JBJ, sketch, courtyard with cottonwoods, residence, La Cienega, New Mexico

Ghosts at the Door

The house stands by itself, lost somewhere in the enormous plain. Next to it is a windmill, to the rear a scattering of barns and shelters and sheds. In every direction, range and empty field reach to a horizon unbroken by a hill or the roof of another dwelling or even a tree. The wind blows incessantly; it raises a spiral of dust in the corral. The sun beats down on the house day after day. Straight as a die the road stretches out of sight between a perspective of fence and light poles. The only sound is the clangor of the windmill, the only movement the wind brushing over the grass and wheat, and the afternoon thunderheads boiling up in the western sky.

But in front of the house on the side facing the road there is a small patch of ground surrounded by a fence and a hedge. Here grow a dozen or more small trees—Chinese elms, much whipped and tattered by the prevailing gale. Under them is a short expanse of bright-green lawn.

Trees, lawn, hedge, and flowers—these things, together with much care and a great expenditure of precious water, all go to make up what we call the front yard. Not only here on the western farmstead but on every one of a million farms from California to Maine. All front yards in America are much the same, as if they had been copied from one another, or from a remote prototype.

They are so much part of what is called the American scene that you are not likely to wonder why they exist. Particularly when you see them in the East and Midwest; there they merge into the woodland landscape and into the tidy main street of a village as if they all belonged together. But when you travel west you begin to mark the contrast between the yard and its surroundings. It occurs to you that the yard is sometimes a very artificial thing, the product of much work and thought and care. Whoever tends them so well out here on the lonely flats (you say to yourself) must think them very important.

And so they are. Front yards are a national institution—essential to every home, like a Bible somewhere in the house. It is not their size which makes them so. They are usually so small that from a vertical or horizontal distance of more than a mile they can hardly be seen. Nor are they always remarkable for what they contain. No, but they are pleasant oases of freshness and moving shade in the heat of the monotonous plain. They are cool in the summer and in the winter their hedges and trees do much to break the violence of the weather. The way they moderate the climate justifies their existence.

They serve a social purpose, too. By common consent, the appearance of a front yard, its neatness and luxuriance, is an index of the taste and enterprise of the family who owns it. Weeds and dead limbs are a disgrace, and the man who rakes and waters and clips after work is usually held to be a good citizen.

So this infinitesimal patch of land, only a few hundred square feet, meets two very useful ends: it provides a place for outdoor enjoyment, and it indicates social standing. But in reality, does it always do those things?

Many front yards, and by no means the least attractive, flourish on western ranches and homesteads many miles from neighbors. They waste their sweetness on the desert air. As for any front yard being used for recreation, this seems to be a sort of national myth. Perhaps on Sunday afternoons when friends come out from town to pay a visit, chairs are tentatively placed on the fresh-cut grass. For the rest of the week the yard is out of bounds, just as the now obsolete front parlor always used to be. The family is content to sit on the porch when it wants fresh air. It admires the smooth lawn from a distance.

The true reason why every American house has to have a front yard is probably very simple: it exists to satisfy a love of beauty. Not every beauty, but beauty of a special, familiar kind; one that every American can recognize and enjoy, and even after a fashion recreate for himself.

The front yard, then, is an attempt to reproduce next to the house a certain familiar or traditional setting. In essence, the front yard is a landscape in

miniature. It is not a garden; its value is by no means purely esthetic. It is an enclosed space which contains a garden among other things. The patch of grass and Chinese elms and privet stands for something far larger and richer and more beautiful. It is a much reduced version, as if seen through the wrong end of a pair of fieldglasses, of a spacious countryside of woods and hedgerows and meadow.

Such was the countryside of our remote forebears; such was the original, the protolandscape which we continue to remember and cherish, even though for each generation the image becomes fainter and harder to recall.

Loyalty to a traditional idea of how the world should look is something which we do not always take into account when analyzing ourselves or others. Yet it is no more improbable than loyalty to traditional social or economic ideas or to traditional ideas in art. The very fact that we are almost completely unaware of our loyalty to a protolandscape allows us to express that loyalty with freedom. We have not yet been made ashamed of being old-fashioned. But what precisely is that landscape which our memory keeps alive and which an atavistic instinct tries to recreate?

It is not exclusively American. It is not New England or colonial Virginia or Ohio. It is nothing based on pictures and vacation trips to the East. It is northwestern Europe. Whatever the ethnic origin of the individual American, however long his family may have lived in this country, we are all descendants, spiritually speaking, of the peoples of Great Britain and Ireland, of the Low Countries, and to a lesser extent of northern France and western Germany. It was from those countries that the colonists transferred the pattern of living which is still the accepted pattern of living in North America. It may not remain so much longer, but that is something else again. We are all of us exiles from a landscape of streams and hills and forests. We come from a climate of cold dark winters, a few weeks of exuberant spring, and abundant snow and rain. Our inherited literary and popular culture both reflect that far-off environment, and until recently our economy and society reflected it too.

For almost a thousand years after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the history of Europe was the history of a slow and persistent deforestation. When the classical civilization began to die, Europe ceased to be one unit and became two. The region around the Mediterranean preserved a good deal of the Roman heritage; for the most part its population did not greatly change and the land remained under cultivation. But for several reasons the entire northwestern portion of the empire—Great Britain, the Low Countries, northern

France, and western Germany—began to revert to wilderness. Roads, towns, cities, and farms were gradually abandoned, fell into ruin, and in time were hidden by brush and forest. The peoples whom we call the barbarians, who later moved in from the East, had thus to reclaim the land all over again. They were obliged to take back from the forest by main force whatever land they needed for farms and pastures and villages. They were pioneers no less tough than those who settled our own West. Their numbers were so few and their means so primitive that every lengthy war and every epidemic saw much newly cleared land revert to undergrowth once more. It was not until a century ago that the last wastelands on the Continent were put under cultivation. The whole undertaking was an extraordinary phase of European history, one which we know very little about. How well it succeeded is shown by the fact that Holland, now a land of gardens, originally meant "Land of Forests."

Could this incessant warfare with the forest fail to have an effect on the men who engaged in it? Does it not help to explain an attitude toward nature quite unlike that of the peoples farther south? The constant struggle against cold and solitude and darkness, the omnipresent threat of the wilderness and the animals that lived in it, in time produced a conviction that there was no existing on equal terms with nature. Nature had to be subdued, and in order to subdue her, men had to study her and know her strength. We have inherited this philosophy, it sometimes seems, in its entirety: this determination to know every one of nature's secrets and to establish complete mastery over her; to love in order to possess and eventually destroy. It is not a point of view which has worked very well here in the West. If we had thought more in terms of cooperation with a reluctant and sensitive environment, as the Mediterranean people still do, and less in terms of "harnessing" and "taming," we would have not made such a shambles of the southwestern landscape.

That aggressive attitude is, however, only part of what the earliest farmers in northern Europe bequeathed us. Since they created the human landscape themselves and under great difficulties, they had a deep affection for it. They looked upon the combination of farmland and meadow and forest as the direct expression of their way of life. It was a harsh and primitive landscape, just as by all accounts it was a harsh and primitive way of life, but it was not lacking in a sentiment for the surrounding world, nor in an element of poetry. The perpetual challenge of the forest stirred the imagination as did no other feature in the environment. It was the forest where the outlaw went to hide, it was there that adventurous men went to make a new farm and a new

and freer life. It teemed with wolves, boars, bears, and wild oxen. It contained in its depths the abandoned clearings and crumbling ruins of an earlier civilization. It was a place of terror to the farmer and at the same time a place of refuge. He was obliged to enter it for wood and game and in search of pasture. For hundreds of years the forest determined the spread of population and represented the largest source of raw materials; it was an outlet for every energy. Its dangers as well as its wealth became part of the daily existence of every man and woman.

When at last it was removed from the landscape, our whole culture began to change and even to disintegrate. A Frenchman has recently written a book to prove that the decline in popular beliefs and traditions (and in popular attitudes toward art and work and society) in his country was the direct outcome of the destruction a century ago of the last areas of untouched woodland. If he is correct, how many of those traditions can be left among us who have denuded half a continent in less than six generations? The urge to cut down trees is stronger than ever. The slightest excuse is enough for us to strip an entire countryside. And yet—there is the front yard with its tenderly cared for Chinese elms, the picnic ground in the shadow of the pines, and a mass of poems and pictures and songs about trees. A Mediterranean would find this sentimentality hard to understand.

The old ambivalence persists. But the reverence for the forest is no longer universal. Our household economy is largely free from dependence on the resources of the nearby forest, and any feeling for the forest itself is a survival from childhood associations. Until the last generation, it might have been said that much of every American (and northern European) childhood was passed in the landscape of traditional forest legends. Time had transformed the reality of the wilderness into myth. The forest outlaw became Robin Hood. The vine-grown ruins became the castle of Sleeping Beauty. The frightened farmer, armed with an axe for cutting firewood, was the hero of Little Red Riding Hood and the father of Hansel and Gretel. In a sense, our youngest years were a reenactment of the formative period of our culture, and the magic of the forest was never entirely forgotten in adult life. Magic, of course, is part of every childhood; yet if a generation grew up on the magic of Superman and Mickey Mouse and Space Cadet instead, if it lived in the empty and inanimate landscape which provides a background for those figures, how long would it continue to feel the charms of the forest? How long would the Chinese elms be watered and cared for?

After the forest came the pasture, and the pasture in time became the lawn. When a Canadian today cuts down trees in order to start a farm, he says he is "making land." He might with equal accuracy say that he is "making lawn," for the two words have the same origin and once had the same meaning. Our lawns are merely the civilized descendants of the medieval pastures cleared among the trees. In the New Forest in England, a "lawn" is still an open space in the woods where cattle are fed.

So the lawn has a very prosaic background, and if lawns seem to be typically northern European—the English secretly believe that there are no true lawns outside of Great Britain—that is simply because the farmers in northern Europe raised more cattle than did the farmers near the Mediterranean, and had to provide more feed.

As cattle and sheep raising increased in importance, the new land wrested from the forest became more and more essential to the farmer: he set the highest value on it. But to recognize the economic worth of a piece of land is one thing; to find beauty in it is quite another. Wheat fields and turnip patches were vital to the European peasant, yet he never, as it were, domesticated them. The lawn was different. It was not only part and parcel of a pastoral economy, it was also part of the farmer's leisure. It was the place for sociability and play; and that is why it was and still is looked upon with affection.

The common grazing land of every village is actually what we mean when we speak of the village common, and it was on the common that most of our favorite group pastimes came into being. Maypole and Morris dances never got a foothold in northern America, and for that we can thank the Puritans. But baseball, like cricket in England, originated on the green. Before cricket the national sport was archery, likewise a product of the common. Rugby, and its American variation, football, are both products of the same pastoral landscape, and golf is the product of the very special pastoral landscape of lowland Scotland. Would it not be possible to establish a bond between national sports and the type of terrain where they developed? Lawn bowling is favored in Holland and near the Mediterranean—both regions of gardens and garden paths. A Continental hunt is still a forest hunt; the English or Irish hunt needs a landscape of open fields and hedgerows. Among the many ways in which men exploit the environment and establish an emotional bond with it, we should not forget sports and games. And the absence among certain peoples of games inspired by the environment is probably no less significant.

In the course of time, the private dwelling took over the lawn. With the exclusion of the general public, a new set of pastimes was devised: croquet, lawn tennis, badminton, and the lawn party. But all of these games and gatherings, whether taking place on the common or on someone's enclosed lawn, were by way of being schools where certain standards of conduct and even certain standards of dress were formed. And in an indefinable way the lawn is still the background for conventionally correct behavior. The poor sport walks off the field; the poor citizen neglects his lawn.

Just as the early forest determined our poetry and legend, that original pasture land, redeemed from the forest for the delectation of cows and sheep, has indirectly determined many of our social attitudes. Both are essential elements of the protolandscape. But in America the lawn is more than essential; it is the very heart and soul of the entire front yard. We may say what we like about the futility of these areas of bright green grass; we may lament the waste of labor and water they represent here in the semi-arid West. Yet to condemn them or justify them on utilitarian or esthetic grounds is to miss the point entirely. The lawn, with its vague but nonetheless real social connotations, is precisely that landscape element which every American values most. Unconsciously, he identifies it with every group event in his life: childhood games, commencement and graduation with white flannels or cap and gown, wedding receptions, "having company," the high school drill field and the big game of the season. Even the cemetery is now landscaped as a lawn to provide an appropriate background for the ultimate social event. How can a citizen be loyal to that tradition without creating and taking care of a lawn of his own? Whoever supposes that Americans are not willing to sacrifice time and money in order to keep a heritage alive regardless of its practical value had better count the number of sweating and panting men and women and children pushing lawnmowers on a summer's day. It is quite possible that the lawn will go out of fashion. But if it does, it will not be because the toiling masses behind the lawnmower have rebelled. It will be because a younger generation has fewer convivial associations with it; has found other places for group functions and other places to play: the gymnasium, the school grounds, the swimming pool, or the ski run. It will be because the feeling of being hedged in by conventional standards of behavior has become objectionable.

To hedge in, to fence in; the language seems to shift in meaning and emphasis almost while we use it. Until not long ago, neither of those words meant "to keep in"; they meant "to keep out." A fence was a de-fence against trespassers and wild animals. The hedge was a coveted symbol of independence

and privacy. Coveted, because it was not every farmer who could have one around his land.

Like the lawn and the tree, the hedge is something inherited from an ancient agricultural system and an ancient way of life. The farming of the Middle Ages is usually called the open-field system. Briefly, it was based on community ownership (or community control) of all the land—ownership by a noble amounted to the same thing—with fields apportioned to the individual under certain strict conditions. Among them were rules as to when the land was to lie fallow, what day it was to be plowed, and when the village cattle were to be allowed to graze on it. Much modified by social and economical revolutions, the open-field system still prevails over much of northern Europe. Fences and hedges, as indications of property lines, naturally had no place in such a scheme.

In the course of generations, a more individualistic order came into being, and when for several good reasons it was no longer desirable to have the cattle roaming at will over the countryside, the first thing to appear, the first change in the landscape, was the hedge. With that hedge to protect his land against intruders of every kind, the individual peasant or farmer began for the first time to come into his own, and to feel identified with a particular piece of land. He did not necessarily own it; more often than not he was a tenant. But at least he could operate it as he saw fit, and he could keep out strangers.

Each field and each farm was defined by this impenetrable barrier. It served to provide firewood, now that the forests were gone, shelter for the livestock, and a nesting place for small game. Most important of all, the hedge or fence served as a visible sign that the land was owned by one particular man and not by a group or community. In America we are so accustomed to the fence that we cannot realize how eloquent a symbol it is in other parts of the world. The Communist governments of Europe do realize it, and when they collectivize the farms, they first of all destroy the hedgerows—even when the fields are not to be altered in size.

The free men who first colonized North America were careful to bring the hedge and fence with them, not only to exclude the animals of the forest but to indicate the farmers' independent status. Hedges and fences used to be much more common in the United States than they are now. One traveler in revolutionary New England enumerated five different kinds, ranging from stone walls to rows of upended tree stumps. In Pennsylvania at the same period, fields were often bordered with privet. As new farms were settled in the Midwest, every field as a matter of course had its stone wall or hedge of privet

or hawthorn, or permanent wooden fence. And along these walls and fences a small wilderness of brush and vine and trees soon grew, so that every field had its border of shade and movement, and its own wildlife refuge. The practice, however inspired, did much to make the older parts of the nation varied and beautiful, and we have come to identify fences and hedges with the American rural landscape at its most charming.

As a matter of fact, the hedge and wooden fence started to go out of style a good hundred years ago. Mechanized farming, which started then, found the old fields much too small. A threshing machine pulled by several teams of horses had trouble negotiating a ten-acre field, and much good land was wasted in the corners. So the solution was to throw two or more fields together. Then agricultural experts warned the farmers that the hedge and fence rows, in addition to occupying too much land, harbored noxious animals and birds and insects. When a farm was being frequently reorganized, first for one commercial crop then another, depending on the market, permanent fences were a nuisance. Finally, Joseph Glidden invented barbed wire, and at that the last hedgerows began to fall in earnest.

There were thus good practical reasons for ridding the farm of the fences. But there was another reason too: a change in taste. The more sophisticated landscape architects in the midcentury strongly advised homeowners to do away with every fence if possible. A book on suburban gardening, published in 1870, flatly stated: "that kind of fence is best which is least seen, and best seen through." Hedges were viewed with no greater favor. "The practice of hedging one's ground so that the passer-by cannot enjoy its beauty, is one of the barbarisms of old gardening, as absurd and unchristian in our day as the walled courts and barred windows of a Spanish cloister."

Pronouncements of this sort had their effect. Describing the early resistance to the antifence crusade during the last century, a writer on agricultural matters explained it thus: "Persons had come to feel that a fence is as much a part of any place as a walk or a wall is. It had come to be associated with the idea of home. The removal of stock was not sufficient reason for the removal of the fence. At best such a reason was only negative. The positive reason came in the development of what is really the art-idea in the outward character of the home . . . with the feeling that the breadth of setting for the house can be increased by extending the lawn to the actual highway."

Utilitarian considerations led the farmer to suppress the fences between his fields; esthetic considerations led the town and city dwellers to increase the size of their lawns. Neither consideration had any influence on those who had

homesteaded the land, lived on it, and therefore clung to the traditional concept of the privacy and individualism of the home. The front yard, however, had already become old-fashioned and countrified fifty years ago; the hedge and picket fence, now thought of as merely quaint, were judged to be in the worst taste. Today, in spite of their antiquarian appeal, they are held in such disrepute that the modern architect and the modern landscapist have no use for either of them; and they are not allowed in any housing development financed by the FHA.

Why? Because they disturb the uniformity of a street vista; because they introduce a dangerous note of individualistic nonconformity; because, in brief, they still have something of their old meaning as symbols of self-sufficiency and independence. No qualities in twentieth-century America are more suspect than these.

It is not social pressure which has made the enclosed front yard obsolescent, or even the ukase of some housing authority, egged on by bright young city planners. We ourselves have passed the verdict. The desire to identify ourselves with the place where we live is no longer strong.

It grows weaker every year. One out of a hundred Americans lives in a trailer; one out of every three American farmers lives in a rented house. Too many changes have occurred for the old relationship between man and the human landscape to persist with any vigor. A few decades ago the farmer's greatest pride was his woodlot, his own private forest and the forest of his children. Electricity and piped-in or bottled gas have eliminated the need for a supply of fuel, and the groves of trees, often fragments of the virgin forest, are now being cut down and the stumps bulldozed away. The small fields have disappeared, the medium-sized fields have disappeared; new procedures in feeding and fattening have caused meadows to be planted to corn, range to be planted to wheat; tractors make huge designs where cattle once grazed. A strand of charged wire, a few inches off the ground, takes the place of the fence, and can be moved to another location by one man in one day. The owner of a modern mechanized farm, and even of a scientific ranch, need no longer be on hand at all hours of the day and night. He can and often does commute to work from a nearby town. His children go to school and spend their leisure there, and the remote and inconvenient house on the farm is allowed to die.

All this means simply one thing: a new human landscape is beginning to emerge in America. It is even now being created by the same combination of forces that created the old one: economic necessity, technological evolution, a

change in social outlook and in our outlook on nature. Like the landscape of the present, this new one will in time produce its own symbols and its own beauty. The six-lane highway, the aerial perspective, the clean and spacious countryside of great distances and no detail will in a matter of centuries be invested with magic and myth.

That landscape, however, is not yet here. In the early dawn where we are, we can perhaps discern its rough outlines, but we cannot have any real feeling for it. We cannot possibly love the new, and we have ceased to love the old. The only fraction of the earth for which an American can still feel the traditional kinship is that patch of trees and grass and hedge he calls his yard. Each one is a peak of a sinking world, and all of them grow smaller and fewer as the sea rises around them.

But even the poorest of them, even those which are meager and lonely and without grace, have the power to remind us of a rich common heritage. Each is a part of us, evidence of a vision of the world we have all shared.

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