

## **Of Time and the River**

The late Thomas Wolfe's beautiful title seems to fit what the city of Sacramento, Calif., is planning. This is the restoration of a portion of the river waterfront which once linked the Pacific Ocean with the Missouri River. Here, in eight days, came a Pony Express rider with news of Lincoln's First Inaugural; here, in dust or mud, the overland stages from St. Jo pulled up; here the steamers from San Francisco brought supplies for the northern gold mines, and here were loaded hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of gold and much more of the Comstock silver with which the West helped save the Union.

A century ago the Sacramento wharves were romantic, sinful and magnificent. In time the railroad killed them; later the automobile and the airplane invaded the railroad's field. The old docks decayed into a litter of warehouses and flophouses. They are gone, and no carefully "aged" reproductions can substitute for the real thing. As the sites of the American past are lost, however, there is a tendency to indulge in a game that might be called "instant history": the nostalgic reconstruction of scholarly stage-settings as three-dimensional educational exercises.

Now Sacramento is considering this kind of reconstruction for the old part of the city—in order to let the tourist and even the historian dream for a while about the time that was and is no more, of long-vanished men, good and bad—Sutter, Frémont, the "mountain men," above all the gold diggers. The idea is appealing, but the question is how much of this is cultural Disneyland, and how much the legitimate rebuilding of a city.

Such demonstrations, at their best, have the virtue of reminding us that time is a dimension and history itself an ever-flowing river. At their worst, they can turn American communities into places of synthetic history and architectural artifice. One wishes that Americans had not destroyed so much and had saved a little more.