

Same Ground: Chasing Family Down the California Gold Rush Trail

Russell Wangersky

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In *Same Ground*, Russell Wangersky searches for family and belonging along the trail of the California gold rush.

In 1849, William Castle Dodge gave up training to become a lawyer to travel to California and join the gold rush. Anticipating the adventure of a lifetime, he kept a diary to chronicle his experiences. More than a century later, that diary ended up in the hands of Dodge's great-great-grandson, Russell Wangersky.

Born in the United States and raised in Canada, Wangersky always felt like an outsider among his American relatives. In search of a family connection across the ages, he decided to trace Dodge's steps, from Wisconsin to California. He used Dodge's diary as his travel guide.

Between the parallel stories of Dodge, a young man bent on adventure, and Wangersky, his searching descendant, the book travels across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. It's a story of family, belonging, and roots, in which the frontier experience is juxtaposed with the fate of Native Americans—who, after fighting for their right to remain on their ancestral lands, are just about erased from their own history.

Wangersky dedicates one chapter to each major stop on Dodge's trip, switching back and forth across state lines that, in 1849, were only just coming into existence. As his travels progress, Dodge's tone changes from excited and naïve to taut and jaded: people around him either die or give up in increasing numbers. Wangersky's experience mirrors that of his ancestor: he encounters the vastness of the American West in a car with a tire that is leaking air, and encounters towns that were recently abandoned.

Same Ground is an American travel odyssey that chronicles the birth and demise of the American dream in the West.

ERIKA HARLITZ KERN (September / October 2022)

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