Fences and Between Fences: Cultural, Historical, and Smithsonian Perspectives

Robbie Davis and Ed Williams

Along with a few Shakespearean gems, the commentary on fences from Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" may be the best-known poetic icon in contemporary American culture. As Frost and his neighbor mend their common wall in a New England spring ritual, the neighbor twice trumpets: "good fences make good neighbors." The first declaration sets out a guiding principle of the neighbor's conservative worldview. Despite some gentle and subtle probing by Frost, the neighbor "likes having thought of it so well, he says again 'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

Frost's rejoinder is less well known. It captures the opposing position, profoundly important in understanding the significance of walls and fences in world and American cultural and historical debates, disputes, and physical conflicts. In response to his neighbor, Frost reflects,

> *Before I built a wall I'd ask to know*
> *What I was walling in or walling out,*
> *And to whom I was like to give offense.*
> *Something there is that doesn't love a wall,*
> *That wants it down.*

A poster designed for classroom teachers as a didactic aid for the Smithsonian Institution's Between Fences exhibition reflects Frost's message. It poses the same question in its headline title, asking if the several pictures on the poster signify that the subjects are "Fenced In or Fenced Out?"

This essay explores the dichotomous and contentious interpretations of fences; walls; and physical, philosophical, and psychological barriers

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Journal of the Southwest 50, 3 (Autumn 2008) : 243–262

of all types, from playpens and prisons to boundary-line real and virtual fences. The essay evolves from a description of the Between Fences exhibition as an organizational rubric, but it goes beyond the exhibition to explore other examples, nuances, and extrapolations of the thematic principles.

The Between Fences Smithsonian traveling exhibition describes fences and explores how fencing has helped to mold and reflect Americans' views of public and private spaces. As the exhibition shows, they are built of living hedges and other flora, stone, concrete, wood, or metal; they are also exemplified by a variety of ditches and moats; and, in another guise, by dogs and other creatures, including crickets. Most recently descriptions of the international boundary line's "virtual" fencing have festooned the front pages of U.S. and Mexican print media and agitate rabble-rousing talk-show hosts and TV's talking (shouting!) heads. Though far too seldom, virtual fencing even evokes more credible, measured debate in the corridors of power and the halls of academe.

Fences skirt our properties—and our minds. They form a central feature of the American experience and the nation's historical landscape—and urban cityscape. Beyond these shores, fences and walls play a featured role in world history. The American chronology began with palisades in the East and presidios in the West. They gave way to the forts of the American West following the Civil War. The wooden worm fence decorated the fields of early America. Young Abe Lincoln split rails for zigzagging worm fences. Barbed-wire fences took command of the rural landscape beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Ubiquitous chain-link fences dominated in the twentieth century. They defined school grounds, protected industrial sites, and discouraged domesticated and wild animals from invading our yards and our interstate highways. The gated community appeared in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It provoked a new round of social commentary from those both within and without the isolated communities supposedly protected from outside contamination.

Several other facts and events also capture broader and rather different North American perspectives on boundaries and barriers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon defined their line before 1800. It later formed the boundary between the U.S. slave states and free states, and even now it serves as the dividing line between the American North and the South. The 1814 Treaty of Ghent helped define the U.S.–Canadian boundary line and officially

ended the war of 1812. Most of the battles during the war took place in the U.S.–Canadian borderlands. Thirty years later, in 1842, the United States and Canada agreed on the definitive east-to-west boundary line of more than 5,500 miles. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican War and established most of the U.S. southern boundary. Five years later the subsequent Gadsden Purchase of 1853 slightly revised the configuration of the international line.

A few examples of barriers covering the globe's geography and a lengthy span of world history complete the scenario. The illustrative evidence includes the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall in northern England, the Maginot Line, the Berlin Wall, the forbidding array of defenses between North and South Korea, and Israel's formidable Separation Barrier.

Fences and walls symbolize always and everywhere a continuum or a contradictory hodgepodge of fears, frustrations, ambitions, and aesthetics. Fences decorate or blight the land; they spark love-hate intellectual and emotional responses; they touch the ambivalence of our minds; they symbolize the indecision that often haunts the human personality and spirit. They protect, but they also separate. Fences define and secure "ours," but they isolate "us."

Fences are, indeed, many-splendored things. They serve several admirable purposes. They protect us, define our property, and decorate our landscape. In an apparent paradox, fences may also liberate. At the most visceral level, fences, walls, moats, and other barriers prohibit real or imagined enemies and bothersome nuisances, "the other," from crossing into our zone of security or our sanctuary of privacy. The "other" may be unfamiliar people, hostile marauders, or the neighbor's brats. They may also be hungry hogs, meandering cattle, or the neighbor's mutt. Our fences keep "them" in their place—and away from "our" place. Beyond protecting life and limb and maximizing privacy, fences and walls help define our property. They nurture a fulfilling sense of ownership. They mark the expanse of our land and, in the process, contribute to predictable and comforting certainty. The surveyor's calculations tell us where to water our cattle, plant our corn—or build our spite fence.

The liberating quality of fences derives from their security function. Fences liberate by securing our space to pursue other productive activities. Thanks to the imposing Separation Barrier, Israelis may tend to their fields relatively free from the threat of the intrusion of their enemies. A double lock on the hotel door comforts the traveler, nurturing a peace-

ful night's sleep. In a clever and witty discussion, author Judith Viorst defended playpens as fences. The playpen restrained her infant child from constantly following and being with her, even in her most private moments. In Viorst's words, it afforded her the opportunity to be "free to pee, not you, just me."[1]

And fences often look nice. Fences and walls decorate our homes; they beautify our yards, gardens, or patios. Given its fetching elegance, it's difficult to recall that the comforting, charming white picket fence descends from the forbidding spiked palisade, or that a strand of conventional chain link may form a lovely rose-covered trellis.

But walls and fences also conjure negative images. On the one hand, they contribute to the enrichment, and even liberation, of the lives of those behind the barriers. Conversely, positive reactions vie with negative responses to fences and walls. They catalyze ambivalence; they trigger a schizophrenic response. They may comfort, but they also offend. Frost may be only half right, but he is spot on in declaring "something there is that doesn't love a wall. That wants it down."

The damnation of fences and walls highlights the inconvenience and insult implicit in fences and critiques the complex of motivations that informs the erection of barriers. The complex includes a confusing (and confused) concoction. It encompasses the search for tranquility and privacy in tandem with security, but all too often degenerates into alienation and isolation. Removing one's shoes at the airport security checkpoint barrier is, at the least, inconvenient and shades into being degrading. The neighbor's spite fence is clearly offensive, insulting. In the same vein, the haughty and pretentious exclusivity of the gated community affects both those within and those without. Millions of assorted physical, virtual, and psychological barriers across the land symbolize, intensify, and nurture the class and ethnic separation, personal alienation, and social and political isolation and mistrust that haunts contemporary America. They feed incivility and erode national community.

The same causes and effects blight borderlands and boundary-line policies, programs, and practices. Even more than within the confines of the national territory, the boundary line defines a deep-seated division between peoples that often degenerates into suspicious attitudes, rude behavior, and overt hostility. In the United States, walls, physical and virtual fences, customs and immigration officials, Border Patrol officers, and a bewildering array of representatives from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the Department of Agriculture, and a miscellany

of state, county, and local "task forces" populate the boundary line and borderlands urban and rural areas.

Fences and walls stand for security: we use them to enclose our houses and neighborhoods. They are decorative structures that are as much part of the landscape as trees and flowers. Industry and agriculture without fences would be difficult to imagine. Private ownership of land would be an abstract concept. But fences are more than functional objects. They are powerful symbols. The way we define ourselves as individuals and as a nation becomes concrete in how we build fences. Since fences allow us to include or exclude others, they play a significant role in personal, local, and even international relationships.

Between Fences explores those images and issues, and many others. Like many good didactic presentations dealing with socio-psychological, political, and philosophical subjects, the exhibition describes, informs, and entertains at one level of its presentation. But, like any effective teacher, the exhibition also educates at a more fundamental level by evoking reaction and reflection from students/viewers/visitors. Indeed, in some of its constituent parts, the exhibition's evocation certainly shades into provocation for some visitors.

The Between Fences Exhibition: Themes and Analysis

The Between Fences traveling exhibition features five free-standing sections highlighting five cultural and historical themes and the factual and conceptual contexts and manifestations of fences that relate to each theme. The five are "This Land Is My Land," "Farm and Fence," "Don't Fence Me In," "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors," and "Building Borders." The outline for the exhibition also includes thirteen "topical themes for development"; the topical themes range from "farmland" thru "wilderness" and present other subjects like "the fence industry," "public lands," and "reservation boundaries." Finally, to their credit, the curators' outline suggests the discussion of significant and potentially controversial sociopolitical and economic issues in a category entitled "cultural/metaphorical fences." That category includes both ongoing and timely topics like "civility," "ethnicity issues," and "home and security." The exhibition treats all of those themes implicitly or explicitly, sometimes quite comprehensively, sometimes less so.

"This Land Is My Land" is the first section of the exhibition. It begins by presenting the American, capitalistic conceptualization of landed property ownership; it chronicles early American land history; and it describes and analyzes home fence types and their sociocultural meaning. In America, both historical chronology and ideology emphasize landed property as being basic and singular. Land is characterized as "real estate" or "real" property—as if an automobile or a valuable painting is any less "real," or any less part of one's "estate." The exhibition's first artifact (after the white picket fence entrance) captures the point quite effectively in displaying three jars filled with soil from three landowners in Iowa, Michigan, and South Carolina. The jars sit before a mockup of a house ("home"), implying the relationship between owning land and enjoying a home—and "happiness."

The next conceptual focus grapples with a more controversial image in suggesting opposing principles informing private landownership and communal landholding. It touches on the dichotomy between "mine" and "ours." When Europeans migrated to North America, they encountered Native American peoples practicing communal ownership of land, streams, and forests within territory under tribal jurisdiction. The indigenous peoples were "territorial" in their relations with other tribal peoples, but Native Americans at the time recognized no "private" landownership within their territory. They employed fencelike constructions for hunting, but not to mark off their private space. In a fundamental and ultimate sense, individuals claimed no private space. The exhibition quotes John Winthrop, head of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, writing in 1629 that the Native Americans "ruleth over many lands without title or property . . . they enclose no ground."[2]

The European newcomers occupied, purchased, or took the land by force. Then, in a defining moment of American economic, social, and political historical evolution, the European conquerors forthwith fenced those lands to establish their ownership of landed property. As the exhibition text has it, "Colonists used fences to take land from Native Americans."[3] And in the process, they took a giant step toward establishing the fundamentally significant American concept of private ownership of real estate.

While the white man continues to define most reigning cultural and legal norms in the United States, Native Americans only reluctantly and partially accept those principles. The point is clearly articulated by the local exhibition of southern Arizona's Tohono O'odham Nation that

complements the national Museums on Main Street's (MoMS) Between Fences national exhibition. The first words on page 1 of the Tohono O'odham text boldly state the principle: The title reads "Fences . . . Not Our Tradition." The body text continues

> From the air, the difference between O'odham land and non-O'odham land is clear. Non-O'odham land is divided into squares and blocks carefully split up by wire and barbed wire fences. Non-O'odham came to our lands with this idea that one person can buy the earth and make it their family's private property forever.
>
> Fences are not part of our tradition. In O'odham villages, a family used a piece of land with the permission of the community. By growing good things on the land, the family kept the right to use it. When a family stopped using a piece of land, another family could ask to use that land instead. No single O'odham owned a piece of the earth. *There were no sales of private property.* (Emphasis added.)
>
> As you fly over our Nation today, there are no large squares of private property. As you fly over our Nation, you see the O'odham way of life.[4]

The O'odham text helps to cover the weakness of the Smithsonian's national Between Fences presentation of its "property philosophy." Perhaps it is too much to expect of a semi-popular product, but MoMS Between Fences makes almost no reference to the hallowed conceptualization articulated by the Tohono O'odham. The Nation relates the right to "hold" (not "own") property as being dependent upon its productive use. This principle defines a basic tenet in centuries of Christian thought and in land-reform programs in Mexico, throughout Latin America, and beyond. Moreover, the national exhibition offers no mention of the concept of cooperative ownership, then and now a significant form practiced in America's agricultural Midwest. The MoMS exhibition's treatment is rather better on the contemporary issues of the community's, the public's, right to regulate the use of property in areas like free range laws, public beaches, clear streams, split estates, and spite fences. The Smithsonian fortunately also alludes to real and symbolic fences in race and ethnic relations and in contemporary gated communities.

The second section of the Between Fences exhibition examines "early American land history." An emphasis on the profound significance of real property ownership flows quite smoothly from the previous section.

Early Americans embraced landownership. It symbolized economic independence, a highly valued virtue. Beyond its economic meaning, landownership also bestowed political rights; only landowners claimed the right (privilege?) to vote and hold public office. Property implied full citizenship and full acceptance in society. Property implied dignity. Indeed, fully 75 percent of all white men owned property by 1763 in colonial America.[5]

The exhibition then proceeds to the implications of early America's public land survey dictated by Congress in 1785. It required that all public land be surveyed before it could be offered for sale. Surveyors created the "rectangular land survey" to superimpose order across the North American continent. The grid created by the survey began at the western border of Pennsylvania and eventually covered almost 70 percent of the contemporary area of the United States, excluding Alaska and Hawaii. The survey had no relationship to the geography of North America, but it created a simple pattern, and its separation of huge tracts of land into smaller parcels made it suitable for easy assumption of ownership and, of course, demarcation by fences.

The survey exhibition quite skillfully captures two important features of the American character in its commentary on the land patterns created by the survey. The first is probably positive; the second quite damning. A geographer claims that the grid plan "conveys a sense of neatness, order, stability." A sociologist condemns the survey. He calls it "one of the most vicious modes devised for dividing lands" because it encouraged the isolation of individuals and raised the cost of roads and power lines.[6]

"Home fencing types and meanings" occupies the third part of the first section. Most of the discussion and the artifacts presented continue the themes of the American emphasis on privacy and the private, and on fences symbolizing the supposed joys of social status and wealth. Indeed, the commentary broaches the idea of "happiness." The presentation offers a nice analysis of the white picket fence as icon of tradition. Later, the exhibition implies the seeming contradiction between privacy and neat little yards as opposed to the American praise and popular adulation of "wide open spaces," but the presentation in neither place consciously considers the contradiction.

"Farm and Fence" is the topic of section two of the Between Fences exhibition. Fantasies of idyllic farm life feed the folklore of Americana. The presentation offers a bit of that, but it focuses more on fencing as

a physical indicator or reflection of American socioeconomic growth throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Especially before the onset of industrialization in the latter part of the nineteenth century, farm fences represented one of the largest investments made by American citizens. To protect crops from wildlife and livestock, farmers invested $2.00 in fencing to enclose every $1.00 of landholdings. By the onset of the Civil War in 1860, the value of fences reached as much as $1.35 billion. The value of all farms at that time totaled about $6.65 billion. That is, fencing accounted for more than 20 percent of the total value of farms. And fences lasted only ten to thirty years, portending periodic capital demands upon a farmer's income.[7]

The worm fence defined the most widely built barrier at the time. Other styles awaited the end of the nineteenth century. (Regional variants of the worm include the zigzag fence, the Virginia fence, and the split-rail fence.) Worm fences were constructed cheaply, quickly, and easily. They required no posts, pegs, or nails to support the structure. Simply built by taking ten-foot logs split into rails and stacking them one upon another, worm fences avoided the labor-intensive effort of post preparation and post-hole digging. Rails could be split as time permitted. (Recall the vision of lean, shirt-sleeved Abe Lincoln at the task.) Simply laying the rails atop one another and zigzagging the sections (or panels) constituted the construction process. A team of four could build up to one hundred worm fence panels per day, but only forty of the more time-consuming and expensive post-and-rail fence panels.

But worm fences required lots of lumber, the down side and the cause of the eventual decline of this fence's popularity. Enclosing a square 160-acre field called for 15,000 ten-foot rails. By contrast, a post-and-rail fence required just 8,800 rails and 200 posts.

Early on, the abundant forests in the eastern and much of the central United States facilitated harvesting trees and investing in worm fencing. But, by the mid-1800s, a fence crisis gripped the United States. Americans had nearly leveled the forests in their efforts to open farmland and build their cities, homes, and fences. Settlers moving westward encountered lands where trees were few or nonexistent. They lacked the plentiful and cheap raw materials for worm fence construction. Without ready and inexpensive sources of wood, fencing often cost more than the land it enclosed.

Technology came to the rescue. It took the form of innovations in weaved wire fencing. Mass-production of wire fence accompanied the

increasing industrialization of the agricultural sector across the board. At its most basic, wire fence building required more work—digging holes, setting posts, and stretching and stapling the fence fabric to prevent sagging or yielding to livestock and people. But the increasing sophistication of the manufacturing process produced significantly more wire, especially as the cost of lumber increased. Moreover, the transportation and acquisition of spools of weaved wire fencing also decreased the cost and effort its use entailed. Weaved wire fencing quickly became the standard product.

And the best was yet to come! Barbed wire appeared in the 1870s. Barbed wire was (is) a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it offered even more aid to farmers and ranchers; it proved quite effective in keeping animals (and humans) in or out, depending upon the side of the fence and the intentions of the farmer or rancher. In the same breath, barbed wire sparked alarm and opposition. It often injured livestock, not to mention farmers and ranchers themselves. Some states enacted legislation barring or restricting the use of barbed wire. Nonetheless, barbed wire continued to sell well throughout the country. Its popularity evolved partly because its imposing presence, its forbidding barbs, seemed to offer a sense of security.

In the process, barbed wire assumed an important role in the cultural folklore of the American West. To this day, displays of variations of barbed wire decorate many museums, roadside tourist traps, and small-town taverns. Barbed wire fascinates, perhaps because of the intimidating barbs. Indeed, the Smithsonian national exhibition and at least three of the six small Arizona museums' local displays include barbed wire boards.

Responding to the protests of many, inventors continued to develop gentler weaved wire fabrics and looms. By the 1890s, they had confected high-speed fencing-making machines that could simultaneously cut, weave, bend, and tie wire. Chain-link fencing assumed a significant presence in the twentieth century, especially in urban settings where it dominated the fencing scenario. By 1906, 80 percent of hardware stores in the West carried weaved-wire fence as standard stock. The Industrial Revolution and its accompanying mass-production machinery and assembly-line productive organization enabled barbed wire, chain link, and other weaved wire designs to reshape American life and the American landscape.

The third section of Between Fences, "Don't Fence Me In," explores the power of fences to create, mirror, and explain sociocultural, economic,

and political differences and disputes of competing interests. It depicts groups of people struggling to appropriate and control land and other natural resources to their advantage. Most fundamentally, the exhibition crystallizes how fences, walls, and other barriers reflect deeply held beliefs about how land and its resources ought to be utilized. The most salient public policy and legal question of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may well have been, Is livestock to be fenced in or fenced out? This divisive quandary stood at the center of passionate land wars fought by farmers, ranchers, and other groups associated with the land. Those disputed cases and their exquisite legalities occupied lawyers and filled court dockets, especially in newly developing areas west of the Mississippi. Decisions on whether to fence in crops, or to fence in or fence out hogs, cattle, and other hungry or meandering beasts, often meant determining the definition of public land as opposed to private property. And, of course, the decisions determined who had the primary obligation to pay for the fences and often, in the process, who paid for damages wrought by the animals.

Everett Dick, a historian of the period, catalogs and analyzes four types of fence and range wars raging during the period: cattlemen versus farmers, ranchers against homesteaders, small ranchers versus large ranchers, and ranchers against sheepherders.[8] These passionate conflicts involved the destruction of fences, overt physical violence, and sometimes even murder. In his first category of conflicts, Dick documents the arrogance, or ignorance, of cattlemen driving herds through farms as they moved their livestock one thousand miles or more from Texas to market in Kansas City and other locations. The massive, moving mass of cattle trampled fields and destroyed crops in their northward sojourn.

The cattlemen versus homesteaders drama has been a mainstay of cinematic Westerns for a century. Amongst thousands of other examples, the Rogers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma* captures the bad blood between the two groups in its rousing song "The Farmer and the Cowman." While the opening line preaches that "the farmer and the cowman should be friends," most of the song accurately documents the sociocultural and economic differences dividing the two groups. On sociocultural tensions, Rogers and Hammerstein depict the cowman as a boozer and womanizer in contrast to the more abstemious, homebody farmer—a caricature perhaps, but with an element of truth. As tempers rise during the song, the two sides begin to fight. The fisticuffs cease only when Aunt Eller fires off a gun. She stops violence

with the threat of violence—an accurate commentary on the fence wars of the period.

Dick highlights and discusses tension and conflict between small and large ranchers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as his third western expansion controversy involving fences. Many clashing interests divided the two groups. The fence surrounding the waterhole in the water-scarce West and Southwest dramatized the best-known and probably the most contentious example of the disputes.

Finally, conflicts between ranchers and sheepherders pockmarked the period. Cattleman charged that sheep grazed too close to the ground, thereby jeopardizing continuing growth of grass. Fences went up, tempers flared, violence often ensued. To make matters worse, ethnic differences often complicated and deepened anxieties and intensified passions. Ranchers tended to be Anglo-Americans. Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Basques, and other non-Anglos cared for sheep.

Conflicts over land continued into the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century. And fences often stand at the center of property rights disputes, land-use issues, and access to limited natural resources. As on the range, fences and walls symbolize and dramatize profound differences in the conceptualization of public rights in competition with the right to own (and fence) private property.

The West remains a frequent locus of those disputes. The population in the western United States increased almost 20 percent between 1990 and 2000. More Americans, neither farmers nor ranchers, expanded into the suburbs and moved to more rural and remote areas. Moves to geographically expanded suburban and exurban developments degenerated into urban sprawl, blighting the landscape and further challenging limited energy resources. Debates over sprawl and its impact on the environment rage throughout the West.

Moreover, disputes over access to public property erupt frequently. California supplies a well-known example. Although the California Coastal Act guarantees public access to its 1,160 mile shoreline, wealthy residents of some coastal communities have attempted to fence out the public. The glamour of celebrity Hollywood actors living in Malibu accentuated the role of that area in the conflicts. The rich and famous built fences to protect their self-arrogated right to enjoy "their" beaches. But a series of court cases have reaffirmed the right of public access.

Property disputes centering on limited natural resources and environmental preservation have also multiplied in the late twentieth century

and the first decade of the present century. Again, they often encompass differing and competitive conceptualizations of the distinction between private property rights and the imperatives of the commonweal, that is, society's rights. The beloved cow stands at the center of one of the most passionate confrontations. Cows meander, they graze—and they defecate. Fences designed to govern the access of livestock to water sources can preserve vegetation and water resources and water quality for plants, fish, and other aquatic life. Fences help diminish the erosion of stream banks, and they reduce destructive effluent emanating from cattle droppings deposited near the streams.

As early as 1966, Oregon activists proposed a Clean Streams Initiative. It would have facilitated lawsuits against livestock owners who violated water-quality standards. Interestingly, Oregon ranchers confected a variation of the fence theme. They argued that the prohibitive cost of fencing would drive them out of business. They defeated the environmental activists and their supporters. Even now, ranchers continue to be a formidable political presence in the West. Though many ranches are corporate enterprises or are owned by the rich and famous, "ranchers" seem to be romantic figures. They drip with an aura of prestige that transfers into political influence. The 1966 Oregon initiative failed. But the issue continues to mobilize environmental activists throughout the country—and beyond.

"Split estates" define yet anther recent property rights controversy. Again, the issue is mostly germane to the West, especially the Rocky Mountain states. The Stock Raising Act of 1916 gives land surface rights to ranchers, but reserves the subsoil hydrocarbon and mineral rights to the federal government. In turn, the federal government may lease the subsoil rights to mining and energy companies. There are about sixty million acres of such split-estate land in the West. That sixty million acres totals more land than fully forty-one of the fifty individual states that compose the union—a vast expanse of federal land that may be offered for exploitation by private mining and energy companies. Low-cost bed methane extraction technology developed in the 1990s allows energy companies to get to the methane gas by pumping out enormous quantities of subterranean water. [9] Predictably, the process leads to irreparable damage to the land. Water tables fall. Salt contamination accrues. Waterways and wells that sustain ranches and wildlife vanish.

A well-publicized case in point claimed headlines in 2008. In Montana, candy magnate Forrest E. Mars challenged Pinnacle Gas Resources' move

to drill on his ranch. Federal mining leases cover about 10,300 acres of Mars' 82,000-acre Diamond Cross Ranch. Mars feared the potentially destructive consequences of Pinnacle's plan to pump out water to exploit the subterranean methane. At the outset, ranch officials blocked Pinnacle workers' entry to the property. A state judge then ruled in favor of the energy company. Pinnacle began to drill ninety minutes after the judge's ruling. The analysis dryly concludes that the "energy companies . . . have the upper hand legally, and the landowners cannot deny access."

The fourth part of the Between Fences exhibition targets fences and civility, and fences and ethnicity. It descends from the macro focus of part three of the exhibition, which analyzed the role of property rights in disputes over issues like environmental degradation. Part four concentrates more on physical fences. They symbolize individual and societal incivility in mean-spirited spats and disputes between neighbors and invidious discrimination against minorities in the United States. The section begins with excerpts from Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" quoted in the opening of this paper. In the context of its presentation of civility and tolerance, the exhibition offers evidence of how neighbors often abandon every semblance of civility and tolerance and use fences to treat one another quite despicably.

Barbed wire fences have injured man and beast for more than a hundred years. Razor wire fences wax even more frightening, damaging to the point of dismemberment. But the spite fence may be the best known case in point. The distinction between a privacy fence and a spite fence may be in the eye of the beholder. On the other hand, it is also abundantly clear that some mean-spirited neighbors, at times quite consciously, design and erect structures to exclude neighborly interaction. They intend to insult their neighbor and to manifest their disdain, if not worse. Beyond the obvious psychological damage wrought by spite fences, they may also block views, light, and air. Judges have banned spite fences in some situations, declaring them to be a public nuisance. Still, fences of all sizes and types continue to play a central role in neighborly relations, good and bad.

Part four also examines other rules of law pertaining to personal property disputes and how fences play into them. In Iowa in 1902, the judicial principle promulgated by the state supreme court in *Hannalbalson v. Sessions* offers an intriguing example of the way courts treat fences in some situations when neighbors are in controversy. Depending upon personal predilection, the decision hovers between amusing and

disturbing. In a neighborly dispute that must have turned into an ugly altercation, the judges ruled

> One who extends her arm over a fence dividing her own premises from those of another is a trespasser, though her body remains on her own side of the fence. . . . It was enough that she thrust her hand or arm across the boundary to technically authorize the defendant to demand that she cease the intrusion, and to justify him in using reasonable and necessary force required for the expulsion of so much of her person as he found on his side.10

The exhibition's analysis then extrapolates from the incivility of hostility between neighbors to the level of societal norms in erecting fences, walls, and other barriers and markers calculated to exclude categories of peoples. Class, racial, and ethnic prejudice and discrimination have long characterized divisions in societies everywhere, certainly in the evolution of American history and culture. In Appalachia, those residing on "the hill" often enjoy both a higher topographical and a more elevated socioeconomic status than their neighbors living in "the holler." The same physical and socioeconomic differences characterize many Rocky Mountain towns and cities. Living in the foothills speaks to higher income levels and more prestigious social standing. And, it's often safer. Flash floods threaten those living on low floodplains.

"The other side of the tracks" defines a universally known metaphor in the American sociocultural idiom. The image originated in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, when railroads spread throughout the land. The tracks formed an easily recognized geographic and social dividing line. In contemporary U.S. cities, freeways frequently mark the boundary line between the rich and well born and their less-fortunate brethren. Moreover, as fences do, they often split asunder established neighborhoods in poor communities. City planners are more comfortable building their freeways through poor communities. The poor have fewer connections than the rich, they usually do not hire high-priced lawyers, and they mobilize less skillfully than the rich do.

Physical and socioeconomic barriers separating racial and ethnic groups also characterize the American historical and cultural tradition. Historically, "Chinatowns" may be the best known, but a "Little Italy" even now graces many eastern and Midwestern urban cityscapes. "Hunkytowns," defining areas inhabited by Eastern Europeans, are rather less known, but they are also found in many eastern and Midwestern urban areas.

Jewish ghettos never existed in the United States in quite the same way as they did in Europe, but identifiable Jewish neighborhoods continue in many cities and towns. For many years, Southwestern cities and towns had their Hispanic barrios. Now, barrios burgeon throughout the land. The Afro-American "black ghetto" may be the most familiar of recent and contemporary ethno-racial neighborhoods, Beyond the more extensive borders separating Afro-American and Hispanic neighborhoods, urban gangs often engage in "turf wars" disputing smaller units of the ghetto or the barrio.

The final section of part four of the Between Fences exhibition offers a short discussion of the gated community as a venue of fences and walls in contemporary America. A recent addition to the nation's landscape, gated communities burgeon in all sections of the country in both suburban and urban settings. They reflect several easily defined sentiments motivating a universal penchant for erecting fences and walls. They provide heightened security, they infer prestige, and they nurture interaction and neighborly community among residents with similar interests. Addressing the prestige component of the mix, the exhibition notes that "privacy is becoming the new status symbol in a society that is increasingly crowded."[11] In the universe of neighborhoods behind gates, the golf community probably predominates, but other social and recreational interests also bind the inhabitants of gated communities. Tucson, Arizona, boasts a gated community composed of retired teachers/scholars who have organized a "Senior Academy" to share and enrich their cultural and intellectual interests.

The exhibition also touches upon the negative implications of the growth of gated communities. Indeed, the provocative critique probes the profound human dilemma crystallized by walls and fences. Between Fences articulates the dilemma in several places. In the context of gated communities, the curators ask visitors to consider whether these neighborhoods are primarily nurturing internal community, or if they reflect a divisive and dangerous movement toward separation and withdrawal from the larger society.

The question is well taken, the curators are spot on. Gated communities probably reflect both community and separation. The positive side may be better known. Beyond the show of class differences, the negative implications of gated communities are less often scrutinized. They demand the discussion and analysis elicited by the exhibition. Fundamentally, increasing socioeconomic separation and isolation defines a

significant contributing cause to personal insecurity and alienation that, in turn, helps explain the troubling, ominous incivility that haunts contemporary American social and political life. Physical, socio-psychological, and cultural fences multiply in the United States and elsewhere. Americans and others fall more frequently into isolation and loneliness than in times past. And, they suffer the perilous consequences.

Sebastian Mallaby discusses the quandary in an essay entitled "America's Lonesome Road."[12] His op-ed essay reports on a 2006 scholarly paper from the *American Sociological Review.* The sociologists present devastating data. In 1985, Americans reported an average of three close friends; twenty years later they counted only two. Only one in four claimed having someone to discuss personal issues with. A "much higher" number of Americans than in 1985 named their spouse as their only confidant. "Over the past half century, the prevalence of unipolar depression in affluent countries has jumped tenfold" and "by some reckonings social isolation is as big a risk factor for premature death as smoking."

Real and imagined walls; physical, mental, and spiritual fences; gated communities; boundary-line defenses; and burgeoning security regulations reflect and contribute to the feelings of isolation, alienation, disaffection, loneliness, and fear that haunt present-day American society. The Smithsonian exhibition touches on every one of those sentiments in its exploration of fences in American history and culture.

The exhibition concludes in part five with descriptive panels, photos, and discussion of boundary-line barriers and markers between the United States and Canada and the United States and Mexico. It is entitled "Building Borders." That part of the Smithsonian exhibition combined with the borderlands location of three of the small Arizona communities participating in the traveling exhibition contributed to the conceptualization of this issue of *Journal of the Southwest.* Nogales, Arizona, sits on the boundary line and forms part of the cross-border binational community of Ambos Nogales. Topawa is on the Tohono O'odham Nation, which abuts the international line. The Nation counts members in both the United States and Mexico. Ajo is located about thirty-five miles north of the boundary line, and Ajo's International Sonoran Desert Alliance, the local host organization, enjoys a longstanding relationship with its Mexican neighbors.

Part five of the exhibition presents interesting and informative descriptive material and displays large photos of the two boundary lines. The photos juxtapose the physical differences between the northern border

with Canada versus the southern border with Mexico. Security has been expanded in the north, but the U.S.–Canadian boundary line remains largely unprotected even in the post-9/11 era. On the contrary, the southern line bristles with armed men of all descriptions and construction activities of all manners. The southern line is militarized and about to become even more fortified and more heavily protected.

The Fences curators get at a significant message crystallizing the differences between the two boundary lines and also touching on more general motivations for constructing walls and fences. The signage in the exhibition quite correctly proposes that "our perceptions of America and its neighbors are reflected in the way we build our boundaries."[13]

A "we/they" dichotomy explains Americans' perceptions of themselves and their relationships with their neighbors. The overwhelming majority of Americans see little difference between the United States and Canada. That perception is not necessarily incorrect, but it is a trifle naïve. Many Canadians define themselves as being more civilized, less aggressive, and more composed than their American neighbors. Whatever the ultimate reality may be, Americans mostly believe that "we" are "they" and they are we. No need for walls and fences between family members. On the contrary, Americans see Mexico and Mexicans as being fundamentally different. The perceptions mix disdain, fear, fascination, and fantasy. But it is clear to most Americans that "they" are not "we," and we are not they. Hence, fences separating disparate peoples and cultures seem fitting and proper to most Americans.

The Between Fences exhibition ends at a simple obelisk where visitors are asked, "How do you build your fences?" The exhibition presents visitors with an engaging view of the history of a built structure and its cultural impact that many Americans overlook. Fences are always and everywhere. Their placement and their construction speak volumes about American society. The remainder of the papers in this issue describe and analyze walls, fences, and other barriers on the U.S.–Mexican boundary line. They tell much of that reality. And like the exhibition itself, they offer perceptive insights into the meaning of fences wherever they may be found. ✣

Notes

1. Judith Viorst on the "Diane Rehm Show," National Public Radio, December 24, 2007.

2. "Between Fences," exhibition text, p. 4, last revised November 22, 2004. This document is a later version of the source referenced in note 5.

3. Ibid.

4. Eric J. Kaldahl, Tohono O'odham Nation Cultural Center and Museum, "Between Fences Local Exhibition Script," December 11, 2007, p. 2 of 18.

5. "Between Fences Exhibition Outline, Themes and Text," n.d., p. 4. This document varies a bit from the "Between Fences," reference in note 2.

6. Ibid., pp. 3–4.

7. Ibid., p. 5

8. Ibid, p. 10

9. For the following discussion, see Jim Robbins, "Candy Magnate Loses Bid to Bar Drilling on Ranch," *New York Times,* online edition, January 10, 2008 (www.nytimes.com/2008/01/10/us/10montana.html).

10. "Between Fences," p. 14.

11. Ibid., p. 30.

12. Sebastian Mallaby, "America's Lonesome Road," *East Valley Tribune* (Mesa, AZ), July 16, 2006, p. F4.

13. Between Fences, p. 38.