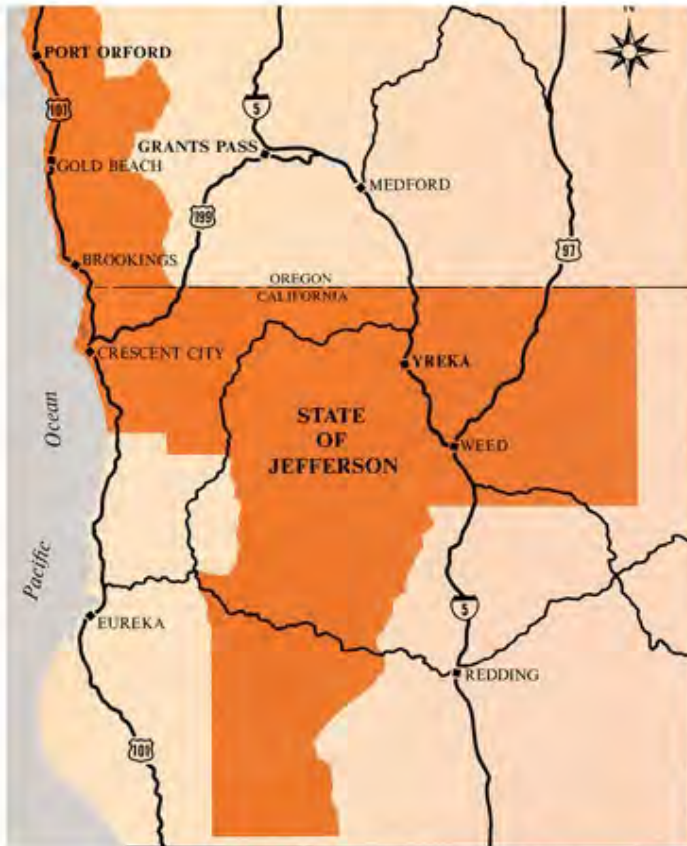


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A peculiarly-shaped forty-ninth state of the Union. Residents seceded from both California and Oregon.

PORT ORFORD, on the coast of southern Oregon, was an inauspicious birthplace for a new state of the union thirty years ago this winter, and Gilbert E. Gable, the mayor of the town, was an unlikely founding father. Port Orford was barely a village—no telegraph, no railroad line, no public library—a place too small to nurture a Kiwanis Club, much less a constitutional convention. As for Mayor Gable, he was an outlander, a retired public relations man from back east, who had shucked off a tiresome job in Pennsylvania and moved west to inhale the fragrance of the spruce woods and occasionally sell a piece of real estate to someone who shared his taste for open space.

Still, not every statesman is cast in the mold of William Penn, nor every commonwealth cradled in the matrix of a thundering metropolis. It was Mayor Gable who raised the cry of liberation in the fall of 1941, and Port Orford was his Philadelphia. Within a few weeks, his manifesto had inspired a full-fledged independence movement—a secession state, complete with ensign and regalia, border patrols, militia, and a shadow government. The state administrators of Oregon and California had begun to look on the rebellion as a definite annoyance; an imaginative young newspaper reporter from San Francisco had made a national mark as the authoritative chronicler of the secession movement; and an indifferent



The Short, Happy History of the State of Jefferson

by Richard Reinhardt

nation, absorbed in other pressing problems, had been forced to notice, for at least an instant, the existence of a place called Curry County, Oregon, adjacent to the California border.

In the beginning this was as much as Mayor Gable wanted. He felt that Oregon had been atrociously neglectful of this strange and haunting coastland, refusing for quite inexplicable reasons to exploit the almost unlimited resources of timber and minerals in the misty green ranges of the Siskiyou—and he hoped to draw attention to this negligence. One day early in October, when the county court of justice was holding session, Mayor Gable, accompanied by several of his friends, stormed into the courtroom and demanded legal sanction to transfer the county from Oregon to California. The judge responded by appointing an official commission, consisting of Gable and a couple of his acquaintances from the nearby towns of Brookings and Gold Beach, to look into the practical aspects of annexation. As a start, Gable sent a letter to Governor Culbert L. Olson of California, requesting an appointment to discuss an *anschluss*.

The resulting publicity was everything Gable had desired—newspaper articles by the dozens, editorials, comments on the radio—and the official reaction was precisely what one might have expected. Governor Olson said warily that he was "glad to know they think enough of California to want to join it."



This traffic-stopping border patrol appears to be looking for an audience rather than contraband. William Maginnis reads the proclamation of independence to an unidentified motorist on Highway 99.

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

Oregon, in the person of its attorney general, said, in effect, that Curry County was free to annex itself to a dry lake. All it would need was the consent of the United States Congress, the Oregon legislature, and the California legislature and the approval of a majority of the Oregon electorate. The editors of the Portland *Oregonian* warned Curry County to beware: "If ambition be realized, Curry would of course immediately acquire the glorious climate of California and become a haven of retired mid-west farmers; development of its mineral riches would add much more to the population. Gold Beach would become a metropolis with offensive slums, and Latin quarters, and traffic problems and police scandals and what not to cause dislike of it throughout the hinterland. Whereupon the hinterland would logically secede from Gold Beach."

Such a display of hostility, indifference, and ridicule might have been sufficient to douse Mayor Gable's flame. But a spark of rebellion struck fire instantly in the woodsy canyons of the border country. It turned out that the idea of separation was by no means new to the people of the Siskiyou Range. Long before the State of Oregon had been admitted to the Union in 1859, the gold miners of the region had been clamoring for local statehood; and in the adjoining counties of Northern California, secession had been an endemic disease from the firing of the first Roman candle on Admission Day, 1850.

During California's first decade as a state, creative legislators brought forth schemes to divide the former Mexican province into three states (California, Colorado, and Shasta); to split it into Alta California and Southern California; to cut loose the sagebrush country east of the Sierra; and even to form a Pacific Republic, separate from the United States. This centrifugal force was at its strongest among the miners of the far north, who recognized no state boundaries, natural or man-made, in their commerce and society. The citizens of Yreka and Happy Camp, California, regularly voted in the neighboring state as well as their own, and so did the patriots of Jacksonville and Waldo and other settlements in southern Oregon. At the same time, nobody paid much attention to the tax collectors of either state. This lack of respect was reciprocated in Sacramento, where a legislator once said that many people in the Siskiyou still bartered bear claws and eagle beaks.

Now and then, a wave of provincial chauvinism would sweep along the foggy, rock-strewn coast and through the winding valleys of the Klamath River, and petitions would begin to circulate, pleading the necessity of establishing a new state called Shasta, Klamath, Jackson or some such thing. As recently as 1935, John Childs, a judge in Crescent City, California, had headed a facetious secession movement,

PROCLAMATION OF INDEPENDENCE

You are now entering Jefferson, the 49th State of the Union. Jefferson is now in patriotic rebellion against the States of California and Oregon.

This State has seceded from California and Oregon this Thursday, November 27, 1941.

Patriotic Jeffersonians intend to secede each Thursday until further notice.

For the next hundred miles as you drive along Highway 99, you are travelling parallel to the greatest copper belt in the Far West, seventy-five miles west of here.

The United States government needs this vital mineral. But gross neglect by California and Oregon deprives us of necessary roads to bring out the copper ore.

If you don't believe this, drive down the Klamath River highway and see for yourself. Take your chains, shovel and dynamite.

Until California and Oregon build a road into the copper country, Jefferson, as a defense-minded State, will be forced to rebel each Thursday and act as a separate State.

(Please carry this proclamation with you and pass them out on your way.)

**State of Jefferson Citizens Committee
Temporary State Capitol, Yreka**

Ten days after this defense-minded proclamation, the country was defending itself against the Japanese.

a chimerical "State of Jefferson," with himself as governor, to dramatize the lack of good highways on the redwood coast. But that movement, like all the others, had flickered out, and the region had remained the Tibet of the Pacific Coast. Gilbert Gable merely had taken a dormant growth, native to the territory, and coaxed it back to life.

Gable had not only the zeal of a convert but the skill of a professional opinion-molder. Although he referred to himself as "the hick mayor of the westernmost city in the United States," he actually was an experienced salesman with a flair for drama and a gift of phrase. During World War I he had been publicity director for several districts in the Liberty Loan drives. Later, he had written scripts for motion pictures and radio broadcasts. Just before he moved to Port Orford in 1935, he had been public relations man for the telephone company in Philadelphia for eleven years.

By the standards of Port Orford, Gable was a city slicker—civilized, sophisticated, and well-groomed; a good-looking, clean-shaven man, just into his fifties, with smooth brown hair and a pleasant smile. The two hundred fifty residents of the town found him charming and persuasive. He talked them into being the first community in Curry County to incorporate, and they naturally made him mayor. He started a real

estate office called The Last Frontier, built a dock and a lumber mill, and stirred up waves. At a meeting in Cave City, Oregon, shortly after the secession movement got started, Gable pointed his finger dramatically at two grizzled miners in the audience and cried out: "Those two men own a million flasks of quicksilver! That's \$180 million at present prices. It makes the gold rush fortunes look like peanuts. And they can't get it out of Curry County because the government won't help them develop the mine—even though they have a geologist's certified report."

That sort of talk was bound to inflame the minds of any number of traffickers in bear claws and eagle beaks.

In Grants Pass, a boosters' club called "The Oregon Cavemen," seizing a rare opportunity to publicize the Oregon Caves, proposed that rebel Curry, instead of defecting to California, should join Josephine County, Oregon, in an independent state of "Cavemania." In Crescent City, the Del Norte County board of supervisors used Gable's manifesto as the signal to create an interstate commission to promote the development of mineral resources, highways, and bridges.

But it was in Yreka, the lonely county seat of Siskiyou, that Gable's bid for attention was welcomed with the greatest enthusiasm; for, if the border country was an American Tibet, Yreka was its Lhasa—a proud little mining town of twenty-four hundred, which had suffered for close to a century from a cruel and widespread slander to the effect that the place did not really exist but was just a way of misspelling Eureka. When Gilbert Gable began to collect scrapbooks full of clippings about Port Orford, the editor of Yreka's *Siskiyou Daily News* commented wistfully: "Hizzoner is one smart cookie. More people have heard of Curry County in the past month than heard of it before in 40 years . . . Siskiyou, which has been cold shouldered by various California big-wigs since the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, might profit by Curry's sound tactics."

THE VERY DAY the editorial appeared, the Yreka Chamber of Commerce voted to investigate the possibility of forming a forty-ninth state (Alaska and Hawaii had not yet achieved statehood) to be called "Mittelwestcoastia." This state might be formed of three Oregon counties (Curry, Josephine, and Jackson) and three California counties (Siskiyou, Del Norte, and Modoc), all of which had been "ravaged by the neglect of Sacramento and Salem." The *Daily News* immediately announced a name-the-state contest to get rid of that frightful Mittelwestcoastia. Out of a field of equally repulsive entries including Orofino, Bonanza, Del Curiskiou, Siscurdelmo, New West, New Hope, and Discontent, the sponsors selected Jefferson.

Mayor Gable, meanwhile, issued a series of fiats that delighted the wire services. Jefferson would be free of obnoxious taxes: no sales taxes, no income taxes, no liquor taxes. All strikes would be outlawed during "the national



Night gives a sinister cast to these Yreka citizens with a message. A border guard worked both the day and the night shift in the State of Jefferson but had every day off except Thursday.

emergency." Slot machines would be proscribed—not in moral reproach but because they constituted unfair competition to the local stud poker industry.

The whole affair began to make the Portland *Oregonian* extremely cross.

"Maybe it's all an advertising stunt," they said, "but Mayor Gable is carrying his side of the comicality to extremes . . . [He] has ceased to be funny."

To the newspapers of San Francisco, however, it appeared that the secession movement was finally catching on. Toward the end of November, the *Chronicle* assigned its liveliest feature writer, Stanton Delaplane, to go up to Yreka (wherever that might be) and do a series of articles on the Jeffersonians—something gentle and warm and tongue-in-cheek, like an A. A. Milne report on political upheaval at Pooh Corner. No one on the *Chronicle*, least of all Delaplane, took the forty-ninth state seriously, but the story would provide relief from the war news that dominated the headlines. The British Army was struggling to advance against the German tank corps in North Africa, and reports from the Russian front were equally disheartening. The correspondent Vincent Sheean, fresh from a tour of the Far East, was predicting that the U. S. and Japan would be at war within two months.

Delaplane packed an extra sweater, some jersey union suits, and a hip flask and drove up Highway 99 to give his city readers an inside report on the "Secession Snowball." The State of Jefferson Citizens Committee (consisting mostly of the Yreka 20-30 Club) had threatened to barricade the main north-south road on Thursday, November 27, and every Thursday thereafter in a symbolic act of secession.

Delaplane found the State of Jefferson a "cold, wild country where strangers at night leap precariously along the street from one hot buttered rum to the next." The thermometer stood at 18°F. A garageman, draining Delaplane's car, told him the whole secession movement had to do mostly with bad roads, neglected for thirty years by the state governments in Sacramento and Salem.

"It gets so bad here in the winter folks can't hardly get out of the back country," the garageman said. He admitted there was not much to do if you did get out, but people being what they are, they wanted to get out anyway.

Delaplane slogged through the sloshy streets of the "temporary state capital," where piles of chrome ore lay along the railroad tracks, to call on prominent secessionists. With the exception of Mayor Gable and Judge Childs of Crescent City, most of the leaders of the rebellion lived in Yreka;



Outside the proposed capitol, candidates for public office hold the hottest issue of the day—copper ore. One with the broadest smile is the town mortician.

O. G. Steele, division manager of the California-Oregon Power Company, headed the statehood commission and was regarded, with Gable and State Senator Randolph Collier, as a potential candidate for governor. George Milne, a mining man from Fort Scott, had declared himself a prospect for United States senator. (A natural aphorist, Milne summed up the Jefferson rebellion in the words: "Somebody had to bite a dog.") Heinie Russ, manager of the Yreka Inn, fancied himself as state treasurer; Homer Burton, the undertaker, said he would run for controller; and a lanky cattleman named William "Buffalo Bill" Lang offered to train a state militia. In Delaplane's opinion, they were all "partly mad, partly in fun, partly earnest about the new state." As the garageman put it: "You can't tell what folks up here will do when they get a notion."

Commissioner Steele got out a large-scale map and traced with his finger the belt of copper, chrome, and manganese running seventy-five miles west of Yreka.

"It's been laying back in those hills for centuries," he said, "and it'll lay there another century if we don't get it out now. There's a road in there, but it's one way in spots and crossed with ten-ton-limit bridges."

Next day, members of the 20-30 Club, with deer rifles and target pistols, were stopping automobiles north and south of town and passing out yellow handbills that proclaimed the

independence of the State of Jefferson. Bonfires and barrels of kerosene blazed along the verges of the highway. The temperature was in the low twenties, and there was an opaque, porcelain whiteness to the sky that spoke of snow. Some of the merchants in town were displaying "Good Roads" buckets on their cash registers. One could deposit his sales tax pennies there, to be seized by Jefferson should Oregon and California fail to respond to reason. "No more copper from Jefferson until Governor Olson drives over these roads and digs it out."

On the third day of his visit, en route to the coast to see Mayor Gable, Delaplane managed to get himself trapped at Happy Camp, whence he wrote:

"Like the copper belt of the Siskiyou, I am stranded between highways. There is a road from this mining camp, half-way between Yreka and the coast, that leads to Grants Pass Highway. But Ed Thurgelow, a miner and humanist, said he wouldn't advise the 32-mile trip over the snowy tops of the mountains. He said cheerfully they would probably find my bones by spring all right and give them a decent burial. That is if I didn't wander from the car during my final agonies and run afoul of a hungry mountain lion."

Obviously, that sort of imprisonment made Delaplane as happy as a mouse locked in a granary. He was onto a good story; and, if he could not get around the back roads of the Siskiyou, neither could rival reporters catch up with him. He knew how to string out a narrative for at least 1001 nights, and he had a hound dog's nose for the scent of Old West romance. Dropping in at the *Siskiyou Daily News*, he had noticed a yellowed photograph of a four-man lynching, which somehow insinuated itself into the fabric of his story. Out on the embattled barricades, he had detected the tang of woodsmoke and the crackle of rustic humor, and these got in too. Woodsmoke, humor, and even lynchings were delectable to city readers who were tired of being informed that Betty Grable (currently starred with Tyrone Power in *A Yank in the R.A.F.*) received two hundred letters a day from servicemen and was being adopted as official sweetheart by an average of one army camp per week. The papers were reporting renewed German assaults on the outskirts of Moscow; Nazi troops around Tobruk were counterattacking; and two Japanese special envoys to Washington—Saburo Kuruusu and Kiohisaburo Nomura—walked out in grim silence after a conference with President Roosevelt.

Deep in the snowy hills, Delaplane wrote tenderly about the road he had followed down to Happy Camp—"a brown sand ribbon through the tall, piney mountains alongside the Klamath River, rushing in white water toward the sea." He dwelt on the hazards of driving trucks in that rough country—the chains, the shovels, and the dynamite you had to carry to clear away landslides. He talked about the anonymous local opponents of separate statehood, whose motto was "Forty-eight States or Fight." He even picked up (or made up) a rumor that the lumber-producing counties were thinking of

coining their own wooden nickels. That story made page 1, along with the diplomatic talks in Washington and the score of the Big Game (University of California at Berkeley, 16; Stanford University, 0).

On the fourth day, Delaplane made a roundabout, two hundred mile trip by way of Medford and Grants Pass to Crescent City, where he found a telegraph. He datelined the story "Hard Scrabble Creek," the last of numberless rushing mountain streams he had crossed during the day. Finally, running into heavy overtime, he drove up the coast to Port Orford and interviewed Mayor Gable "in a redwood cabin while the Oregon skies poured dark rain into the pine-covered hills."

Reporter and public relations man felt an immediate affinity. Gable could tell a good story, and Delaplane was enchanted by his overt and joyous manipulation of publicity to draw attention to a small, vacant county in the Far West. Here sat Gilbert Gable, in his redwood cabin, demanding the convocation of a provisional state legislature and bragging that the State of Jefferson had Fifth Columnists at work in all the surrounding counties!

Gable had got hold of a bottle of 150-proof Hudson Bay rum, and they sampled it while the dark rain poured down. The rum cut the chill.

"I'm going to write that Gilbert Gable is watching the sun go down each evening over the Pacific with a golden dream in his eyes," Delaplane said. Gable laughed and said, "That's newspaper stuff, all right."

They talked about the dinosaur tracks Gable had found while prowling around the desert. ("Never look for elephant tracks if there's a dinosaur around," Gable said.) And they ruminated on the legal problems of Jefferson. What if California should try to dock Senator Collier one day's pay each Thursday, when he served as provisional governor of Jefferson? What should Heinie Russ, the treasurer, do for money on Thursdays when Jefferson was in operation? Would wooden nickels do? And, if so, what was a wooden nickel really worth?

Delaplane concluded his last story from the secession counties with a lyric outburst of praise for the frontier individualism, the lonely integrity of the mountain people. He wrote about the children who panned gold in old mine tailings to pay for Christmas shopping and housewives who always checked for traces of gold in the gizzards of chickens. Neither Owen Wister nor Theodore Roosevelt had ever romanced the Old West so shamelessly—or so well. A year later, the Trustees of Columbia University awarded Delaplane the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism for "distinguished reportorial work during the year 1941."

Datelining his final dispatch "Pistol River, Secession State of Jefferson," Delaplane warned Californians not to minimize the new state. Then he headed back for San Francisco, a place where new states and mountain fastnesses generally are held in small regard.

WITHOUT INDICATION of a grave illness, on the following day, December 2, Gilbert Gable died. He was fifty-five, and he left a wife and an eight-year-old son. As some of his friends put it, he had been too tense. Delaplane wrote the obituary for the *Chronicle*. He spoke of Gable as "a pioneer who used the tools at hand to fulfill his dreams of the West as men a century ago used long rifles and axes to build the nation.

"I think he was a man whose historical importance was yet to come," Delaplane wrote. "If Gilbert Gable's dreams had come to fruition, a new area of the West would have been opened."

Near the obituary was an article reporting that American forces throughout the Far East were on twenty-four-hour alert. Royal Arch Gunnison, a syndicated correspondent, quoted a "high aviation authority" of the United States Army: "If the Japanese want to start something, we can bomb Japanese cities and war objectives from the Philippines easier than they can come this way by air, since we have longer range, faster planes—the Flying Fortresses."

Like American power in the Philippines, the power of the State of Jefferson had yet to be tried; but the secession movement had developed at least enough vitality to survive the death of the founding father. Flags were half-masted over the public buildings, but delegates met in Yreka that afternoon and agreed to elect state officers the next day. Three California counties—Siskiyou, Del Norte, and Trinity—and Curry County, Oregon, were represented.

The second official Rebellion Thursday turned out to be the climax of the short happy history of the State of Jefferson. Mayor Gable's publicity stunts and Delaplane's prose had brought the Jeffersonians to national attention. Four newsreel companies sent cameramen. Two national picture magazines had dispatched photographers and reporters. The local newspaper urged its subscribers to swarm the town. "Please wear western clothes if they are available. . . . Two hundred people in western costumes will be selected to march past the camera for closeups."

Ranchers and lumbermen were out on the highway again, warming their hands around bonfires, waving shotguns, and passing out leaflets. Mounted patrols pranced along the outskirts of Yreka. Schools were let out early. The film crews were set up on the lawn of the Siskiyou County Courthouse, under a sky leaden with the threat of rain.

W. N. Davis, Jr., a California historian, gives this eyewitness account of the scene:

"Curious townsmen, ranchers, miners, visitors . . . school children . . . and a sprinkling of the 'secessionist' promoters, wearing broad-brimmed hats and boots, are standing about under the chestnut trees. Brilliant in their scarlet uniforms, the girls of the high school drum-and-bugle corps await their turn to entertain the crowd. A boy wearing a coonskin cap roams the grounds with two bear cubs at the end of chains. . . .

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THE STATE OF JEFFERSON

(Continued from page 41)

Now the officers of Jefferson mount the platform and the 'territorial' assembly awaits its cue. In a moment, the cameramen shout for action and the assembly is under way. It is a staged production; from the loudspeaker at the rear, the crowd and the officers receive their instructions. First to the crowd: 'Get over there and be looking at the map. Don't look at the camera. . . . We have too many children. Can't we have a few more adults in there? . . . Show a little enthusiasm! Wave your arms!'

At twilight a torchlight parade moved through the narrow streets, swept by cold wind from the Siskiyou. Some of the marchers carried hand-lettered signs: OUR ROADS ARE NOT PASSABLE, HARDLY JACKASSABLE; IF OUR ROADS YOU WOULD TRAVEL, BRING YOUR OWN GRAVEL; THE PROMISED LAND—OUR ROADS ARE PAVED WITH PROMISES.

On Friday, while Yreka was recuperating from its winter carnival, Port Orford attended a funeral service for Gilbert Gable. Judge Childs announced he would hold a press conference to discuss such matters as roadbuilding and taxation.

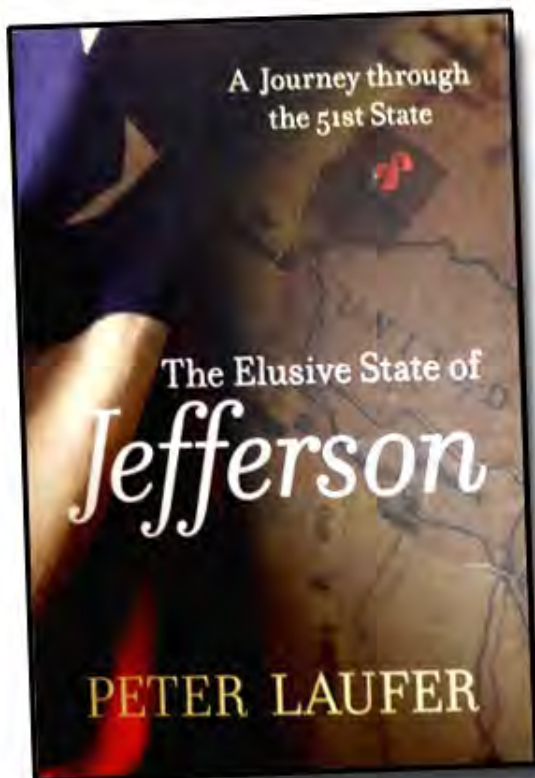
A few members of the Citizens' Committee sensed that the movement had reached, perhaps had passed, its peak; others hoped for an even more exciting Secession Day next week. The dilemma had not been resolved by Sunday morning, December 7, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The two special envoys hastily left the State Department, and the staff of the Japanese Embassy in Washington began burning papers on the lawn.

Governor Childs's last act as chief executive of the State of Jefferson was to issue a statement declaring that "the acting officers of the provisional territory of Jefferson here and now discontinue any and all activities. The State of Jefferson was originated for the sole purpose of calling the attention of the proper authorities . . . to the fact we have immense deposits of strategic and necessary defense minerals and that we need roads to develop these. We have accomplished that purpose."

The governor's statement did not get much press coverage, not the sort of mileage they used to give Gilbert Gable. Royal Arch Gunnison was broadcasting from Manila that day that Japanese paratroops had landed in the Philippines. ☪

Richard Reinhardt, a contributing editor of *THE AMERICAN WEST*, is author of *Ashes of Smyrna* (1971).

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