

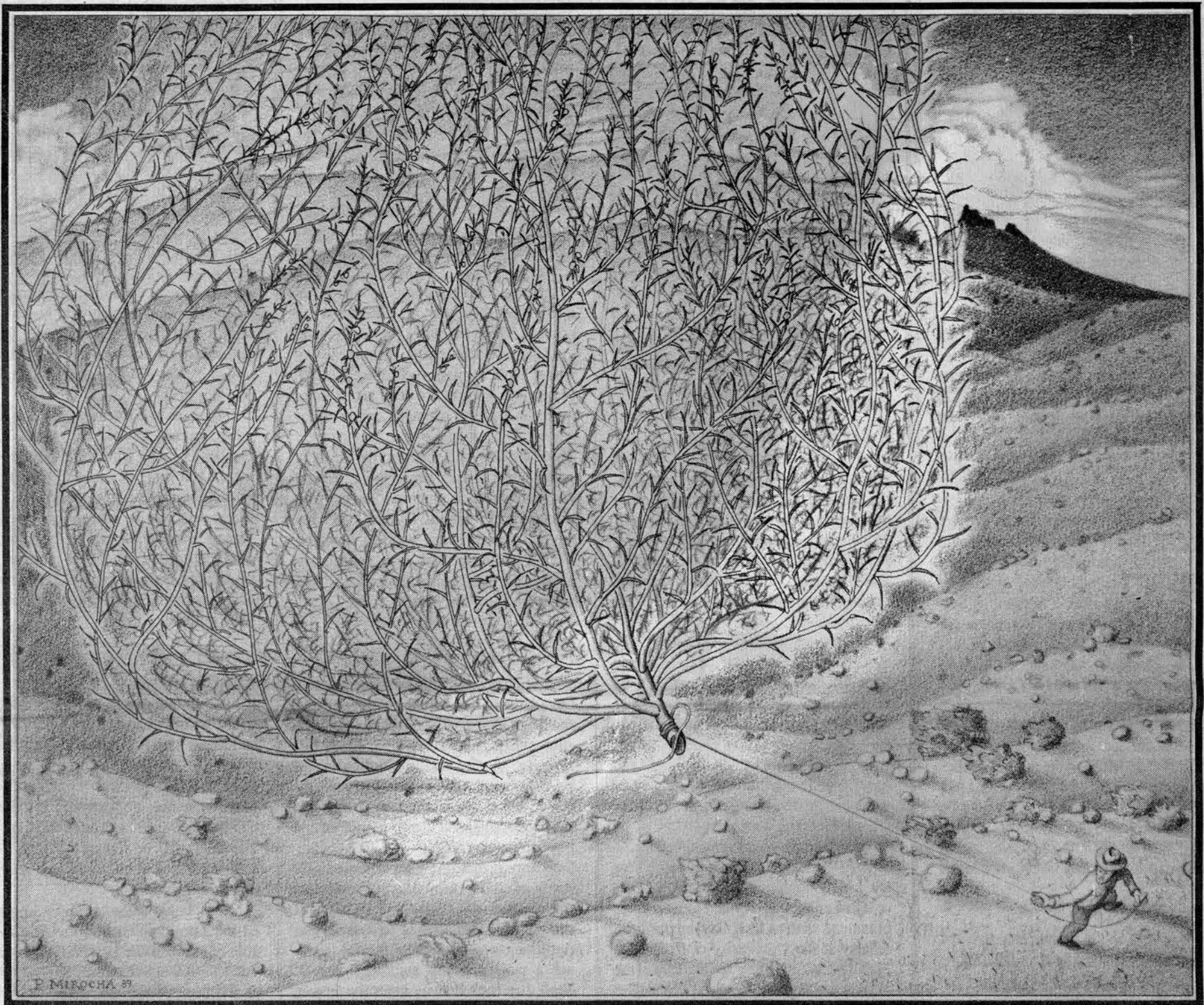
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TUMBLEWEEDS TRIUMPHANT

How the Russians conquered the West

by Ray Ring

Sky clear, westerly breeze. A fine day to be out flying tumbleweeds. I've come equipped with fishing rod and reel, highest line, leather gloves, sun hat and shades and, most important, the crazy belief it can be done.

Could be that someday I'll be remembered as the originator of the West's quintessential sport, or more likely, as just another fool, but I've scouted the perfect site for finding out — one of the subdivisions scraped into the desert foothills outside Tucson, where hundreds, thousands of tumbleweeds have sprung up on the cleared land, broken loose of their roots and piled up against the ranks of houses and fences. Atop a hill where the breeze is more energetic I

round up three choice specimens: a small, a medium and a large — prickly monsters that can only be handled safely with the gloves — that'll give me some good baseline data on tumbleweed aerodynamics.

My rod — a fly rod, what else? — is six feet long, graphite-core, medium action: a more limber rod might snap; a stiffer one would rob me of the sporting feel, or so I imagine, because there are no experts to consult, no manuals on the finer points or even the basics of how to fly tumbleweeds.

No hook necessary, I just tie off around the stalk of the medium tumbleweed, lift and the rod comes alive, quivering, bending sharply at the tip — got a tumbleweed on the line, and it wants to go, now, even in the little wind it angles out sideways free of the ground, tugging,

trying to fly. It just might, I admit. I break loose into a sprint against the wind, rod over my shoulder, playing out line as the tumbleweed bobs behind and strains to take off.

I'm laughing, gasping, running so fast down the street that I lose my sunglasses and hat, and people driving by are swerving at the spectacle — what do they know?

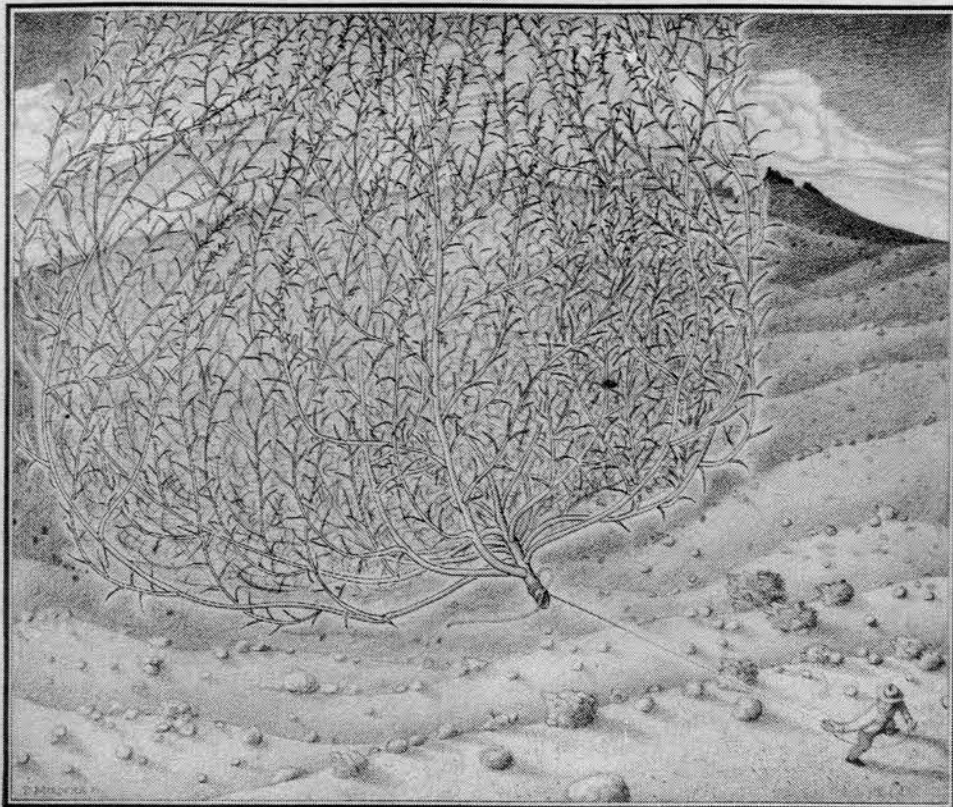
So out of proportion to its size is the weight of the big plant that it will lightly fly in the air during a hard gale. Children in the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho and Utah find tumbleweed a splendid late-fall playfellow. Two big weeds are harnessed to a string, and in front of a wind they go hurtling down the street

'driven' by shrieking, happy boys and girls. At other times, the weed becomes a kite, attached to a long cord dangling from a fish pole.

— *Scientific American*,
in 1919, on tumbleweeds

When it comes to weirdness in the natural world, the tumbleweed has to be right up there. This bit of freaky biology run amok has inspired everything from sport to mythology to gourmet cooking. So maybe it's fitting that the tumbleweed has come to symbolize the American West.

We Westerners live in the region of the surreal, of contorted cactus and
(Continued on page 10)



*Balls of tumbleweeds
stuck against fences, got covered
in blowing sand, and created
ramps for the cattle to walk
to freedom, or at least into the
neighboring field.*

Tumble...

(Continued from page 1)

glowing canyon walls and the apparent hallucinations of Lake Powell and a green-lawned Phoenix in the desert, but tumbleweeds?

Just look at them: roly-poly, dried-out, brittle blobs blowing about the landscape like oversized, on-the-loose, punk-rock hairdos. You want to ask, how did this happen?

A good question, forcing some ecological confessions and abject surrender to irony. Because for all the tumbleweeds blowing through just about every Western movie and Western novel, and all the cowboy songs and poetry and paintings and placemats and postcards and et ceteras from Arizona to Idaho depicting tumbleweeds as distinctly Western, they don't belong here. A little more than a hundred years ago, the entire West was distinctly tumbleweed-less.

"It's basically the same story line as a *Star Trek* episode — an alien life form" taking over, says James A. Young, one of our most devoted (and only a little mad) tumbleweed scientists.

An alarmed citizenry has labeled tumbleweed as Russian thistle, roly-poly, Russian cactus, Nevada barbed wire and the wind witch, but it's Young, a research leader in landscape ecology out of the federal agricultural station in Reno, Nev., who first started talking about, in partly-mock terror, "The Weed That Won The West."

Place a (tumbleweed) in each schoolhouse, so that the pupils may become familiar with it ... Teach them to kill it as they would a rattlesnake.

— bulletin circulated in the West, 1895

Researchers divide Western history exactly into two very different ages: B.T. (Before Tumbleweed) and A.T. (You get the idea).

They point to the exact place where the old age ended and the new age began, and to the culprits: A few peasant farmers who ran out of opportunity in the steppes of the Russian Ukraine, and imagined a better world on the windswept prairie of Bonhomme County, South Dakota. It was spring 1873. The new arrivals got busy doing their thing, planting crops — and making one of the all-time ecological blunders.

Lurking by mistake somewhere in their sacks of flax seed from back home were seeds of another and far less desirable plant: *salsola kali*, a.k.a. *salsola pestifera*, *salsola iberica*, or just plain old tumbleweed, which lost no time taking root.

Literally from that moment on, the accidentally introduced tumbleweed spread through the West like — well, like white men. It had evolved to dominate the arid lands of southern Russia, Siberia and Afghanistan (which some researchers believe is the plant's original prehistorical homeland) and was ideally suited for a regional takeover here.

Able to thrive on almost no moisture, grow up to six feet in diameter or larger in a few months and then, once dead, break free of its roots and go drifting, rolled along by the wind, dropping seeds as it goes — the tumbleweed won the West in a hurry from that small and localized invasion.

Other weeds both foreign and domestic have had success tumbling, but not as much as Russian thistle — this is the tumbleweed, by now spread around the world from China to Argentina, Norway to Australia. Each tangle is geometrically designed to roll almost without effort while protecting its dried flowers

and steadily dispersing up to 200,000 seeds that can germinate in as little time as 36 minutes, inspiring yet another not-very-fond nickname in American scientific literature: "The Fastest Sprout in the West."

Spreading out from South Dakota, creating bristly, inhospitable jungles, clogging streams and irrigation ditches, piling up against any obstruction, tumbleweeds seemed to possess a special plant genius for screwing things up.

Giant balls of it blew into fields of crops and made harvesting difficult or impossible. Tangles collected in deep drifts against houses and other buildings, blocking access and creating fire hazards. During wildfires, rolling balls ignited and blew far ahead of the advancing flames, speeding the blaze. Still more balls of tumbleweed stuck against fences, got covered in blowing sand and created ramps for the cattle to walk to freedom, or at least into the neighboring field.

By 1953, more than a thousand miles south of where our trouble began, a tumbleweed emergency was declared in Texas, when, according to *American City Magazine*, "these picturesque prairie travelers threatened to engulf parts of Midland ... In many instances tumbleweed reached the eaves of the houses." Midland city crews suspended trash collection for two days and hauled 250 truckloads of tumbleweeds to the dump, where they were burned. There's no record of any victory dance — every new gust sent still more tumbleweeds rolling in.

By 1977, trying to eradicate tumbleweed from its roadsides, California alone was spending more than \$500,000 annually just to keep the pesky critters from blowing into all those speeding BMWs. You could almost hear the tumbleweeds snickering.

The problem is ... once a tumbleweed grows and starts rolling, it's very difficult to tell whose tumbleweed it is.

— a city councilman in Sierra Vista, Ariz., on the difficulty of enforcing an anti-tumbleweed ordinance.

Around the West, people up to their hips or higher in tumbleweeds have tried burning, mashing, discing, poisoning and even loosing moths against the plants. Nothing has worked.

Tumbleweed is actually a poor plant competitor — its strategy is to invade ground that's already been disturbed by agriculture, grazing, construction or more extreme means.

"Guess what?" says Young. "The first species that invaded the above-ground nuclear-blast sites in Nevada was tumbleweed."

So more than anything, tumbleweed is a symptom of a degraded environment in the West (see accompanying story). There seems to be a direct relationship — as the condition of the land worsens, the tumbleweed also gets worse, as illustrated by the history of the struggle against tumbleweeds in the southern Arizona desert.

Until a decade or so ago, Tucson's city crews and residents fought isolated skirmishes against whatever tumbleweeds happened to blow into town. But there was a major escalation when the city started buying farm land in the Avra Valley to the west, so the ground water could be pumped out. Without water the crops disappeared, and the tumbleweeds conquered.

"I think most people picture a couple of tumbleweeds blowing along ... I'm

talking about a field that could be a square mile so dense with (growing) tumbleweeds that it looks like somebody planted it — you don't even see the soil surface," says Martin Karpiscak, another only-slightly-mad tumbleweed scientist (his mailbox at the University of Arizona's Office of Arid Lands Studies has attracted at least one letter addressed simply to "Dr. Tumbleweeds").

Acting on complaints from surrounding farmers and residents — or rather, farmers and residents surrounded by tumbleweeds — the city tried various unsuccessful countermeasures such as importing moths from Pakistan (*Coleophora parthenica*) that had evolved along with the tumbleweed, and were supposed to chomp enough of the plants to keep the population under control. But the moths, also given a try elsewhere in the West, couldn't eat fast enough, says Karpiscak, to keep up with the tumbleweed over here.

Tucson's least ineffective plot was to form a crack anti-tumbleweed patrol that remains active much of the year.

"We've got two tractors with 14-foot-wide flails (to beat down the tumbleweeds) in constant use, summer, fall and early winter," says George Parker, property manager for the city, who estimates the tumbleweed war is being waged on 10,000 to 12,000 acres in the Avra Valley. "It's tough, just when you think you're ahead of the game..."

Around Arizona, anti-tumbleweed patrols do battle, often on vacant land and roadsides that are continually reseeded as tumbleweeds pile up along fences. "When it gets windy, we get a lot (of tumbleweeds) moving through," says Nick Kollar, greenskeeper at the Bisbee Municipal Golf Course, where, as at many other courses, tumbleweeds are mashed in the rough. Not that golfers have to play through the blowing tumbleweeds — "it's more like they're dodging 'em with their golf carts."

Probably nowhere in Arizona does the tumbleweed loom larger than in Sierra Vista, a city of 30,000 where delinquent blobs as big as cars roll down the main street, Fry Boulevard, causing smash-ups and amazed eye-rubbing. "I get a lot of calls on tumbleweeds," says Mayor Carl Frieders, who's gone out himself with a pitchfork to clear away the alien intruders.

In some Sierra Vista neighborhoods, at times the blowing tumbleweeds "fill up the yards, wall to wall and up to the roofs" of the houses, says the mayor. City crews do rescue missions, clearing doorways so people can get in and out of their houses. They also aided a nursing home where "the tumbleweeds were blowing directly into the front and back, and stacking up pretty high."

Desperate taxpayers shelled out \$50,000 last year to fund an anti-tumbleweed patrol of their own, and struggled with a tough ordinance that makes it illegal to allow tumbleweeds to grow — or even collect — on any private land in Sierra Vista.

As in other Western towns, the ordinance has led to complications. "We've had several cases," says public works superintendent John Taylor, "where the poor person who calls up and says, 'my neighbor's tumbleweed rolled into my yard' gets the ticket, or the warning."

Seeem them tumbling down,
Pledg-ing their love to the ground,
Lone-ly but free I'll be found,
Drift-ing along with the tumbling
tumbleweeds...

I'lll keep tolling along,
Deeeep in my heart is a song,
Heeere on the range I belong.

Drift-ing along with the tumbling tumbleweeds... Tu-u-m-ble-weeds.

Cowboy crooner and old-time movie star Rex Allen Sr. is singing over the telephone from his tumbleweed-infested ranch outside Sonoita, Ariz. He's singing the Western classic, "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" — evidence of how the plant, even while it's been battled, has generated much romance.

The song was written as a poem in 1927 by Bob Nolan, who lived in Tucson around that time and then drifted like a tumbleweed to Southern California, where he made the original "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" recording in 1934 with Slye Leonard (who became somewhat better-known under his stage name of Roy Rogers) and their fellow founding members of the Beatles of Western music, the Sons of the Pioneers. "I've

done 10 songs in all (featuring tumbleweeds)," drawls Allen, "and this is the biggest."

Tumbling Tumbleweeds? "Hell, everybody did it. There's probably been 200 records, at least, done of it, in every language on Earth," Allen says. Gene Autry sung it in the movie *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* in 1935; Bing Crosby made it a best-seller in 1940; Rogers and Autry both did encores for later films — helping Nolan to be recognized now, in places like *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, as "one of the greatest country-music songwriters." That's Western music, mister, and smile when you say it.

"The tumbleweed just symbolizes the cowboy's attitude in life," says Tom Chambers, cowboy singer and president of the Western Music Association, founded a few months ago in Tucson to emphasize the differences between country and Western music — Western music is not about stepping out, prisons and

crying into booze, it's about the open range and tumbleweeds.

"The cowboy is not tied down, he's just tumbling, tumbling along. (Like the tumbleweed) he's just a part of nature, short-lived, and he requires harmony with nature to give him freedom. Without the wind, the tumbleweed is just a dead Russian thistle," Chambers says. "The tumbleweed sums up life in the West ... They die with their thistles on."

Despite all his crooning praises, Rex Allen Sr. eventually got fed up with tumbleweeds: "I've sung about 'em and burned 'em and cut 'em and I'm not fond of 'em. I have a man one whole day in the spring come in and clear 'em out of my place. Oh God yeah, they're horrible when they grow up. If you're on a horse and one blows under it, more guys got bucked off that way. They're no friend of the cowboy."

The tumbleweed must touch something deep inside us, but it's had help. Allen recalls how movie crews shooting

early Westerns would collect tumbleweeds off the range and stash them beside the big wind machines, so they could be blown across the scenes, on cue.

Propaganda, says another probably-not-too-mad tumbleweed scientist, Jim Hageman at New Mexico State University: "The first evidence of tumbleweeds making it to New Mexico isn't until 1894. They probably got to Arizona about then, too. So most of these Westerns can't be right." During the unsettled frontier era in much of the West, tumbleweeds weren't even here yet.

Even more ironical, as the tumbleweed became tied in with Western myth — so the mere sight or mention of one tumbling along evokes the image of wide-open spaces and liberty — it was flourishing not in natural settings, but only where land had been torn up and depleted of native vegetation. The tumbleweed really symbolizes failing farm-

(Continued on page 12)

Tumbleweeds: evidence of felonious assaults on land

Few people realize that when they look at the landscape of the West, even on expanses of seemingly natural, open land stretching to the horizon, they're seeing something altogether different than what was here a mere 100 years ago.

"It's probably the number one problem we have in managing natural resources," says James Young, a landscape ecologist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's research station in Reno, Nev. "People have the idea they're looking at a pristine environment."

The reality is, invading plants — of which the tumbleweed known as Russian thistle is only one of many examples — have dramatically reshaped the appearance and condition of the Western landscape in a very short time, and often for the worse.

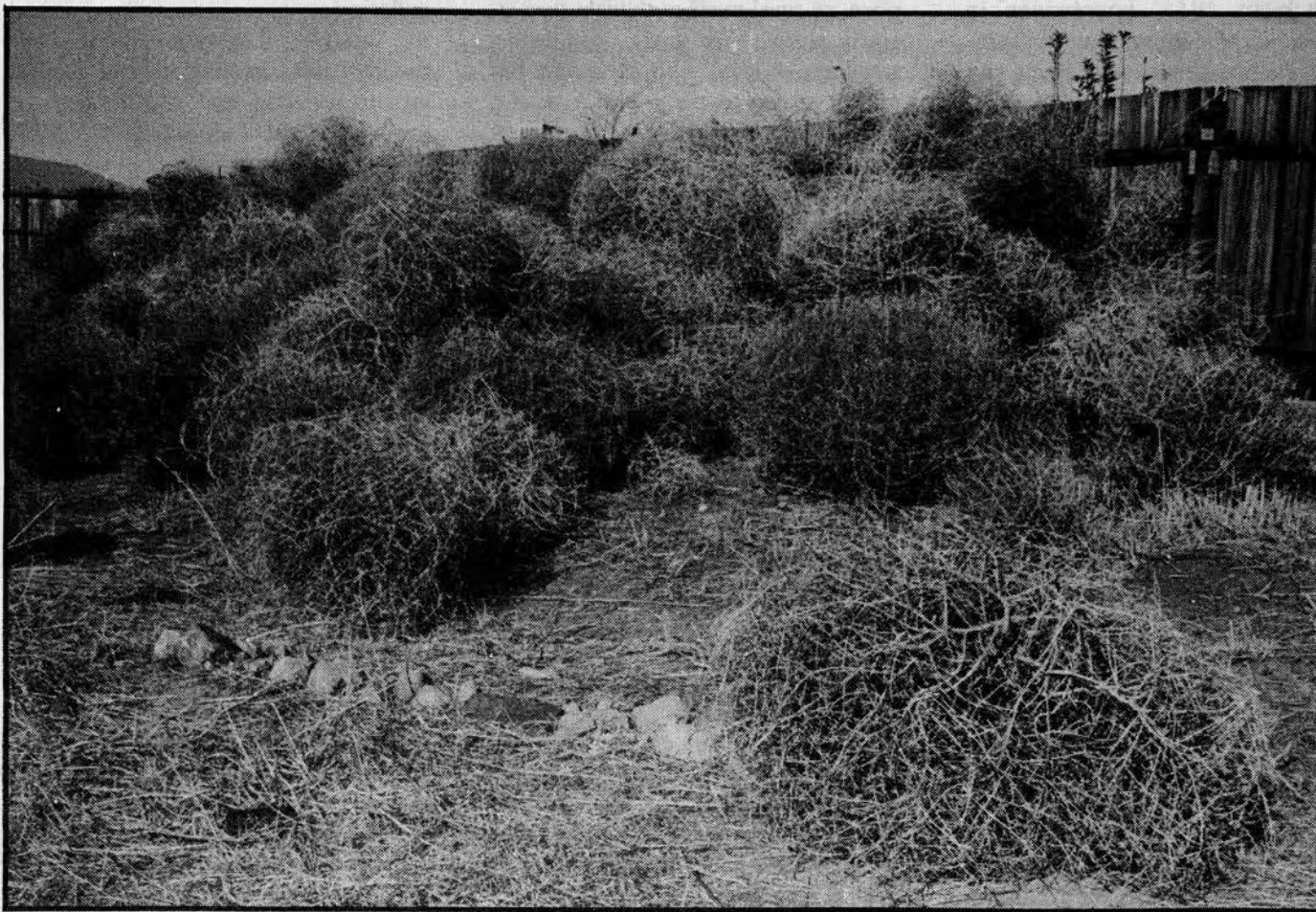
The invaders tend to be aggressive, "weedy" species that crowd out native plants or occupy their ecological niches, and the ultimate responsibility often lies in land-degrading practices such as marginal farming, overgrazing and development of sensitive lands.

Ironically, as some researchers have noted, probably no single force was more destructive than the series of homestead acts (1862, 1909, 1912 and 1916), which had the good intention to offer settlers a start in the region. The acts encouraged farms and ranches in marginal locations, where conditions were arid and the soil poor. Once the native vegetation was stripped or trampled, many of these marginal operations quickly failed, leaving the ground ready for invading weeds.

Some of the most common plants in the West today are invaders from central Asia: crested wheatgrass, halogen and cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*) — which, as Young has written with fellow researcher Raymond Evans, "revolutionized plant succession on millions of acres of degraded rangelands. The seedlings of native perennial grasses were virtually excluded from the environment by the advent of this aggressive annual grass."

Native grasses such as Indian rice grass and basin wild rye, Young says, "used to grow up to the stirrups" of riders in the Great Basin, and have suffered greatly.

Other invaders, sometimes preferring land in towns, include Canadian thistle (*Cirsium arvense*, from Eurasia); crabgrass (*Digitaria sanguinalis*, from



March of the tumbleweeds through Tucson, Arizona

Europe); barnyard grass (*Echinochloa crusgalli*, from Eurasia); plantain (from Europe); pigweed (*Chenopodium album*, from Eurasia); cocklebur (*Xanthium pennsylvanicum*, from Eurasia and Central America); curly dock (*Rumex crispus*, from Europe); dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*, from Asia); chickweed (*Stellaria media* from Europe); white, purple and red clovers (from Europe); and Jimson weed (*Datura stramonium*, from India or the tropics).

Without human interference, tumbleweed itself (Russian thistle) is all but unable to compete with native vegetation. The root emerging from its germinated seed is unable to penetrate the soil unless the surface has been disturbed. In a natural setting, a prairie dog digging around here or there might provide an opening, but that's nothing compared to the disturbance of an entire region by ranchers and farmers.

Tumbleweed "is a symptom of degraded rangelands — 75 years of (historical) overgrazing" by cattle and sheep created its niche, says Young. "I call it the grand experiment. We raised holy hell with the rangelands, we created a void in the environment and voids don't

exist for very long. They were rapidly filled by plant invaders."

Without abusive grazing to speed its spread, Young says, "tumbleweed would have been a tiny part of the natural environment."

Much of the blame for the spread of tumbleweed, most researchers agree, falls on failed farmers rather than overreaching ranchers. Farm land that's been "retired" and left fallow is the "ideal" place for tumbleweeds to take hold, says researcher Martin Karpiscak at the University of Arizona's Office of Arid Lands Studies. "If it wasn't for poor farming practices, tumbleweeds wouldn't have spread."

Around the West, tumbleweed continues to thrive as more farms are abandoned because of marginal conditions, the inflation of energy costs for pumping irrigation water, inadequate crop prices, or because water tables have fallen or water rights have been purchased by cities or industries.

"These have all exacerbated problems for the farmer," Karpiscak says, and "tumbleweed takes advantage of these idle areas."

Tumbleweed will take over an aban-

doned farm within two years, growing three feet high and as thick as a lawn, Karpiscak says. In some fields he's been studying, where Tucson city crews have battled tumbleweed for 13 years, the plants are still a problem. "It'll probably take many, many years before it's eliminated," he says, "if ever."

Often the invading plants are the only sign of historical abuses. The Great Basin, for instance, was largely dominated by huge, introduced herds of domestic sheep until the industry "crashed" after World War II, says Young. Now the sheep are mostly gone, but the invading plants they helped establish remain.

"The young range manager or rancher going out today, he's dealing with an environment shaped by grazing that doesn't even exist anymore," Young says.

"It's a difficult thing to understand — the temporal quality of land management. We've caused a lot of these subtle changes that we don't really understand." And because the ecosystem never remains in a freeze-frame, but is constantly remixing, "the final chapter isn't written yet."

— Ray Ring

Tumble...

(Continued from page 11)

ers and overcrowded livestock and developments like railroads, roads and subdivisions.

I never expected to see tumbleweed displayed as an objet d'art ... From the rusted iron tumbleweed sculpture over the entrance to the genuine tumbleweed inside, the cow-country theme is sounded with wit and style.

— from a review of the chic Hollywood eatery, the Tumbleweed Cafe, in an issue of *Gourmet* magazine



A tumbleweed fence-jam

Once it got to the point that tumbleweeds were clinging to everything on out to the horizon, we started to wonder if maybe there wasn't some good use for the darn things.

Back in 1955, housewives in Roswell, N.M., rounded up tumbleweeds, dipped them in oil paint and made "party decorations" and (with the addition of a few cockleburs) dinner-table "arrangements." "Thus," *Collier's* magazine observed, "the humblest of outdoor plants becomes an interior delight."

Since then, artists and hucksters alike have gotten into sculpting tumbleweeds. Some deal by the semi-truckload in tumbleweeds that have been stuck together and pruned into recognizable shapes like snowmen and Christmas trees. Others fashion creations like the "witty and stylish" iron tumbleweed that shares space with trendy Californians who are drinking coffee out of glass cowboy boots at the Tumbleweed Cafe.

Perhaps a little more pragmatically, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the University of Arizona's Office of Arid Lands Studies once threw itself into an effort to develop tumbleweeds into an alternative energy source — grinding up and compressing acres of them into fire-place logs and fuel pellets for power plants.

Using a variety of commercial farm equipment, researchers discovered that a field of tumbleweeds resembled in some ways a field of alfalfa, able to support two or three harvests in a growing season, yielding a total of six tons an acre. And most interesting, pound for pound, tumbleweed contained roughly the same amount of thermal energy as wood.

"Things were looking really good," says Karpiscak, mentioning the one

problem with the 10,000 so-called "Tumblelogs" that were produced and distributed for home burning: While one-third of the people who tried the logs thought they smelled nice in the fireplace, an equal number thought they literally stunk. "We were considering scenic (the logs) with something like pine or oak, so people would think of it as wood."

After spending about \$150,000 in federal and state funds, Arid Lands had to abandon the project when the price of more conventional fuels plummeted and undercut tumbleweeds. "With oil at \$40 a barrel, tumbleweed looks good as an energy source," says Karpiscak. "At \$20 a barrel, it doesn't."

Still, Karpiscak sees a future in the idea. "When you burn fossil fuels, you release carbon that's been removed from the atmosphere for millennia, adding to the greenhouse effect" and overall pollution, he says. On the other hand, tumbleweed "recycles the same carbon, year after year," as each new crop grows and fixes carbon from the atmosphere. But pollution and recycling "aren't figured into the economics of it" — yet.

One sign of that implied potential came during the experiments, Karpiscak says, as Arid Lands "had inquiries from literally all over the world" from countries interested in harnessing the energy of their tumbleweeds.

An even more ambitious project at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces aimed at ending world hunger among livestock, and eventually humans, by breeding an edible super-tumbleweed. "We were really optimistic for a couple of years," says Hageman, whose genetic experimentation and chemical analysis indicated strains of tumbleweed could be bred to emphasize

protein content and nutritional yield (in past drought emergencies, Western farmers have fed their livestock on both green and dried tumbleweed).

Hageman was part of a team that collected tumbleweed seeds from around the West. "At first we just drove along the roadsides looking for the biggest thistles we could find, and we'd throw them in the bed of the pickup and thrash them with a broom," he recalls. Eventually the project had a five-acre plantation thick with various strains of tumbleweeds, and was negotiating with private companies about the possibility of extracting valuable chemicals and food additives from the plants.

Tumbleweeds' ability to thrive in arid conditions, and even on brackish or saline water useless for other agriculture, could make it "a solution" to spreading desertification and starvation in Africa and other places, Hageman says. Also, in diversifying agriculture away from the few worldwide food crops, "It's a good idea from an ecological standpoint. We were basically working on domesticating a wild plant, and it takes time."

The New Mexico experiments, and a few elsewhere in the West, proved that tumbleweed can produce, acre for acre, about the same tonnage and protein yield as alfalfa, Hageman says. Sadly, within the past year, funding for edible tumbleweeds has also dried up, and the New Mexico plantation was torched to avoid further spreading the weeds. "That was hard," Hageman says. "The problem is, you can't motivate anyone" to support research on perfecting tumbleweeds.

"They wonder why we need more tumbleweeds in the Southwest ... The ranchers are a lot more interested in seeing this developed than the agricultural (research establishment) is. They see the

cattle eating it. We had ranchers call us up and ask for us to come out and plant it."

Still, some of Hageman's students did whip up a batch of tumbleweed cookies. And Arid Lands put out a recipe for "cream of tumbleweed soup." Not to mention the cookbook, *The Tumbleweed Gourmet*.

Wash and sort tumbleweed sprouts, discarding roots and any sprouts which have matured to the point of feeling prickly. Chop fine. Set aside.

— from the recipe for Jellyed Tumbleweed Salad, in *The Tumbleweed Gourmet*

"They taste green and vegetable-ly, not at all unusual. Mild," says Carolyn Niethammer, Tucson author of *The Tumbleweed Gourmet* (University of Arizona Press, 1987). She's talking about tumbleweed sprouts, which come up in the spring and throughout the growing season. It's the only form of tumbleweed that, so far, is deemed fit for human consumption.

"You just kind of walk around, reach down and pinch them off with your fingernail," says Niethammer. "There's a place in my alley where they come up. It takes just minutes to get enough to feed four people. Oh, about a half a cup for each person," if you want your tumbleweed sprouts done up simply, steamed and dashed with lemon juice.

She sounds only a little mad for tumbleweeds. Like me.

I'm out a few days after my first try, on another breezy hilltop, with a tumbleweed on my line. The action is good. The tumbleweed whips out horizontally ... but never higher than the tip of the rod. We need — that tumbleweed and I — more than this paltry 10 or 15 miles an hour. By now I can see it'll take some major wind — 30, 45 miles an hour at least — to revive this sport of flying tumbleweeds.

I can imagine one approach that might work. I'll stand in the bed of my pickup, facing rear, equipped with rod and tumbleweed dangling. Somebody will be driving, and as we gain speed, I'll be playing out line and that tumbleweed will be flying high. Maybe someday the big tumbleweed meets, the regional fly-arounds, will be held just like that: "Gentlemen and ladies ... Start your engines."

□

Ray Ring is a freelance writer in Tucson, Arizona.

LETTERS

TRUE HEROES

Dear HCN,

Publisher Ed Marston's thought-provoking editorial (HCN, 6/19/89) condemning ecotage, America's third largest night sport after sex and substance abuse, reminded me that the safest place to be during a crisis is behind a typewriter. Better to risk handcramps than handcuffs. Still, the bravest abolitionists did not print broadsheets, but ran the illegal (and often nocturnal) underground railroad. Similarly, I owe allegiance to a nation created not by conciliatory loyalists (conciliatory-tory?), but to Sons of Liberty and Minute Men. Should Paul Revere have awaited dawn to rouse the countryside?

One has only to read the previous issue of HCN (June 5) to see how the system works. An influential rancher receives a paltry fine for lawlessly invading critical wildlife habitat, while the best of the government employees live in fear of "transfers" reminiscent of Soviet-style "internal exile."

Even when the law is just, the system proves to be corrupt. The expansion of civilization's moral purview requires more good people like Ed Marston, but let's not denigrate the actions of a brave few. They are the new heroes of the American West.

John Walker
Coaldale, Colorado

PRAISES BLM

Dear HCN,

We've just read the article, "Did the BLM give too much for too little?" (HCN, June 19). National Parks and Conservation Association joins with other environmental organizations, such as Audubon, The Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club, and The Wilderness Society, in commending BLM in Arizona for its aggressive, visionary, and innovative land-and-mineral exchange program which has been successfully bringing a whole array of environmentally priceless lands and biologically diverse resource values into public ownership, over the past several years.

Regarding allegations that BLM is not getting enough monetary return for lands traded into private ownership, we

suggest that it increasingly appears BLM is being vindicated ... by the rising number of real estate foreclosures, the downward slide in much of Arizona's real estate market, and the mounting crisis of the S&L's — speculative and unrealistic appraisals as are mentioned in the article. We suspect that any official investigations into BLM exchanges will confirm the agency's vindication.

We'd like to call your attention, if we may, to Kathleen Stanton's article, "High and Dry," appearing in the June 14, 1989, issue of *New Times* (published in Phoenix). She details just such a grossly speculative situation, regarding the so-called Sun Valley development proposal, west of Phoenix. "Sun Valley has become not Phoenix's new frontier," says Ms. Stanton, "but the latest example

(Continued on page 13)