

# STUDIES IN MIDWESTERN HISTORY

VOL. 2, No. 8

September, 2016

## ESCAPING CUPCAKE LAND

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*"I came to the city that nobody recognized because it looked like every other city." --Wendell Berry<sup>2</sup>*

Once in awhile I watch one of the House and Garden channel's house-hunting / house-refurbishing programs with my wife. Whether the show is set in Toronto or Atlanta, it's frequently in the suburbs, and I'm just as frequently struck by the familiarity of some of those suburban neighborhoods where I've never been. The interchangeability of those houses and streets is quite amazing, to say nothing of the way they can evoke places I know all too well. It's then I'm reminded of an essay by Richard Rhodes entitled "Cupcake Land, Requiem for the Midwest in the Key of Vanilla" which originally appeared in *Harper's* several years ago and eventually became a chapter in the revised edition of his book *The Inland Ground: An Evocation of the American Middle West*.<sup>3</sup> In his essay, Rhodes assails the conspicuously consumptive, often pretentious culture he has seen

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 208.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rhodes, "Cupcake Land, Requiem for the Midwest in the Key of Vanilla," *Harper's* (November 1987), 51-57; Richard Rhodes, *The Inland Ground: An Evocation of the American Midwest*, revised edition (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

develop over many years around the Kansas City, Missouri Country Club Plaza district and the vast array of suburbs just across the Kansas state line in northeast Johnson County, one of the most affluent areas in the country. This is the place of the long-standing country club culture, captured as it existed in the 1930s and 40s by Evan Connell in his novels, *Mr. Bridge* and *Mrs. Bridge*, and in many ways still unchanged. The Kansas side of the state line is frequently marked by laughable allusions to what once was there—from the names of suburbs such as Overland Park, Shawnee, and Prairie Village, to streets called Indian Creek, Santa Fe Trail, and Tomahawk, veering off from time to time into an even more improbable never-never land (and perhaps inevitably found in suburbs anywhere) christened Nottingham Downs, Apache Estates, and Sherwood Forest. As with many such areas, it's characterized by its high-priced neatness, and its sameness, to say nothing of its ever-present shopping malls. While Rhodes writes about a part of the country he knows well, he's also quick to point out what has happened there has become an American phenomenon, not just a Midwestern one. As he writes in the introduction to the first edition of *The Inland Ground*, "The Middle West's cities have aged; its farm population has declined; and only its anonymous suburbs, as in the rest of the United States, have temporarily prospered. At what terrible expense to the human spirit who can say?"<sup>4</sup>

This is not to deny the charm and beauty of places like The Plaza (as it's familiarly known) or even many of the near-by suburbs. The product of J. C. Nichols, the Plaza opened in 1922, one of the first shopping centers in America. It consists of several square blocks of lovely buildings of Spanish (Seville) architecture and is especially famous for its many fountains. And it was where my wife and I courted and dreamed and window-shopped in the 60s, and which will always remain magical in our memories. But even in those days, I was a bit overwhelmed by an air of unreality hanging over much of Cupcake Land in general, from the pseudo-European and Disneyesque to the simply self-consciously affluent. All this began when my family moved from a much older city neighborhood in Minneapolis to the Kansas City suburbs in the late 50s and I found myself plopped down in a landscape as alien as I could only imagine parts of distant countries might be. My new high school, perhaps unsurprisingly named Shawnee-Mission, was over 2500 enrollees strong. The student parking lot was huge—it seemed as many kids drove as rode the buses—and with generally newer and more luxurious cars than could be found in the much smaller teachers' lot. Adding to my indelible status as a confused outsider, I was one of the very few who actually

<sup>4</sup> Rhodes, *The Inland Ground: An Evocation of the American Midwest* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 4.

walked to school, over the frequently sidewalk-free quarter-mile from our house on the edge of Merriam—an old town on its way to becoming another Kansas suburb, though one of the few places maintaining an unpretentious name.

I don't want to seem simply negative about my life in the greater Kansas City area for a few years. It eventually gave me several good friends and broadened my range of experience immensely; it was also the place where my parents lived for many years (and was thus the scene of many visits) and where my father died. And as I've mentioned, it was also where I was to meet my future wife, herself a recent transplant from New Jersey. It was, in short, a home, and a place whose physical beauty I came to appreciate greatly, but it was also one that gave me a kind of yardstick for measuring pristine artificiality in every other suburban locale I've visited in this country. It came to reinforce my love for old neighborhoods and old houses (especially the quirky ones), for interesting (even funky) downtowns and small towns and good places to walk—in short, for the opposite of the shopping mall-freeway access-quaintly reconstructed duplication so easy to find in so many places these days. But it's far more than a matter of the physical locale. To Richard Rhodes, "Cupcake values have spread like sugary icing to cover much of the United States."<sup>5</sup> And those amazing Cupcake front yards, as Rhodes pictures them, might stand as emblematic of those values: "whatever their extent and however inviting their shaded green swards. . . . they're purely decorative, like the pristine curb spaces in front of Cupcake houses [that] exemplify the Golden Rule of Cupcake Land, which is, *A place for everything and everything in its place.*"<sup>6</sup>

A number of years ago I happened to read a *Paris Review* interview with the writer William Goyen, which has remained particularly vivid. A part of that interview concerned Goyen's students at Princeton, where he was a visiting professor. It made me glad about where I've lived for many years, out of the "mainstream" on the northern plains, but it also reminded me inevitably of my years in greater Kansas City:

The young people I've been involved with in my classes seem to have no sense of place. It bewildered me at first and then it caused me no little alarm. We've talked about it and what they tell me is often what I've presumed . . . that there isn't much of a place where they come from. I mean, every place looks like every other place. . . . So what they're writing about right now is the Princeton campus, and I've told them I don't want to hear about that. I ask

<sup>5</sup> Rhodes, *The Inland Ground* (University Press of Kansas edition), 175.

<sup>6</sup> Rhodes, *The Inland Ground* (University Press of Kansas edition), 175.

them, But didn't you live somewhere before? Wasn't there a room somewhere, a house? A street? A tree?<sup>7</sup>

On a more limited basis, I would come to have a similar experience with many of my own college students, in writing classes and a course I developed in the literature of the Midwest. These tended to be individuals from within a hundred-mile radius, from small towns and farms, not suburbs. But as with Goyen's students at Princeton, I found all too often that my students had very little sense of their own places beyond the obvious. While they might surprise me with rhapsodies about prairie sunsets or a meadowlark's song, for example, they usually had little idea of where their family name came from or why they might find it interesting to visit the pioneer cemetery just outside of their hometown. What became more and more clear was that even if you didn't grow up somewhere that's done its best to pave over, gentrify, and rename what once made the area distinct, you might still be prone to lacking any clear sense of place. Unfortunately, that's true of many American suburbs, Midwestern or otherwise, which, as Rhodes suggests, is protectively bland: "At the bottom of the cup in Cupcake Land is a deep insecurity about the consequences of individual expression. Cupcakes . . . believe that only their conformity to the narrowest standards of convention protects them from the abyss."<sup>8</sup> Wherever they might be, Cupcake lands exist behind a kind of barrier, sealed in their own time zones with themselves as their only point of reference.

It seems to me that's all the more reason to be thankful there are still individuals such as Richard Rhodes to goad us in the opposite direction—to find out, for example, where the name for the local river came from, or just who Crazy Horse actually was, or where the Santa Fe trail began and ended and why it was there in the first place. Perhaps that kind of knowledge isn't really important to most people anymore, just like the study of both literature and history is becoming. And perhaps the attempt to make people aware of this is a losing battle at best. Once again it seems a matter of tangibles vs. intangibles—what will enrich us as human beings as opposed to what will look good on our professional résumés.

Those of us who are or have been teachers in the Liberal Arts have maintained an enduring hope for our students, as did the great Western American writer, Wallace Stegner for his own. Especially because of his sense of *place*, Stegner has long been a hero of mine. Indeed, much of what he has written about the American and Canadian West has become applicable to many other

<sup>7</sup> William Goyen, *Paris Review Interview 63*, *The Paris Review*, No. 68 (Winter 1976), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Rhodes, *The Inland Ground* (University Press of Kansas edition), 185-186.

regions as well, especially when it involves the forsaking of one's sense of history, which began with immigration itself:

History was part of the baggage we threw overboard when we launched ourselves into the new world. We threw it away because it caused old tyrannies, old limitations, galling obligations, bloody memories. Plunging into the future through a landscape that had no history we did both the country and ourselves some harm along with some good. Neither the country nor the society we built out of it can be healthy until we . . . acquire the sense not of ownership but of belonging.<sup>9</sup>

Both Stegner and Rhodes emphasize what too many of us seem to have forgotten—that, history and *place*, like history and literature, are inevitably and inseparably linked, transcending all the Cupcake lands and the self-centered and uncertain values they represent. In simple terms, what remains important to me is summed up by a passage from a chapter called “The Sense of Place” in *Wolf Willow*, Stegner’s memoir of childhood: “I may not know who I am but I know where I’m from. . . . However anachronistic I may be, I am a product of the American earth, and in nothing quite so much as the contrast between what I knew through the pores and what I was officially taught.”<sup>10</sup> What Stegner is talking about, of course, is the complex of things that make up one’s place, from the land itself to the attitudes, idioms, codes, biases, etc., which it engenders. In that sense, is it any wonder that to some of us it will always seem hopeless *not* to know where you come from, or to search for your identity in a shopping mall?

<sup>9</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 206.

<sup>10</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 23.