

How the Wild West REALLY looked: Gorgeous sepia-tinted pictures show the landscape as it was charted for the very first time

By [Rob Cooper](#)

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These remarkable 19th century sepia-tinted pictures show the American West as you have never seen it before - as it was charted for the first time.

The photos, by Timothy O'Sullivan, are the first ever taken of the rocky and barren landscape.

At the time federal government officials were travelling across Arizona, Nevada, Utah and the rest of the west as they sought to uncover the land's untapped natural resources.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Breathtaking landscape: A view across the Shoshone Falls, Snake River, Idaho in 1874 as it was caught on camera by photographer Timothy O'Sullivan during Lt. George M. Wheeler's survey west of the One Hundredth Meridian that lasted from 1871 to 1874. Approximately 45 feet higher than the Niagara falls of the U.S and Canada, the Shoshone Falls are sometimes called the 'Niagara of the West'. Before mass migration and industrialisation of the west, the Bannock and Shoshone Indians relied on the huge salmon stocks of the falls as a source of food. And the John C. Fremont Expedition of 1843, one of the first missions to encounter the falls reported that salmon could be caught simply by throwing a spear into the water, such was the stock



Land rising from the water: The Pyramid and Domes, a line of dome-shaped tufa rocks in Pyramid Lake, Nevada photographed in 1867. Taken as part of Clarence King's Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, O'Sullivan's mesmerising pictures of the other-worldly rock formations at Pyramid Lake committed the sacred native American Indian site to camera for the first time



Famous photographer: Timothy O'Sullivan whose childhood and background are the subject of debate among photographic scholars was of Irish ancestry. It is known that as a teenager he worked in the studio of the legendary 19th century photographer Mathew Brady, who is seen as the father of photo-journalism. A veteran of the American Civil War in its first year, O'Sullivan turned his hand to photographing the horrors of war in during the final three years of the conflict before setting out on his cross-continental expeditions.

Timothy O'Sullivan, who used a box camera, worked with the Government teams as they explored the land. He had earlier covered the U.S. Civil War and was one of the most famous photographers of the 19th century.

He also took pictures of the Native American population for the first time as a team of artists, photographers, scientists and soldiers explored the land in the 1860s and 1870s.

The images of the landscape were remarkable - because the majority of people at the time would not have known they were there or have ever had a chance to see it for themselves.

O'Sullivan died from tuberculosis at the age of 42 in 1882 - just years after the project had finished .

He carted a dark room wagon around the Wild West on horseback so that he could develop his images. He spent seven years exploring the landscape and thousands of pictures have survived from his travels.

The project was designed to attract settlers to the largely uninhabited region.

O'Sullivan used a primitive wet plate box camera which he would have to spend several minutes setting up every time he wanted to take a photograph.

He would have to assemble the device on a tripod, coat a glass plate with collodion - a flammable solution. The glass would then be put in a holder before being inserted into a camera.

After a few seconds exposure, he would rush the plate to his dark room wagon and cover it in chemicals to begin the development process.

Considered one of the forerunners to Ansel Adams, Timothy O'Sullivan is a hero to other photographers according to the [Tucson Weekly](#).

'Most of the photographers sent to document the West's native peoples and its geologic formations tried to make this strange new land accessible, even picturesque,' said Keith McElroy a history of photography professor in Tucson.

'Not O'Sullivan.

'At a time when Manifest Destiny demanded that Americans conquer the land, he pictured a West that was forbidding and inhospitable.

'With an almost modern sensibility, he made humans and their works insignificant.

'His photographs picture scenes, like a flimsy boat helpless against the dark shadows of Black Canyon, or explorers almost swallowed up by the crevices of Canyon de Chelly.'



Native Americans: The Pah-Ute (Paiute) Indian group, near Cedar, Utah in a picture from 1872. Government officials were chartering the land for the first time as part of Lt. George M. Wheeler's survey west of the One Hundredth Meridian which O'Sullivan accompanied the Lieutenant on. During this expedition O'Sullivan nearly drowned in the Truckee River (which runs from Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake, located in northwestern Nevada) when his boat got jammed against rocks.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Breathtaking: Twin buttes stand near Green River City, Wyoming, photographed in 1872 four years after settlers made the river basin their home. Green River and its distinctive twin rock formations that stand over the horizon was supposed to be the site of a division point for the Union Pacific Railroad, but when the engineers arrived they were shocked to find that the area had been settled and so had to move the railroad west 12 miles to Bryan, Wyoming.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

19th century housing: Members of Clarence King's Fortieth Parallel Survey team explore the land near Oreana, Nevada, in 1867. Clarence King was a 25-year-old Yale graduate, who hired Irish tough guy O'Sullivan for his Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel. Funded by the War Department, the plan was to survey the unexplored territory that lay between the California Sierras and the Rockies, with a view toward finding a good place to lay railroad tracks while also looking for mining possibilities and assessing the level of Indian hostility in the area.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Incredible: Tents can be seen (bottom, centre) at a point known as Camp Beauty close to canyon walls in Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Arizona. Photographed in 1873 and situated in northeastern Arizona, the area is one of the longest continuously inhabited landscapes in North American and holds preserved ruins of early indigenous people's such as The Anasazi and Navajo.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

On this rock I build a church: Old Mission Church, Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico pictured in 1873 where the Zuni people of North have lived for millennia. O'Sullivan was famous for not trying to romanticise the native American plight or way of life in his photographs and instead of asking them to wear tribal dress was happy to photograph them wearing denim jeans.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

9. Native Americans: Boat crew of the 'Picture' at Diamond Creek. Photo shows photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, fourth from left, with fellow members of the Wheeler survey and Native Americans, following ascent of the Colorado River through the Black Canyon in 1871. O'Sullivan's work during Lt. George M. Wheeler's survey west of the One Hundredth Meridian in Black Canyon has been called some of the greatest photography of the 19th century and a clear inspiration for that other great American photographer Ansel Adams.



Landscape: Browns Park, Colorado, as seen by Timothy O'Sullivan in 1872 as he chartered the landscape for the first time. Historians have noted that even though the photographer had become a more-than-experienced explorer at this point, the ordeals of the Wheeler survey tested him to the extremes of his endurance



Rockies: A man sits on a shore beside the Colorado River in Iceberg Canyon, on the border of Mojave County, Arizona, and Clark County, Nevada in 1871 during the Wheeler expedition. Lieutenant Wheeler insisted that the team explore the Colorado River by going upstream into the Grand Canyon--apparently to beat a rival, who had first gone downriver in 1869. There was no particular scientific reason to do the trip backward.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Timothy O'Sullivan's darkroom wagon, pulled by four mules, entered the frame at the right side of the photograph, reached the center of the image, and abruptly U-turned, heading back out of the frame. Footprints leading from the wagon toward the camera reveal the photographer's path. Made at the Carson Sink in Nevada, this image of shifting sand dunes reveals the patterns of tracks recently reconfigured by the wind. The wagon's striking presence in this otherwise barren scene dramatises the pioneering experience of exploration and discovery in the wide, uncharted landscapes of the American West.



Industrial revolution: The mining town of Gold Hill, just south of Virginia City, Nevada, in 1867 was town whose prosperity was preserved by mining a rare silver ore called Comstock Lode. On the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel, Clarence King insisted that his men dress for dinner every evening and speak French, and O'Sullivan had no difficulty fitting in.



Early rails: A wooden balanced incline used for gold mining, at the Illinois Mine in the Pahranaagat Mining District, Nevada in 1871. An ore car would ride on parallel tracks connected to a pulley wheel at the top of tracks. Because of his work in U.S Civil War of 1861 to 1865, the organisers of the two geological surveys that he photographed knew that O'Sullivan was made of stern stuff and therefore could cope with the rigors of life outdoors far from home



Silver mining: Here photographer Timothy O'Sullivan documents the activities of the Savage and the Gould and Curry mines in Virginia City, Nevada, in 1867 900ft underground, lit by an improvised flash -- a burning magnesium wire, O'Sullivan photographed the miners in tunnels, shafts, and lifts. During the winter of 1867-68, in Virginia City, Nevada, he took the first underground mining pictures in America. Deep in mines where temperatures reached 130 degrees, O'Sullivan took pictures by the light of magnesium wire in difficult circumstances



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Untouched landscape: The head of Canyon de Chelly, looking past walls that rise some 1,200 feet above the canyon floor, in Arizona in 1873. Inspiring millions of amateur photographers, O'Sullivan's first pivotal Canyon de Chelly pictures, with his views of Indian life and his New Mexican churches are now the archetypal images of Arizona



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Barren: Two men sit looking at headlands north of the Colorado River Plateau in 1872. As they sailed upstream into the Grand Canyon, the team commanded by Lieutenant Wheeler used three boats and O'Sullivan commanded one named 'Picture'. During the voyage, 'Picture' was lost along with hundreds of O'Sullivan's negatives and food



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Portrait: Native American (Paiute) men, women and children pose for a picture near a tree. The picture is thought to have been taken in Cottonwood Springs (Washoe County), Nevada, in 1875. Known for his dispassionate views towards native Americans on his travels, O'Sullivan was more interested in photographing the true lifestyles of the indigenous people and not a preconceived image that those back east had. Never asking any native American to change his or her dress, O'Sullivan's portraits are noted for their simplicity and truth



Natural U.S. landscape: The junction of Green and Yampah Canyons, in Utah, in 1872. O'Sullivan has been described as the right person who was there at the right time as he managed to document the re-birth of the nation through war in the early 1860's and then managed to be at the nexus of the great wave of exploration and migration westwards as the United States assumed what it thought to be its manifest destiny

Poraqvipazo el Alfexes
Joseph de Payba Basconzelos
el año que trujo el Cavildo, del
Reyno a su costa a 18 de feb.
de 1726 Años =



© Timothy O'Sullivan

An earlier visitor: Nearly 150 years ago, photographer O'Sullivan came across this evidence of a visitor to the West that preceded his own expedition by another 150 years - A Spanish inscription from 1726. This close-up view of the inscription carved in the sandstone at Inscription Rock (El Morro National Monument), New Mexico reads, in English: "By this place passed Ensign Don Joseph de Payba Basconzelos, in the year in which he held the Council of the Kingdom at his expense, on the 18th of February, in the year 1726"



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Insight: Aboriginal life among the Navajo Indians. Near old Fort Defiance, New Mexico, in 1873. With this simple picture of the Navajo Indians, O'Sullivan managed to capture the domesticity of a dying people as wave after wave of migration snuffed out their way of life. It is noticeable that there is nothing romantic about the pictures and one profile of Timothy O'Sullivan described these scenes as of 'a defeated people trying their best to put back together a life.'



Incredible backdrop: The Canyon of Lodore, Colorado, in 1872. After O'Sullivan spent one last season with Clarence King in 1872, he returned back to Washington D.C to marry Laura Pywell in E Street Baptist Church, although his parents thoughts on this non-Catholic marriage went unrecorded



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Settlement: View of the White House, Ancestral Pueblo Native American (Anasazi) ruins in Canyon de Chelly, Arizona, in 1873. The cliff dwellings were built by the Anasazi more than 500 years earlier. At the bottom, men stand and pose on cliff dwellings in a niche and on ruins on the canyon floor. Climbing ropes connect the groups of men. Anthropologists and archeologists place the Anasazi peoples of Native American culture on the continent from the 12th Century BC. Their unique architecture incorporated 'Great Houses' which averaged up to 200 rooms and could take in up to 700



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Sailing away: The Nettie, an expedition boat on the Truckee River, western Nevada, in 1867. This was the river that O'Sullivan almost died in and according to the magazine Harper's 'Being a swimmer of no ordinary power, he succeeded in reaching the shore... he was carried a hundred yards down the rapids...The sharp rocks...had so cut and bruised his body that he was glad to crawl into the brier tangle that fringed the river's brink.' He is also supposed to have lost three hundred dollars worth of gold pieces during the accident too



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Taking a dip: A man bathing in Pagosa Hot Spring, Colorado, in 1874. Coming to the end of his adventures, O'Sullivan returned to Washington to live with his wife Laura and worked as a commercial photographer for Lieutenant Wheeler. In 1876, he buried his only child who was stillborn and it is thought that O'Sullivan buried the baby himself.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

A man sits in a wooden boat with a mast on the edge of the Colorado River in the Black Canyon, Mojave County, Arizona. Photo taken in 1871, from an expedition camp, looking upstream. At this time, photographer Timothy O'Sullivan was working as a military photographer for Lt. George Montague Wheeler's U.S. Geographical Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian.



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Native: Maiman, a Mojave Indian, guide and interpreter during a portion of the season in the Colorado country, in 1871. It has been observed that 30 years before Edward S Curtis began his famous study of native American's dying way of life, O'Sullivan was working without prejudice within the field of his photographic art. Trying to capture the everyday aspects of life for the indigenous people's of North America, O'Sullivan did not use a studio to capture imagery of native Americans, like many other photographers were at the time



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Valley view: Alta City, Little Cottonwood, Utah, in 1873. O'Sullivan's amazing eye and work ethic allowed him to compose photographs that evoked the vastness of the West that future generations would come to recognise in the work of Ansel Adams and in the films of John Houston



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Remarkable landscape: Cathedral Mesa, Colorado River, Arizona in 1871. O'Sullivan's second expedition employer, Lieutenant George Wheeler, 'was just interested in knowing what kind of fuss the Indians would put up,' according to a profile in the Tucson Weekly and the photographs were used to grease the wheels of expansion westwards



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Mountains: Big Cottonwood Canyon, Utah, in 1869. A man can be seen with his horse at the bottom near the bridge (right). As people in the east came to see O'Sullivan's photographs the legend of the pioneering west as a land of limitless opportunity even for Americans came to form.



Rock formations in the Washakie Badlands, Wyoming, in 1872. A survey member stands at lower right for scale. Tragically, O'Sullivan's health declined after the death of his boy and he contracted tuberculosis. His wife Laura died from the same disease in 1881.



Tree-mendous: Oak Grove, White Mountains, Sierra Blanca, Arizona in 1873. In 1881, O'Sullivan returned to his parent's home in Staten Island where he died from tuberculosis. Seen as an irony as he had survived some of the most inhospitable conditions known to man beforehand, such as Death valley and the Grand Canyon



Shoshone Falls, Idaho near present-day Twin Falls, Idaho, is 212 feet high, and flows over a rim 1,000 feet wide. It is pictured in 1868. These were some of the first iconic pictures of the western expeditions that O'Sullivan took on the United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel. They were also one of the last places he photographed before he returned home to the East Coast and Washington D.C



© Timothy O'Sullivan

Rocky: The south side of Inscription Rock (now El Morro National Monument), in New Mexico in 1873. The prominent feature stands near a small pool of water, and has been a resting place for travellers for centuries. Since at least the 17th century, natives, Europeans, and later American pioneers carved names and messages into the rock face as they paused. In 1906, a law was passed, prohibiting further carving.



Very plain landscape: A distant view of Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1873. Santa Fe is one of the oldest continually inhabited places in North America. Thought to have been settled by native American's in around 1050 AD, the city has grown into one of the most prosperous in New Mexico and the Southwestern United States

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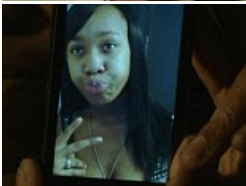
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I spent almost three years in the U.S. Mostly in California, also Oregon and Washington. Never and I mean NEVER did I hear a nasty statement about the British or our country. -

kaitlin, london, 25/5/2012 22:27////////////////////Thank you, Kaitlin. I don't get it, either. I always thought of the US as a relative of Britain. :)

- [bannie](#) , California, USA, 26/5/2012 03:00

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It still looks like this in the west, save for the garb.

- [Bob](#) , Rio Rancho, NM, Non United States of America, 26/5/2012 02:44

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Hey Buster, Go pound Sand

- [Dee](#) , Las Vegas, NV, 26/5/2012 02:28

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FYI: The Navajo are not dying out. And a lot of your commenters are clueless. Beautiful photos however. Thank you for posting them.

- [tioedong](#) , Gapan City Philippines, 26/5/2012 01:53

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Absolutely gorgeous, striking. Ansel Adams did indeed study this work but I can't say he improved on it. To Shirley: I don't know when or how you have driven coast to coast , but along I-40 but there are no "hours" without signs of humanity--the longest stretch between exits is only 28 miles. You cite " US 40, " which begins in Atlantic City and ends in Utah, but that road goes down every pig lane and through every crossroad in the heartland. Densely peopled, in other words. Five percent of the total land in the U.S. is developed. Only 11% of the contiguous U.S. is state or federal park or forest land. 504 million acres fall under DOI, BIA, USDA, but these also contain oil wells, mines,& gas leases. Before you spout "facts," check them to avoid sounding so misinformed.

- [Lynn](#) , Dallas, Texas, USA, 25/5/2012 23:52

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Wonderful views of the west. Very impressed by the old photos and just how much of the west is largely unchanged and how much some of the west has changed so much. Delightful ,Thanks!

- [DAVE MILLION](#) , Stratford , ON,Canada., 25/5/2012 23:37

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You know, folks, every time DM prints one of these sorts of articles, it gets everyone started up. We ARE cousins, we ARE allies, and there is much about both countries to admire - and some to be embarassed about as well. But it's part of our histories, and we need to accept that - not get defensive and feel apologetic for what happened. Countries have warred and conquered, and reconquered, one another since time immemorial.....all our British cousins please remember that when we were a colony and being so rebellious we were simply being very British! The Stamp Act was not something we were going to take lying down - just we had learned from being bred and raised in Britain.....it should come as no surprise to any Brit that all those colonies went independent - Britain is the cradle of modern democratic thought.

- [LeAnne](#) , Suisun, CA, USA, 25/5/2012 23:09

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Here's a little perspective when considering the fate of the Indians. One of the photos shows Navajo Indians. The main Navajo reservation is 27,000 square miles in size. As a comparison, Scotland is 30,000 square miles in size. The reservations are not squalid hell holes, they have among them many of the most beautiful places on earth.

- [jim](#) , san juan capistrano california USA, 25/5/2012 22:48

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A good record of the lands stolen by incomers from the natives - America belongs to the native tribes - give it back to them - jim, Daventry Distric Council.....Here's an idea, Jim. How about if everyone of British and Irish ancestry gives their property to the Indians and moves back to the UK and Ireland? Can I stay at your place until I get settled, since my ancestor's property was taken by some English chaps?

- [Dave](#) , Los Angeles USA, 25/5/2012 22:39

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Beautiful country trashed by the white man. You are now charged a fee to see the last small remnants of wilderness. - Gus, Brighton uk, 25/5/2012 13:25.....LOLOLOL!!!!

Last SMALL remnants of wilderness? Are you KIDDING me???? There are over 300 milion of us and this country is 80% EMPTY federal land and COMPLETELY wild. Even driving on US HWY 40 (that cuts completely across the country) you can travel for HOURS without seeing any sign of humanity except the road you're on.

- [Shirley](#) , Virginia, USA, 25/5/2012 22:38

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