Sowing Clover

by Tonya Stiles

I am hopelessly nostalgic. By nature, it seems, I am drawn to historic town squares, brick streets, and dusty museums. I am a sucker for trains and soda fountains. Any pre-World War II architectural style fascinates me. And this fascination, though it has brought me many charming afternoons and road trips, is sometimes wholly depressing.

Have you ever found yourself feeling resentful towards those "Historic Landmark" plaques? I have. Having spent hours building up the pleasant delusion that I'm actually walking down a street in the 1890s, I don't want to see a bunch of plaques reminding me that, no, this street is just a novelty—a memory. I would rather ignore the likelihood of, within two blocks, stumbling upon a Walmart, a McDonald's or an AutoZone. And I resent the generations who inherited so many would-be "landmarks," but abandoned them, deciding to chase convenience down that never-ending rabbit hole of strip malls and cheap Chinese drywall.

I always wonder how one could make that choice? How can someone be raised in a Queen Anne Victorian, or a rambling farmhouse, or a shady Craftsman, and choose to just walk away? Walking through these old towns, so many empty shells of grand homes sit abandoned, crumbling into their foundations. Did no one think they were beautiful enough to save? Or did no one imagine that, as years wore on, their childhood homes would grow rarer, crowded out by pre-fab auto parts stores and fast food joints. Did anyone know that those years constituted a far more beautiful age than those to come? For instance, I wonder if even one person, seventy or eighty years ago, surveying the San Francisco skyline, thought to himself, "Well, it's all downhill from here."

Or whether, a hundred years ago, one man walking across a bridge in London, or through an alleyway in rural France, thought, " I'd better take a good look today. It's only going to get uglier from now on." It would have been quite a visionary feat, I know, but I can almost imagine that one 1920's woman, walking with hat and gloves among Boston's brick row houses, realizing, suddenly, "The world will never be more beautiful than it is now." And the strange exhilaration and sadness that would follow such a vision.

I know it's naïve, of course, to say that our grandparents and great-grandparents lived in a better world than we do. What idiot would claim that life was any better for a woman, a black person, a sick, or unemployed person a hundred years ago? It's only the misty-eyed conservative who remembers with fondness the "glories" of the Antebellum South or the "simpler" way of life led by his white, privileged forefathers, while forgetting, conveniently, the brutality and devastation those times wrought on the un-white, the un-male, the un-rich. No, I wouldn't want to be one of those types. I would never take back the progress of the last century, or the evolution of thought.

But it seems the unfortunate way of the world that each important triumph has necessitated a corresponding sacrifice. The last century has seen ever-progressing human rights and ever-dazzling scientific discovery. Entire philosophies and cosmologies took hold, and were shuttered, and then rose again. Old gods, with their constant demands for judgment and division, fell away, to be replaced by new gods. And then those new gods—analysis, individualism, consumerism—settled in, and began to demand ransoms of their own.

The most seductive among these new Deities? The god of efficiency. "Isn't there an easier way?" he asks. And there always was. With the advent of new technologies, there was always an easier, or faster, way. Why should you keep building a car the same way you built a carriage? Why should you spend thirty dollars for the cart at your friend's store when the shop at the edge of town sells carts for twenty-five?

That vague notion, efficiency, spawned a whole new movement at the close of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. The assembly line! What an incredible idea! Fantastic for the consumer, who could purchase a car at unheard-of prices. And for the worker—who never once "made" anything, who was as replaceable as the cogs he placed, one after another, after another, in each wheel—well, he couldn't complain—for fear that he'd be shipped, efficiently, out the door.

And so, gradually, we fled our past. Books, which required such efforts of imagination, were increasingly set aside for the easier pleasures of the radio. The radio was surpassed by the even less demanding fantasia of television. So much simpler, and faster.

What a revelation, to put down your letter-writing pen and pick up a telephone receiver. And now even that act seems passe. I can still remember the last time I spun the dial of a rotary phone, calling my parents from the church office, needing a ride home from catechism. Now our telephones talk to us in their own voices, navigate for us, and entertain us through those boring meals with our families.

How many of those losses were necessary, I wonder, in order to bring about the better forms of progress? Could we have still fought for Civil Rights without the interstate freeways? Could we have brought about laws against sexual harassment without the invention of Jello and the microwave dinner? Could we have kept both rock'n'roll and the family farm? I suspect we could have, if we only had had the desire.

The sum of what we've lost is charm. Why do Americans love to vacation in places like New Orleans, Charleston, or Napa Valley? What's the appeal of a Bed and Breakfast? Charm. It's charming to sleep in a beautiful old home. It's charming to live a few days sans cell phone and ipad. It's charming to buy your bread from a bakery, your chocolate malt from a soda fountain, and your wine from the vineyard. And why are those things charming? In part, it is because they require time. They usually require walking, or driving down cramped, winding roads. They require "going out of your way." They require a deliberate choice of inefficiency, an extravagance to the modern American.

We have a desire for the trappings of the past, but, short of becoming Amish, our only outlet now for that desire is within the perverted reality of the tourism industry. We feel a longing for the slower, quieter days, but we receive only a facsimile. For instance, my husband and I recently spent a weekend driving back roads around the Northern edge of the Kansas-Missouri border, and found ourselves, for one night, in a small town North of Kansas City, along the banks of the Missouri River. Clearly, the beautiful little town had fashioned itself a regional tourist destination. A sign in the window of the Chamber of Commerce read, "Voted #1 weekend destination of Kansas City." I could see why that would be. Lovely, winding roads descended into the town center, which offered a plethora of Victorian architecture and green, leafy charm. At first, I was entirely caught up. But, as we poked our heads into the little shops, I felt increasingly less enthralled. The town had it all, right? Antique shops, wineries, local pottery. But it was all for our benefit. All for tourism. One shop worker admitted, "Main Street does most all its business Friday through Sunday." The grocery store was out on the edge of town, close to the highway. So was the Dollar General. That was the real town, for the people who lived there. This lovely little main street was just for us.

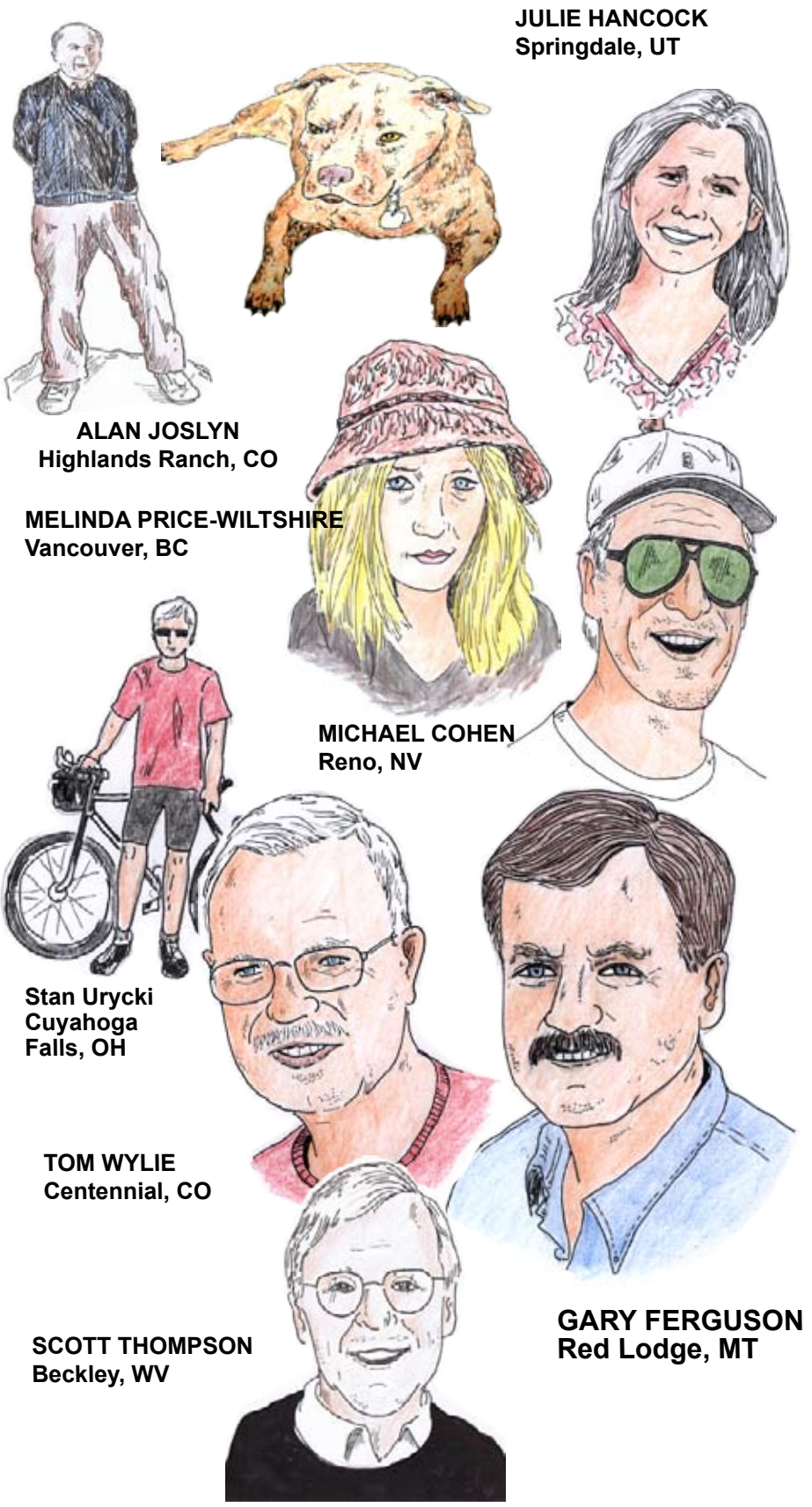
And, knowing that, the charm was gone.

When did the tourism trade become the only value of beauty? Every lovely

little town in America is already considering how to turn their loveliness into profit. How to "brand" that loveliness, and then "market" it to attract dollars. It's so much the rule that now I'm suspicious of any town with leafy well-kept historical neighborhoods, or a busy Victorian Main Street. "Is this the real town?" I wonder. "Are those locals in the coffee shop?" The only benefit, it seems, of having an attractive town is to sell that attractiveness to outsiders. Just having a nice town, for the the sake of itself, doesn't occur to anyone. It just doesn't enter the equation. And, if the town isn't trying to attract tourists, then the value of its history is nil. In the quiet, depressed towns around the Midwest, too many miles from the interstate economy, historic homes and buildings collapse from neglect. We drive by dozens of working farms near our town, and it always saddens me to see the empty old farmhouses, windowless and rotting to nothing, while twenty yards closer to the road is the new, modular home where the family now lives. Wouldn't it haunt me, I think, to live next to my father's childhood home and to watch it crumble into dust?

I could (and likely will) write a million articles on all the horrible effects of efficiency. That prevailing ethos of "cheaper, faster, easier" is probably the most destructive idea ever to occur to the human race. It dehumanizes every aspect of our lives—perverts every noble thought or memory for profit. But the everyday face of that heartache, to me, is watching the disintegration of those old, forgotten buildings. Each day of the last century has presented that choice—to preserve the past, or to abandon it, and each day we chose the latter. We chose that homogenized sprawl of Walmarts and fast foods and Home Depots. It was so much cheaper, and faster, and easier than keeping the downtown alive. We chose to abandon our parents' front porches for the spacious, air-conditioned suburban homes. It was so much easier that way. Those old buildings were built to be beautiful—with intricate metalwork or gingerbread trim or turrets. (One building nearby, which will soon be torn down, has hearts embellished into the concrete arch of each window.) Now we build for the ease of amenities, and all those beautiful, painstakingly detailed buildings are outnumbered, and will eventually be replaced, by pre-fabricated metal boxes.

It would be difficult for me, if I were presented with the option of returning to the past or remaining in my own time. As a woman, I wouldn't give up my enfranchisement. I wouldn't want to see the institutionalized prejudice, or the endemic neglect of the poor, which has characterized so much of American history. At the same time, I would relish living in a less efficient world. I would love to see these old neglected buildings in their heyday—shining and buzzing with activity. I would love to sit on a downtown bench, watching the families promenade along brick streets. I would ask strangers, "Isn't this the most beautiful place?" And I wonder how I would keep my face from falling when, inevitably, they responded back, "Oh, surely the best is yet to come."



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