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"The Desert and the Garden: Climate as Attractor and Obstacle in the Settlement History of the Western United States"

Culver, Lawrence

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This article examines climate and perceptions of climate as factors in the migration and settlement history of the western United States. It focuses on two regions of great interest in the nineteenth century. One, the so-called Great American Desert, in the western Great Plains, seemed a potential obstacle to settlement. The other, the Mexican state of Alta California, which after 1848 became the US state of California, proved a definite attraction to settlers. By the late nineteenth century, both regions were attracting migrants. One, however, would experience climatic disasters that discouraged settlement, while the other would continue to grow, encouraging an even larger migration after 1945 to the southernmost tier of US states, from Florida to California, a region that became known as the Sunbelt. The Sunbelt drew migrants from the US Northeast and Midwest in part because of its warmer climate. By examining these regions, and the climatic migrations they spurred, this article illustrates how perceptions of climate changed in the US. Climate was transformed from a problem into a commodity. For prospective migrants, climate, once a matter of profound concern, became a benign asset. Yet the Sunbelt region is subject to major climatic hazards, from droughts to hurricanes. By better understanding historical perceptions of climate, we can more clearly see how it could prove either an obstacle or an attraction for migration, and why people migrated to areas of environmental hazards, whether in the US or elsewhere.

— Text from The White Horse Press website

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