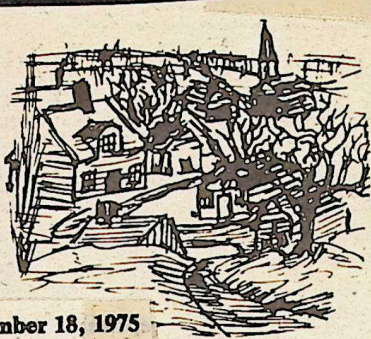


Village View by Andrea Leonard



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During the recent Labor Day weekend signs belonging to the Town of Barnstable, and valued at more than \$1,000, were removed from their posts and carried away, apparently souvenirs of departing tourists.

Since the beginning of the current year the value of town signs stolen or maliciously destroyed amounts to twice that figure.

The theft of the signs represents a theft of your tax dollars since you paid for the signs originally, and now you must pay a second time to replace them. Stop, no parking and no left turn signs seem most attractive to sign thieves.

Is there any way to control this drain on our tax dollars? Several deterrents have been suggested, but for some reason none seem acceptable.

It might be helpful if non-drying paints were used in making the signs so any person touching them found himself besmeared with paint. There must be some kind that will come easily off metal but is very difficult to remove from human skin and clothing.

Thieves would be more easily apprehended if they were marked more or less permanently with the colors of the stolen signs.

If a paint that would stick to people or clothing can't be found, how about spraying the signs with something to make handling them uncomfortable? Itching powder, perhaps?

While it might wash off in a rainstorm, after an experience with even a small amount of acute discomfort to thieves, signs might be safer.

Perhaps it's possible to install between the signs and its post a small vial of harmless but brightly colored dye, so arranged that when the sign is forcibly removed from its place the dye sprays over the tampering person. The vial could be defused by authorized personnel who might need to replace a worn sign or move it to another location.

If ways can be found to mark oil cargoes in tankers carrying fuel to various ports in the world, surely ways can be found to identify people who steal or destroy maliciously public or private property.

Alternatively, it might help if the signs were painted on something more permanent than foot-square pieces of metal mounted on poles. Wouldn't signs painted on road surfaces serve as well to indicate stops, no parking zones, and so forth?

While we are accustomed to seeing stop signs mounted on posts eight or ten feet above the road surface, need they be there? In addition to being targets for souvenir-hunters, they clutter the view in more congested areas and are sometimes a hazard when it's necessary to pull off the highway.

In time the paint would wear away, but surely it's less expensive to repaint than to replace metal signs repeatedly.

It's infuriating to be helpless victims of costly vandalism and strong measures are justified to make loss and destruction of property an unattractive pursuit.

Vandalism is an incomprehensible activity. I can understand, although not condone, a person who steals something he needs when he can't afford to buy it. It's wrong, certainly, but there is some basis for understanding.

What's not understandable is people who steal things they don't need, or smash and destroy and spoil without reason. It's so senseless to ruin something and make it valueless.

When the thing destroyed is private property it might be explained if a person had a grudge against the owner; explained, but not approved.

When the thing destroyed is public property it becomes more senseless than ever because part of it, however small, belongs to the person spoiling it. Why would anyone in his right mind rip off himself?

All around we see evidence of vandalizing. Mail boxes are knocked galley west. School windows are smashed, plumbing fixtures broken, furniture defaced. Why?

When the new Student Union building at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst campus, opened a few years ago, it was

beautifully decorated with inch-thick cork tiles on the walls. In months the cork had been picked, gouged, ripped and torn from the walls.

The public rooms were furnished with heavy birchwood chairs and lounges, padded with colorful comfortable cushions. A few weeks was all it took for the cushions to disappear. Now the students sit on bare wooden furniture. These have been hacked at, marked and splintered.

Closer to home at Cape Cod Community College, furnishings are already in disgraceful disrepair. The arms of lounge chairs and couches are torn and stripped of their upholstery.

In our high school the formica desk and table tops are chipped, the tough -- and expensive -- protective finish pryed off in ragged sheets. Chair legs and rungs are so roughened and splintered they ruin the nylon hose of any person sitting in or walking past them.

We provide one teacher for each twenty-five students enrolled in the school, and it costs us \$1,000 or more a year to provide education to each student enrolled. Are youngsters so resistant to discipline that one teacher can't oversee twenty-five of them and their activities?

When tuition raises are proposed for state-supported schools, students scream and cry about the burden and hardship the extra expense entails. Who do they think is at least partly responsible for the increases? Do they think money to pay for repairing broken windows, retopping tables, replacing chairs, installing new plumbing fixtures, comes from some other planet?

From what kinds of homes do the young people who destroy property come? Are they allowed to spoil the possessions of their parents? Are the things surrounding them at school, on the street, in public buildings, any less the possessions of their taxpaying parents than the furniture in their own livingrooms?

Where does the responsibility lie for teaching people respect for things? Who is failing to make it clear there are good reasons for taking care of things?

Accidents happen to us all. Windows get broken, ink gets spilled, an ancient piece of furniture finally wears out. Vandalism is no accident; these are acts committed simply to destroy.

Why? What possible pleasure can anyone get from making a mess of something attractive and functional?

Why steal signs? Why chip formica off a table? Why gouge cork from walls? Why strip couches of cushions? Why take a baseball bat to mail boxes? Why rip plumbing fixtures off walls? Why smash doors and windows? Why? Can someone tell me?

When I go into schools for meetings, visit a college campus, do an errand at the Community College and see the bare concrete walls the architects hope are indestructible, I feel angry. And sorry, too.

Sorry because the people who damage property will soon be taxpayers supporting the coming generations' education.

And when I read of stolen signs costing us more than \$2,000 a year to replace, in the Town of Barnstable alone, in this year alone, I feel sorry and angry and resentful. I'm being robbed, and so are you, and so, heaven help them, are they!