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Treasured Wastes: Spaces and Memory

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The Bog, The Pit, Mrs. Norris's Woods, The Swamp, Fuller's Dam, The Landing, all linger as landmarks in a landscape of childhood. Adults in the 1950s and 1960s knew the places treasured by boys growing up in a small New England coastal town but used other designations, if they applied designations at all, to a collection of semi-used or long abandoned spaces. Only one bog deserved "the" in its name; perhaps fifteen acres in extent, it produced few cranberries but innumerable wild ducks, frogs, herons, and the big snakes eventually identified from junior high school nature guides as the common northern water snake, *Natrix sipedon sipedon*. Beaver now and then dammed the brooks flowing through the worn dike built in the early part of the century; if the beaver stayed "up bog," boys rolled fieldstone into the breaches, insuring a tiny pond all summer and, with luck, a larger skating pond by Christmas. Three miles away, south by southeast, endured The Landing, a ragged gash in salt marsh opening into the estuary. From the 1650s to the 1920s, boatbuilders, fishermen, and farmers used it, making it common land; its steep slope and slick mud defeated cars and trucks, however, and as the age of the horse passed, bayberry and sumac crowded the lane. Officially if occasionally visited by the Highway Surveyor, used by fishermen seeking striped bass, and rare summertime canoeists, it remained the possession of boys bored with the well-kept gravel and asphalt of the densely populated town landing

slightly seaward. Hidden by second-growth forest, defended by twisting, muddy paths and rotted bridges, The Bog, The Landing, and the other constituent elements of the intricate landscape of childhood thrived within an equally complex landscape of adults.

Now and then intersection of interest shattered peaceful coexistence. Forest fire signaled the arrival of the volunteer firemen, adult onlookers, and the boys, breathless on bicycles. Always the fire chief barked the same question: "Boys, what's the best way in?" Then followed the frantic flinging down of Indian pumps—four-gallon, Army surplus handpumps worn on the back—to the boys, filling the pump tanks by a fireman nearly knocked down by boys with pumps and too-small boys screaming for the honor of a pump, then dragging the hose along the trail known only to boys thrilled to be guiding the townsmen and squirting tiny streams on smoldering white pines or smoldering canvas hoses. Day after day, however, after school, in the frigid winter vacations, the landscape of boys remained almost untrodden by adults. Separate, protected, and regularly modified by its stewards, it passed eventually to younger boys when the wonders of driving family automobiles in distinctly adult space deflected sixteen year olds from marshes, swamps, and the forgotten plantation of balsam fir designated Christmas Tree Land.

Of course, men return now and

then, even a landscape historian weary of typewriting and determined to improve the last of a November afternoon by following the old route to The Bog. Windfalls and poison ivy have deflected the path a bit, but the long vista across the now overgrown sandpit remains. And in the gray light, at the crest of the drumlin, the historian describes a man walking as he walked a quarter-century earlier. In the hollow, now thick with choke cherry, the old friends meet, the historian asking the lawyer dressed for court what brings him onto the path to The Bog. "She just told me. She wants a divorce. Somehow I just wound up out here."

Discreteness distinguishes a landscape from landscape. A landscape typically acquires discreteness from natural or artificial boundaries or as it evolves peculiar spatial and distinguishing characteristics. The landscape of Nantucket Island or Sombrero Key extends to the low tide mark and is easily bounded by any observer on foot or equipped with a map or chart. Even the landscape of Missouri or Montana can be delineated by political boundaries. But more often geographers and other dedicated students of the built environment identify a landscape not only by tracing its edges but by defining its distinguishing characteristics. Bank barns, double-pen cabins, adobe wall construction, and a thousand other characteristics serve to define landscapes. In the past two decades, landscape identification and definition have grown sophisticated. Edges and details, cherished by

discoverers, dovetail with frameworks evolved by philosophers, economists, and mathematicians.

Landscape is not *a* landscape. As I define it in *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845*, landscape is not cityscape but essentially rural, essentially the product of tradition.¹ To discern and define *a* landscape means knowing what landscape is in general, then devising a system for noting the important edges and other features of the place under study, be it a suburb, a valley devoted to cattle ranching, a Great Lakes resort island. Scholars have lately devised such systems; many prove immediately useful, others suggest modifications or adaptations to specific landscapes.² Implicit in most are prisms, however, prisms that subtly distort the usefulness of the system in the work of others.

Consider scale. What is a long vista across an overgrown sandpit? To a native of Moab, Utah, perhaps two or even three miles; bright sunlight, clear air, and unobstructed views combine in Utah to produce attitudes toward distance alien to West Virginians. In Norwell, Massachusetts, it means about two hundred yards, a figure not surprising for a heavily wooded town. But what, then, is the impact of a town's coastal location? What influence has the sea, stretching away flatter than any Wyoming wheat field? Such are the issues that perplex the reader of undergraduate and graduate term papers. What local values, unrecognized by their

bearers, distort visions of landscape?

The question lies at the heart of landscape analysis. "In certain of its fundamental features, our rural landscape," asserts the French historian Marc Bloch in *The Historian's Craft*, "dates from a very remote epoch." But in order to examine the rural landscape of the past, "in order to ask the right questions, even in order to know what we were talking about, it was necessary to fulfill a primary condition: that of observing and analyzing our present landscape." Bloch says little about the actual observation and analysis; he does, however, liken the task of the historian to that of someone examining a roll of photographic film. "In the film which he is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behooves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken."³ The state of the last negative, therefore, determines the whole study of the prior ones. And as any surveyor or navigator knows, the slightest error at the start of a long course produces increasingly serious errors as the course is run.

J. R. R. Tolkien, the British folklorist who produced *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for fun and in so doing created one of the richest of fantasy landscapes, wondered about the start of landscape perception, about the very frame that worried Bloch least.

"If a story says, 'he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below,' the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene," Tolkien argues in *Tree and Leaf*, "but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but specially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word."⁴ If Tolkien is correct, the landscape of childhood has immense meaning for the student of landscapes, for that first landscape remains—despite training, system, and years of fieldwork—a prism through which actual landscapes are viewed and through which long vanished landscapes are reconstructed using the written documents favored by Bloch and other historians. And as all prisms do, the prism distorts, perhaps dangerously.

Innocence suffuses the landscape—or cityscape—of childhood. To the child not yet aware of thermonuclear fire, landscape is permanent. It is no accident that landscape history is largely a postwar phenomenon; the work of Maurice Beresford and W. G. Hoskins in Britain and J. B. Jackson in the United States evolved out of wartime experience and technique.⁵ The devastated landscapes of continental Europe advertised the fragility of built form, spurring interest among people ever less certain of permanence.⁶ "The city has never been so uncomfortable, so crowded, so tense," wrote E. B. White of New York in 1949. "The

subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions."⁷ World War II destruction and the subsequent threat of atomic warfare did not create the field of landscape history and the profession of historic preservation, but they urged them onward. If Tolkien is correct, if the last frame of Bloch's film is seen through the prism of childhood, it may be simply because the landscape of childhood is the last safe place, the refuge to which adults can never return.

A landscape, therefore, can certainly be what geographers or landscape historians so frequently say it is: a discrete area. It may also be something else, something defying photography. It may be a prism, or a pipe dream.

Prism

In autobiography lies the shadow of the prism, if not the prism itself. Often writers of autobiography stare backward at some well-remembered space, the details of which remain crisply clear. "In the foreground lay a marvelous confusion of steel rails, and in the midst of them, on a vast cinder-covered plain, the great brick

roundhouse with its doors agape, revealing the snouts of locomotives undergoing surgery within," writes Russell Baker in *Growing Up*. "Between the mountains that cradled the yard there seemed to be thousands of freight cars stretching back so far toward Harpers Ferry that you could never see the end of them." Baker recalls the long approach to Brunswick, "as distant and romantic a place as I ever expected to see," the toll bridge with its loose boards, the "incredible spectacle" of an express passenger train "highballing toward glory," a department store, movie house, and drugstore. For the boy from the farm, Brunswick is a "great smoking conurbation," a "metropolis,"⁸ But for the town-bred boy, the country is equally exciting.

"I realized at once that we had been transported into a different world, far from the dust and heat we had left behind," muses Gerald Warner Brace in *Days that Were*. "It is always in my memory a pure summer morning with white sunlight glinting across the eastward bay, the waters all calm except for the long heave of the groundswell that reared and creamed along the rocky shores of the islands on our port hand, and the air is faintly redolent with the fragrance of fir and spruce." For Brace, entering Rockland Harbor aboard the *Bangor* or some other coastal steamer proves as memorable as arriving in Brunswick by flivver proves for Baker. Brace recalls every vacation "rediscovering" the town's "perfect

harmony of function, where everything seemed to fit into a natural design," but clearly Baker savors the memory of the industrial order of the railroad town so unlike his own.⁹

Memories of Brunswick and Rockland Harbor endure so strongly simply because they originate in what the novelist-philosopher Walker Percy calls a "rotation," a successful escape from daily routine, something different. For students of landscape, however, it is the concept of repetition, not rotation, that proves of more lasting value in defining a landscape. "A repetition," argues Percy in *The Moviegoer*, "is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle." The narrator of the novel provides an example: in glancing at a newspaper, he sees an advertisement identical to one he saw twenty years ago in a magazine on his father's desk. For a moment, "the events of the intervening twenty years were neutralized," and "there remained only time itself, like a yard of smooth peanut brittle."¹⁰ The concept of repetition explicates the prismatic function of remembered childhood landscape.

Baker recalls his boyhood in the agricultural town of Morrisonville, "a poor place to prepare for a struggle with the twentieth century, but a delightful place to spend a

childhood.” He describes it almost in shorthand. “It was summer days drenched with sunlight, fields yellow with buttercups, and barn lofts sweet with hay. Clusters of purple grapes dangled from backyard arbors, lavender wisteria blossoms perfumed the air from the great vine enclosing the end of my grandmother’s porch, and wild roses covered the fences.”¹¹ Such memory remains strong because it is grounded in sensory experience, a range of sensory experience extending well beyond sight. Baker recalls sounds, smells, and textures, the heat of the sun on his skin. As Edith Cobb and other researchers have noted, children experience space through all senses, achieving, for a few years at least, a powerful intimacy.¹² Smell acquires an importance in childhood that it quickly loses, perhaps with the discovery of reading and the consequent emphasis on vision. Just as Brace recalls the fragrance of Maine coast conifers, Baker savors the lingering aroma of newly stacked hay and the perfume of wisteria. As sensitive adults know, smells trigger repetition more quickly, more directly than visual stimuli. The traveler alights from an airliner, smells the odor of the floor wax used in his kindergarten room, and is momentarily transported across time with awesome immediacy. Children—or some children, at least—know a landscape as they know the back of their hands, not only through sight but through the other senses as well.

Certainly rural and small-town

children have the “back-of-the-hand” knowledge; so much autobiography springs from such roots. About urban children, the young inhabitants of cityscape, not landscape, the evidence is much less clear. City life may be qualitatively different for children; researchers have only begun to examine it.¹³ In deciphering the mysteries of landscape, however, the role of childhood space in rural and small-town America acquires importance in proportion to the degree of repetition it engenders. The landscape of childhood can function exactly as Tolkien suggests, by becoming a prism; it can also evoke repetition.

Many scholars—and artists—agree on the importance of memory in the intellectual life of creative adults. Indeed Cobb suggests that powerful memories of childhood may be the roots of genius. Powerful memories, vibrant enough to frequently stimulate repetition, often involve landscape or interior space. “Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are,” muses Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. “Each one of us, then, should speak of his roads, his crossroads, his roadside benches.” After describing how powerfully his memories of a childhood attic inform his thinking, he continues, “each one of us should make a surveyor’s map of his lost fields and meadows.” Bachelard argues that such remembered space, whether attic or “familiar hill paths,” is somehow “creative,” that to visit it

in dreams or daydreams is to partake again of its energy.¹⁴

Artists rarely deal explicitly with this issue. Even Wordsworth’s “The Prelude; Or, Growth of a Poet’s Mind” or Whitman’s “There Was a Child Went Forth” are many-layered constructions, not simple autobiographical statements.¹⁵ From time to time, of course, artists do write explicitly about the significance of memory of childhood landscape, and their work bears scrutiny, for some artists understand the prism.

Eudora Welty perhaps understands the prism better than most other writers of fiction. In *Place in Fiction*, Welty suggests that place can focus the eye of genius and so concentrate its energy. “Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it,” she asserts after insisting that place is the fundamental component of successful fiction. “Imagine *Swann’s Way* laid in London, or *The Magic Mountain* in Spain, or *Green Mansions* in the Black Forest.”¹⁶ Throughout the slim book, she insists on the absolute importance of place in ordering all else in fiction, character, plot, period.

In *One Writer’s Beginnings*, published twenty-seven years after *Place in Fiction*, Welty sharpens her argument, focusing on her own childhood. The first sentence of the

book introduces the striking of clocks; the first paragraphs introduce the “elegant rush and click” of her brothers’ electric train, the rocking chair that “ticked in rhythm” to the stories read aloud by her mother, the appearance of illustrations in her first storybooks. Early in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty suggests that “childhood’s learning is made up of moments” and offers a catalogue of hers, beginning with sitting in a kindergarten circle of chairs and drawing three daffodils just picked in the schoolyard. The middle third of the book, “Learning to See,” lovingly describes a series of discrete landscapes, the landscapes that eventually appear, sometimes in altered shape, in her fiction.

By “a landscape,” therefore, the artist may designate a concatenation of images remembered in the creative moment, indeed somehow merging with the creative moment, perhaps in a near-magical repetition. “But it was not until I began to write, as I seriously did only when I reached my twenties, that I found the world out there revealing,” writes Welty near the close of her book, because “*memory* had become attached to seeing, love had added itself to discovery.”¹⁷ Welty italicizes the word *memory* because memory sparks the creative process; love receives no such emphasis.

Baker and Brace, Cobb, Bachelard, and Welty assert or imply the importance of remembered childhood landscapes in the creative process. For them,

landscape can be a prism through which they look at present experience and space. But landscape may also be pipe dream, not prism, and the distinction is subtle.

Pipe dream

Urbanization in the years following the Civil War prompted many Americans to savor the memory of rural childhood, of childhood in landscape abandoned for cityscape, or at least for the built environments of towns and villages. The last decades of the nineteenth century consequently witnessed the appearance—and acceptance—of nostalgic works concerning rural childhood. *Being a Boy*, an 1878 volume by Charles Dudley Warner, not only represents the genre, but hints at the genre that replaced it.

Being a Boy describes a farm boyhood to readers intimately familiar with such experience. Haying, weeding, woodchuck baiting, firewood toting, all the experiences of farm boys, Warner sites in an environment focused on house and barn and encompassing fields, dirt roads, and woodlots. And Warner is aware of repetition, of the immediacy with which an urbanite may be momentarily transported to another time and place. “But that which lives most vividly in his memory and most strongly draws him back to the New England hills is the aromatic sweet-fern; he likes to eat its spicy seeds, and to crush in his hands its fragrant leaves; their odor is the unique essence of New England.”¹⁸

No description of overgrown, half-wildered pasture or shaggy roadside prefaces the sweet fern sentence; Warner assumed an audience familiar with the habitat of the shrub.

Twenty years later no writer could so easily assume a once rural audience; indeed the turn-of-the-century era witnessed a new scorning of farmers, a scorning evident in words like *hayseed* or *clodhopper*.¹⁹ No longer did farm boys grow up to prosper in professions other than farming; the new generation of male urbanites recalled a boyhood spent on the fringes of farming, in villages or small towns. Between 1880 and 1930, American authors turned out a staggering literature focused on small-town life; for many writers, the small town represented the best of all possible worlds, a place free of the new evils of corporate industrialism and massive urbanization, but for others it exemplified a sterile, conformist, dull existence useful only as a starting point for urban splendor.²⁰ Social and literary historians continue to examine the wonderfully rich, markedly divided literature ordered about small-town life, and they reach only rare accords.²¹

One window on late nineteenth-century small-town life remains oddly unstudied. The small-town weekly newspaper, for all its biases and inaccuracies, endures as the voice of the moment. Consider, for example, the May 8, 1880, issue of the *Saturday Evening Journal* of

Crawfordsville, Indiana. In 1880, the *Journal* had published for thirty-three years, apparently always weekly. The left-hand column of its front page consists entirely of advertisements for pianos, groceries (including nine varieties of coffee), ornamental poultry, and patent medicines. Five additional columns of fine type report stories involving the circus stranded by debt, changes of railroad schedules, the organizational meetings of an equal suffrage society and a baseball club, the twenty-five-dollar fine levied on a man convicted of attempted murder, an Illinois rapist reported to have given Crawfordsville as his address, a drunk rescued from a railroad track. Beyond the front page lies more news, similar in content and tone. Only a few back-pages advertisements for McCormick reapers and other field machinery aim at farmers. Clearly the *Saturday Evening Journal* is a town paper.

More than a century after its appearance, the May 8 issue fuels two interpretations of small-town life. On the one hand, it is evidence of a closely knit, friendly community; most articles emphasize names—everyone organizing the baseball club, for example—and demonstrate the essential quietude of Crawfordsville. Trouble comes from outside, and internal difficulty is immediately confronted, if not by bystanders, then by the town judge. On the other hand, the articles make easy the argument that the town is stuffy, nosy, and

determined to maintain close scrutiny of all activity. For the landscape historian concerned with landscape perception and the role of childhood landscape perception in particular, however, the newspaper proves at first glance less than useful.

The *Saturday Evening Journal* reports almost nothing of landscape, indeed of space. To name a person or business is sufficient; scarcely one address intrudes in news stories or advertisements. Just as Warner assumes an audience familiar with the habitat of sweet fern, so the newspaper editor assumes a readership familiar with the town landscape. And with the exception of a brief story concerning school enrollment and another describing the abandonment of a baby by a city woman who arrived in Crawfordsville for that purpose, stories involving children are lacking too. Landscape and children deserve no notice by the editor because they are simply part of the scene.

What the *Saturday Evening Journal* provides so exquisitely is the official, adult view of things in Crawfordsville on May 8, 1880. To discover the other view, one need only examine the memories recorded decades later by boys who recalled the landscape and the escapades it hosted.

More than many writers, the cartoonist Clare Briggs scrutinized the childhood small-town landscape left behind by city residents.

Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, Briggs's sketches delighted readers of the *New York Tribune*.²² Briggs recalled all the spatial details so lacking in small-town newspapers, and he knew exactly the thousand and one familiar places so vitally important in the lives of children. His sketches depict boys playing on railroad tracks, playing follow the leader through an orchard, playing in lumber yards, old barns, half-finished houses, on rooftops, and in a hundred other places. Now and then the boys tolerate the company of girls, but in the many sketches focused on swimming holes, girls—and women—are conspicuously absent. Briggs's drawings of boys running past haunted houses, dreaming of hopping freight trains, and taking a thousand shortcuts now and then include urban backdrops, but chiefly they memorialize the small-town landscape out of which so many New York City men had come, a landscape of boyhood, a landscape of innocence. They memorialize the landscape of Reedsburg, Wisconsin, the late nineteenth-century boyhood home of Briggs himself.²³

Autobiography savors the landscape of small-town boyhood. The most cursory survey of American autobiographical writing uncovers hundreds of twentieth-century books extolling the intricate world unreported by the *Saturday Evening Bulletin*. Now and then, as in Edmund G. Love's *The Situation in Flushing* and Loren Reid's *Hurry Home Wednesday*:

Growing Up in a Small Missouri Town, 1905 to 1921, most or all of the book focuses on the boyhood environment, but more often, only the first chapter records the timeless details of intimately known small-town space.²⁴

“The golden age of childhood can be quite accurately fixed in time and place,” begins a typical autobiography, Dean Acheson’s 1965 *Morning and Noon*. “It reached its apex in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first few years of the twentieth, before the plunge into a motor age and city life swept away the freedom of children and dogs, put them both on leashes and made them the organized prisoners of an adult world.” Morning for Acheson is life in Middletown, Connecticut, in the 1890s, a place where “nothing presented a visible hazard to children,” where “no one was run over,” where only his mother fleetingly worried when she saw him hooking a ride on the ice wagon. As do so many other male authors, Acheson catalogues structures and spaces, some certainly noticed by local newspaper reporters, but many part of the invisible landscape of boys. “An open field of perhaps three acres” where the boys refought the Boer and Spanish-American wars, the dentist’s “large, round bed of luxuriant canna plants” in which baseballs vanished, “the maze of backyards and alleys.” Acheson recalls the importance of naming spots like the pond “too muddy and choked for bathing and appropriately called by ‘Polliwog Pool’” and shaping and reshaping

places like the three-acre field and the caves in the wooded hills just west of town. Acheson concludes that “life in the golden age was the very distillation of that place and time,” a distillation whose essence, at least, lingered with him through the decades.²⁵ Safety, spatial freedom, the power of naming, the power of shaping and reshaping space, such are the attributes so frequently catalogued in male autobiography of the mid-twentieth century.

Only rarely does an intrepid observer long departed from his boyhood small-town landscape return and scrutinize contemporary space. Eric Sevareid’s long, incredibly detailed 1956 *Collier’s* account of his own return to a small North Dakota town illustrates so forcibly the shock of confrontation and the meaning of memories strong enough to provoke repetition.

Sevareid catalogues smells, sounds, and a wealth of boyhood spaces remembered clearly enough and describes the strain of finding some smells and sounds absent, and many once familiar, once cherished spaces changed beyond recognition by the building of a small office building or the demolition of the town water tank. At first profoundly disappointed—*disenchanted* perhaps designates better his melancholy shock—he gradually discovers some boyhood elements, a faded lumberyard fence, for example, still unchanged and recognizes in the movements of boys the existence of an equally rich space. Eventually, Sevareid uses a

photographic metaphor to explain his new perception: “I could run through the film exposed this day of 1955 and see it all, the hills, the rapids, the bridge and the house and the streets, all of it as it *is*, in black and white, exact, life-size, no more, no less. Then I could run off the old, eternal negative, larger than life, in its full color and glory—the same scenes and trees and faces—and there was no fading or blur of double exposure.” He emphasizes the photographic nature of memory: “I had both reels now, sealed in separate cans, and I knew I could keep them both, as long as I lived.” What then of Marc Bloch’s notion, of the historian unwinding the film backward in order to study the rural landscape of time past? Sevareid answers the question, albeit obliquely.

“In stark clarity I remember running away from home at the age of four, crossing the Soo Line tracks, trudging up South Hill and then, suddenly confronting the sky and the plains; I was lost, alone in the eternity of nothingness.” In the era of his boyhood, towns had definite edges, edges of genuine significance to the people who lived “in town” and to those farmers or ranchers who lived “outside.” In walking back from “outside,” the adult Sevareid recalls the one terrifying incident of brutality of his childhood, the senseless, deliberate shooting by a farmhand of his friend’s dog. As he recounts burying the dog in a weed patch, “across from our island,” Sevareid enters the town, and his essay immediately changes subject and tone. With the prairie at his back, the adult

Sevareid “felt for a moment, faintly, the joy this passage had brought me at each re-entry into the oasis with its familiar shapes and smells and sounds, its thousand secret delights, cool water and shade, and home and safety.” And suddenly, he pierces the veil of mystery that shrouds so many autobiography first chapters. “I understood then why I had loved it so and loved its memory always; it was, simply, *home*—and *all* of it home, not just the house, but all the town. That is why childhood in the small towns is different from childhood in the city. Everything is home.” Walking the old path across the edge of town, turning his back on the place where he had witnessed evil, he perceives the childhood reality of town as oasis, as refuge, as home.

“We are all alike, we graying American men who were boys in the small towns of our country,” he muses. “We have a kind of inverted snobbery of recollection and we are sometimes bores about it, but that’s the way it is.”²⁶ Of course, for Sevareid, for Acheson, for Baker, the way was not permanent residence; the way led to the corners of the earth, to success not only in great cities but in national and international arenas. For such men, the landscape of small-town boyhood is in Robert Frost’s terminology, a fixing point, a place in which later life is moored, however long the mooring line.²⁷

For others, for many according to the most recent federal census, the landscape of small-town boyhood is a contemporary, accessible place. In *Return to Main Street: A Journey to*

Another America, Nancy Eberle chronicles and analyzes her family’s move from a Chicago suburb to a rural small town. Before its appearance in 1982, portions of the text appeared as a long article in *McCall’s* magazine in which Eberle argues that small-town life redirected her two sons toward richer, simpler living. *McCall’s* and many other so-called “women’s magazines” focused on middle-class audiences have lately emphasized child-rearing issues. Eberle, in her article and subsequent book, argues explicitly that small-town physical and social environments strengthen both individual and family character. “It’s never wondering if storekeepers think you’re a shoplifter and never being asked to produce your driver’s license,” she asserts in her final chapter. “It’s a swimming hole, a haunted house, a Halloween Parade, and a nickname.”²⁸ *Return to Main Street* emphasizes not only the physical and social setting so casually presented in the May 8, 1880, *Saturday Evening Journal* but that of the cartoons of Clare Briggs. Eberle delicately balances the adult view of small-town life—and space—with that of her sons, the stewards of shortcuts and swimming holes.

In her first chapter, entitled “Main Street,” Eberle begins her balancing with a command: “Picture a primitive.” She then describes the buildings and spaces along Main Street, the residential streets adjacent to them, the farms at the edge of town. For Eberle, it is primitive, and as her argument evolves, one learns that it is

Edenic. Galena, Illinois, in 1982 is prelapsarian America, the Republic before the fall, the United States of America before urbanization, industrialization, Viet Nam, drug abuse, divorce, even before the nuclear bomb. In her last chapter, the balance kept poised, Eberle asserts that “quality of life” is increasingly important to thoughtful men and women, often more important than social status, salary, professional advancement. And Eberle grounds her argument, her balancing of adult and child view, in space, in the landscape of small-town America.

Eberle is no lonesome soothsayer. As she correctly points out, periodicals like *Mother Earth News* now boast circulations over the one million mark, suggesting that even many urban and suburban families feel a tug toward rural living and small-town residence. The tug is more than emotional. Harley E. Johansen and Glenn V. Fuguitt demonstrate in their 1984 study, *The Changing Rural Village in America: Demographic and Economic Trends Since 1950*, that the growth rate of small towns in the countryside has surpassed that of suburbs and metropolitan regions.²⁹ As the 1960 census hinted, as the 1980 census proves, something important, something massive, now looms in the American psychological horizon. A geographic shift of staggering implications is under way. As Sevareid suggested in the middle 1950s, the small town remains the American home, the cultural cradle. And if the statistics indicate



The Steam Shovel

Photograph by John R. Stilgoe

anything, they indicate that many Americans are going home.

Perhaps they go for the reasons Eberle, Johansen, and Fuguitt catalogue: fear of urban crime, distrust of new forms of community, disgust with unhealthy air, water, and food. Perhaps they go for such reasons and for many more. But perhaps they also go for a more elemental reason. Perhaps they search for the landscape of childhood.

If they go to rediscover the full-color photograph Severeid describes, to experience not only fleeting repetition but permanent repetition, to restore themselves with the energy of place about which Welty orders her fiction and autobiography, to experience a place known in the years before they recognized that the atomic bomb destroys all, then indeed they are in search of the landscape described not in the *Saturday Evening Journal* but in the nostalgias of the heart. One popular prime-time television series, *The Waltons*, drew energy from this concatenation of thought and feeling, each show concluding with an epigraph extolling not only childhood security but the importance of childhood space enduring into adulthood: “Forty years have passed, but that house still stands, and the solace and love that we knew there as children still sustain us.” Solace and love, important as they are, gather strength from the *still existing house*, the physical manifestation of family life.

What underlies the power of boyhood landscape, what attracts so many men—and women—to the small town today, is not only the memory so strong it engenders repetition. It is the recapturing of the right, the freedom to shape space. The small-town boyhood landscape is not simply enjoyed by boys. It is maintained and changed by boys. As Clare Briggs depicted in so many of his sketches, as so many graying men remember in their autobiographies, the small-town landscape permitted and rewarded shaping. Boys felled trees to make rafts, cut saplings to lace together as huts or duck blinds, begged slabs from the sawmill to make tree houses so high in the white pines that even the lighthouse could be seen through field glasses borrowed from fathers’ dresser drawers. No one, not even the Highway Surveyor, consider the fieldstones rolled into the bog dam spillway an act of vandalism; no one, not even the Coast Guard crew chugging seaward, looked askance at the boys laboriously pounding a newly cut cedar tree into the salt marsh to make a mooring bollard at The Landing. Men who had long ago shaped the boyhood places expected new generations of boys to shape them, and so long as real estate developers stayed clear of the abandoned, half-forgotten acreage, the boys did shape space and do so still.

And as long as bits and pieces of the boyhood landscape endure, grown men can visit them, sometimes in the panting rush of the volunteer fire department, grunting under the weight of hoses, “Used to come here

when I was a kid, huge tangle of barbed wire under those wild grapevines, stay left”; sometimes they come alone, seeking the solace of innocence. For that landscape is, as Severeid so accurately saw, home, all of it is home, for it flows into back yards and barnyards, to back steps and screen doors. And home, as Frost discerned in 1914 in a poem entitled “The Death of the Hired Man,” is indeed special: “‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there,’” one of the poem’s narrators says; “‘They have to take you in.’”³⁰ The landscape of boyhood, if it endures in an age of suburbanization, condominium development, and shopping malls, is perceived by many grown men as Severeid perceived it, as being somehow obligated to give solace, rest, repetition. And even when modernization has obliterated it, it can survive as a prism or even as a pipe dream, changing the perceptions of grown men or luring others, with their families, back to small towns.

Understanding landscape must, I think, involve coming to terms with the power of boyhood landscape. Tolkien is correct: words like *river*, *hill*, *wooded valley*, *salt marsh* mean in part the visual image adults first associated with them. Consider the words *steam shovel*. Now used by nearly everyone to designate diesel-powered equipment, they carry special meaning in my little coastal town. For decades, boys old enough to explore the abandoned sandpits bordering the cranberry bogs—not The Bog—have found The Steam Shovel, a derelict diesel-engined

vestige of long vanished activity, a derelict still standing watch over sandpits growing up in chokecherry and now green with sweet fern. For many Norwell men in their late thirties, now graying and wondering about their own children, *steam shovel* evokes memories of The Steam Shovel, of races ending at it, of precarious balancing on its outstretched boom, of shaping the abandoned sandpits and bogs around it, of living in an innocent summer afternoon free of The Bomb, of living at home.

NOTES

- 1 New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 3–7, 339–346, and *passim*.
- 2 See, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974); D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), especially Peirce F. Lewis, “Axioms for Reading the Landscape: Some Guides to the American Scene,” pp. 11–32; Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); and Tadahiko Higuchi, *The Visual and Spatial Structure of Landscapes*, translated by Charles S. Terry (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).
- 3 Translated by Peter Putnam (New York: Random House, 1953; reprinted 1964), pp. 46–47.
- 4 Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, p. 80.
- 5 Jackson is especially eloquent about the role of war; see “Landscape as Seen by the Military,” *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 133–137.
- 6 World War I had, perhaps, a similar effect, at least on Edith Wharton; see her *A Backward Glance* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1934), pp. 362–363.
- 7 “Here is New York,” *Perspectives USA* (Summer 1953), p. 44.
- 8 New York: Congdon & Weed, 1982, pp. 50–53.
- 9 New York: Norton, 1976, pp. 66–67.
- 10 New York: Avon, 1960; reprinted 1980, p. 68.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- 12 *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
- 13 See, for example, Kevin Lynch, *Growing Up in Cities* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977); Irwin Altman and Joachim F. Wohlwill, *Children and the Environment* (New York: Plenum, 1978); George Butterworth, *The Child’s Representation of the World* (New York: Plenum, 1977); and Charles Zerner, “The Street Hearth of Play: Children in the City,” *Landscape* (Autumn 1977), pp. 19–30.
- 14 Translated by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1958; reprinted 1962), pp. 10–12.
- 15 William Wordsworth, *Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904), pp. 124–222; Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 287. One critic has discerned the role of childhood space in the poetry of Hart Crane; see Sherman Paul, *Hart’s Bridge* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972).
- 16 New York: House of Books, 1957, n.p.
- 17 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, pp. 3–7, 10, 76, and *passim*.
- 18 Boston: Osgood, 1878, p. 177.
- 19 Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Vintage, 1956), pp. 30–31; see also Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884–1919* (New York: Free Press, 1965). The place of farm boyhood in the American spatial and cultural imagination deserves separate, detailed study.
- 20 For an introduction to the arguments still swirling about small-town life, see Carl Van Doren, *The American Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), pp. 294–302 and *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900–1920* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 146–171; Richard Lingeman, *Small Town America: A Narrative History, 1620 to the Present* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); Anthony Channell Hilfer, *The Revolt from the Village, 1915 to 1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); and John R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 191–220. One of the most thought-provoking studies is John A. Jakle, *The American Small Town: Twentieth-Century Place Images* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String, 1981).
- 21 Since very few farm children grew up to be writers, there is a consequent dearth of written evidence explicating the farm child’s view of the town, however, something frequently overlooked by literary historians.
- 22 After his death, a multivolume memorial edition of his drawings was published: *When A Feller Needs a Friend* (New York: Wise, 1930); *That Guiltiest Feeling* (New York: Wise, 1930); *The Days of Real Sport* (New York: Wise, 1930); et al.
- 23 *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, XXIII, p. 317.
- 24 Respectively, New York: Harper, 1965; and Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978. To the best of my knowledge, there is no parallel development of autobiographies by women who grew up in small towns.
- 25 Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965, pp. 1–24.
- 26 May 11, 1956, pp. 38–68.
- 27 “Take Something Like a Star,” *Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969), p. 403.
- 28 New York: Norton, 1982, pp. 19–23, 214–224, and *passim*; portions of the book appeared as “A Good Place to Live,” *McCall’s* (October 1981), pp. 127–131. When Eberle finished the book, her daughter was only three years old and not roaming the small-town landscape (pp. 206–207).
- 29 Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1984.
- 30 *Poetry*, p. 38.