

Robert G. Athearn (1914-1983)



Robert G. Athearn served as the third President of the Western History Association from 1964-1965. He was born in Kremlin, Montana, on August 30, 1914 and attended Northern Montana College and the University of Minnesota, where he completed his Ph.D. in history under the direction of Ernest Staples Osgood in 1947, after serving in the United States Coast Guard from 1942-1945. Athearn's first and only academic position was at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he remained for the duration of his career.

Well-known for the variety of his scholarship, Athearn published books on Thomas Francis Meagher: An Irish Revolutionary in America (1949), British travelers in the West, and William T. Sherman. His book, *High Country Empire* (1960), was a history of the Northern Plains and the Rocky Mountains and in 1965 was chosen as a White

House Library selection. Mid-career, Athearn turned to railroad history, penning a book on the Denver and Rio Grande Western (*Rebel of the Rockies*) in 1962 and *Union Pacific Country* (1972), a centennial history of the transcontinental railroad, for which the UP gave Athearn access to previously restricted records. Athearn's later career was dedicated to the history of forts on the Missouri River, the history of Colorado, his adopted state, and the African-American exodus to Kansas after the Civil War. His last book, *The Mythic West* (1986), in which he examined the image of the twentieth-century West, was published after his death.

Robert Athearn was, as one biographer noted, "one of the guiding figures" in the Western History Association from the birth of the organization. To honor his contribution, in 1982 the WHA established the Robert G. Athearn Award, given to the author of the best book on the twentieth-century West. That same year his home university awarded Athearn the University of Colorado Medal, recognizing his contributions as both scholar and professor over the breadth of his career. In October of 1983 the WHA honored Athearn as the first recipient of the prize for a "distinguished body of writing" on the history of the American West.

Undoubtedly a prolific and influential scholar, Robert Athearn was also a popular teacher at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He directed twenty-eight doctoral students to completion over the course of his career.

Robert Athearn died on November 13, 1983 in Boulder, Colorado, at the age of 69.

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