread of the stars
When, through their bright recessional,
We commune together.

—C.E.S. Wood, *Poet in the Desert*

A tapestry of aspens, Fish Creek. Photo by Ron Cronin

Aspens in Whorehouse Meadows, Steens Mountain *(below)*; **Round barn at the P Ranch** *(right)*. Photos by Ron Cronin

in 1893, driving a herd of cattle and settling on the Bell A ranch on the Silvies River.[11]

At first the Hanleys added small bits and pieces to their land holdings. But Hanley was anxious to grow. Owing to ties Hanley cultivated among the wealthy and powerful who were interested in cattle and land in the Harney country, he soon got a tremendous career boost. Shortly after Peter French was murdered by a settler in 1897, Chico attorney F. C. Lusk asked Hanley to assume management of the huge P Ranch for the French Glenn Corporation.[12]

And in his first large purchase transaction in 1903, Hanley was to "buy the OO Ranch from Riley and Hardin. He paid six dollars an acre for 16,000 acres."[13] When his brothers pulled out—Ed taking a herd of beef to sell in the Alaska goldfields—he ended up with both the OO and the Bell A with its 4,000 acres. The Hanley herd numbered in the many thousands, and Hanley soon felt keenly the economic threat facing all ranchers in the Harney country: how to get the beef cheaply and efficiently to the markets of the Midwest.

Somewhere in the midst of the politicking, the dickering and the land dealing, Hanley met a Portland attorney named Wood, and the two were soon comparing notes.

Wood hadn't been idle in the years following the Paiute wars. Besides raising a family, Wood took advantage of his assignment to West Point to pursue degrees in political science and law at Columbia University in New York.

While there, the powerful lure of intellectual and artistic freedom also worked on Wood's heart. His circle of friends included painters, sculptors, and writers, and even that giant of nineteenth-century American letters, Mark Twain, whom the Wood family hosted while he lectured at West Point.

In 1884, Wood left the Army and moved the family he and his wife had started at Vancouver Barracks back to Portland, where he established a lucrative law practice he would maintain until 1919.[14]

Because of the clients he represented in his practice, Wood kept returning to that special country of southeastern Oregon for both business and pleasure, and often as Hanley's guest.

Besides owning the OO Ranch, with the battleground Wood described in his 1878 journal, Hanley continued to manage the P Ranch headquartered in the Blitzen Valley at French Glenn, nestled at the foot of Steens Mountain, whose beauty worked such a hypnotic effect on Wood's artistic sensibilities.

With the help of Wood, Portland investor and Hanley friend H. L. Corbett bought out the French

Glenn Corporation interests in the Blitzen Valley in 1907.[15]

The P Ranch wasn't the only endeavor in which Wood and Hanley found themselves mutually interested. The Willamette Valley and Cascade Mountain Wagon Road Company, ostensibly set up to build a road from Albany to Burns, controlled vast amounts of land along the proposed route. The land was managed for speculative purposes by Charles Atschul, agent for the French-based investment firm of Lazard Freres, whose attorney in Portland was none other than Wood.

In order to promote better transportation routes in the Harney country, Hanley had formed his own Harney Valley Improvement Company, with the initial purpose of developing (and thus gaining title to) irrigable public lands under the Carey Desert Land Act of 1895. But when other ranch interests thwarted some of Hanley's plans, he rearranged the company's lands by exchanging up to 16,000 acres with the Cascade Mountain Road Company between 1903 and 1906.[16]

The settlements reached with the Cascade Mountain Road Company and the eventual sale in 1910 of the lands it controlled brought Wood considerable wealth.

Wood's motives throughout the land dealings are difficult to pin down. Like all those of his generation, he was caught between the horns of frontier pragmatism and intellectual ideals. Financial survival in those days often lurked in that murky middle ground between enterprise and exploitation. His Army experience had made Wood sensitive to what could happen when a government exploited native peoples, for example. But he also had a family to care for, and representing wealthy clients, utilities, and land speculators gave him financial security as well as the means to indulge in other social causes closer to his heart.

Patronage of the arts was one of Wood's abiding passions. Wood founded a library and an art museum in Portland and commissioned public and private works from such artists as sculptor Olin Warner, who later designed the doors of the Library of Congress.

But Wood also assisted his friend Hanley in his schemes for developing the Central Oregon desert country. Ranchers, farmers, merchants, and investors throughout the area knew that only cheap and reliable transportation could link resources with the outside markets critical to establishing a strong and stable regional economy.

The railroad offered the surest means for transporting cattle, lumber, and other local products. Trouble was, neither of the two men who controlled the Northwest's railroad empires—E. H. Harriman of the Union and Southern Pacific and James J. Hill of the Great Northern—felt a pressing need to invest in rail lines into the sparsely settled lands of eastern Oregon, much less the sage and juniper hills of Harney County.

Bill Hanley on horseback. SOHS #4681

Hanley and Wood set out to change that, Hanley proposing an amendment to the Oregon Constitution that would permit the state to sell bonds for the purpose of financing railroad construction. "We arranged for a joint session of the House and Senate, and Mr. Wood presented the situation of our state with its rim of transportation and no road through the center—the heart-breaking disappointment of the long-waiting, long-suffering settlers," Hanley recalled.[17]

But other factors helped induce Hill and Harriman to start their famous track-laying duel up the Deschutes River to Bend, with the result that the Oregon Trunk into the heart of the state opened in 1911, making the bond scheme moot. Nevertheless, at the celebration, Hill acknowledged Hanley's role when he told him, "I was building a road to come and see you," and reportedly slipped the golden spike into Hanley's pocket.[18]

More projects—highways, irrigation schemes, land deals—lay ahead for Hanley, who traveled the nation and the world pursuing the cattle business, telling stories, and making friends. He died in 1935, and his wife followed him in 1954 after selling most of the OO Ranch to the government as part of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.[19]

Wood was able to retire on the money he made from the Willamette—Cascade road sale, some of which he even used to establish trusts for his children.[20]

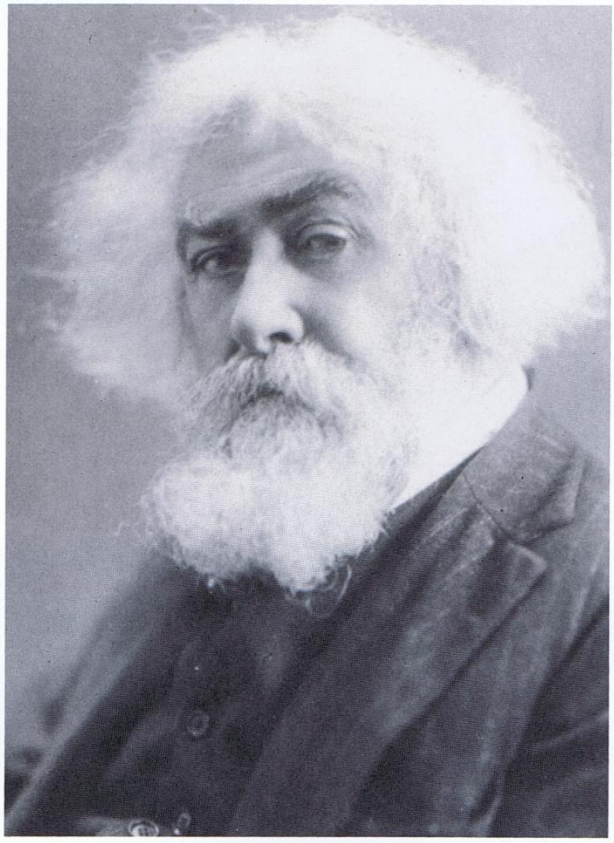
Wood's friendship, contacts, and advice had served Hanley well in his later years. In return, Hanley's convivial hospitality in the Harney sagebrush country helped feed Wood's desire to immerse himself in the landscape that had haunted his reveries since the days of the Paiute campaigns.

Wood was always welcome on the broad porch at the OO headquarters, and his sons found work on Hanley's spreads when they wanted it.

It was in the intoxicating lushness of the Blitzen Oasis at the P Ranch that Wood worked up the first draft of his classic *Poet in the Desert,* which Wood first published in 1915. He also painted and sketched what he saw of the Steens rims and valleys.

Even after he left Portland for California with the poet Sara Bard Field, the influence of the desert still called to him, as in these lines from *Poems from the Ranges,* published in 1929:

Lay me on the hilltop, close to the sky;
Among the lava rocks let me lie,
Where I've lain in my blanket on the ground;
The big, brown empty desert all around,
And heard the coyotes' crazy howl and cry.
There is the place I want to lie.
I shall not see the slow and lonesome moon;
But still there will be moonlight; still there will be moon.
I shall not hear the furious hoofs, the neigh
Of the wild stallions in their play.
Asleep on the hilltop, next to the sky.
There is the place I want to lie.



C.E.S. Wood in later years. Photo courtesy Ecola Educational Associates

ENDNOTES

1. Raymond Lewis, "The Remarkable Bill Hanley," *Table Rock Sentinel* (June 1984): 4.
2. Anne Shannon Monroe, *Feelin' Fine* Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1930), 63.
3. Ibid., 62–63.
4. Ibid., 72—73.
5. C.E.S. Wood, *Oregon Historical Quarterly* (transcribed from private journal of 1878) Vol LXX, No. 1:539.
6. Monroe, pp. 69–70.
7. Alfred Powers, *History of Oregon Literature* (Portland: Metropolitan Press, Publishers, 1935), 444.
8. Monroe, 83, 86.
9. George Francis Brimlow, *Harney County, Oregon, and its Rangeland* Bend: Harney County Historical Society, 1980, reprint, Maverick Publications), 161.
10. Monroe, 124.
11. Lewis, 11.
12. Peter K. Simpson, *The Community of Cattlemen, A Social History of the Cattle Industry in Southern Oregon, 1869–1912,* (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1987), 119.
13. E. R. Jackman and John Scharff, *Steens Mountain in Oregon's High Desert Country* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1967), 164.
14. Powers, 444.
15. Simpson, 119–120.
16. Ibid., 107.
17. Monroe, 158.
18. Ibid., 167.
19. Lewis, 17.

Maria Novak-Cronin is creative director at Ecola Educational Associates, a Portland nonprofit organization specializing in producing exhibits, publications and multimedia programming. Among Ecola's recent exhibit efforts is Poet in the Desert, *currently on display at the Southern Oregon Historical Society.*

This story appeared in *Table Rock Sentinel*, Volume 12, Number 1, January / February 1992. The *Sentinel* is a regular publication of the Southern Oregon Historical Society, and this was its lead feature in conjunction with *Poet in the Desert*, an exhibition at the Society. Used with permission of the author Maria Novak-Cronin and photographer Ron Cronin. Reach them at RonCronin1@hotmail.com.