

VILLAGE VIEW

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Some time ago I lived in a small New York State town on Long Island, about 35 minutes by train from Pennsylvania Station in New York City. One summer I invited two little girls, residents of Osterville (my own hometown as well) to spend a week with me. The children, sisters, were about nine and ten years old; it was my intention to treat them to the impressive grandeur of one of the world's largest cities.

A day or so after their arrival we set forth on the scheduled trip to Manhattan. Emerging from the station's vaulted expanse, we walked over to the Empire State Building, then the world's tallest building, and there I launched into a description of the structure's size, height, and other marvels; it was my intention, once they were sufficiently awed by its immensity, to take them to the observation deck far above our heads.

You may imagine my surprise when both children informed me they didn't want to go up there, and my chagrin when the younger one volunteered, "We have higher buildings than that in Osterville!" It was one of the best examples I've ever had of the emotional mechanism of defense. This youngster, I realized with a flash of insight, would brook no odious comparisons between her home and any other place under the sun.

In later years I was to see and hear similar reactions among Americans visiting European, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries. Wherever Americans traveled and were shown ancient sites of earlier civilizations, or examples of classic architecture, or the collections in museums of archeology, they could not resist their impulses to describe in glowing terms the marvelous accomplishments achieved at home in this country's relatively few years of existence.

It is natural for people to feel home is a special and superior place. That locality, wherever it may be, represents to every individual the security of the known, and with it are associated all the ties of family, familiarity, community loyalty, and affection bred into us from the earliest days of our lives.

The city-bred person feels comfortably reassured by the bustle and noise of a metropolis and finds the silence of open country slightly threatening; conversely, those raised on the broad plains of the Midwest, where a single farm stretches its acreage from horizon to horizon, or those brought up alongside the ocean, where the vast reaches of the sea roll in to the beaches in endless waves, never quite adjust to urban environments.

Just as we rush to protect the image of the place, we identify as "home," we think of it as "best." Refugees from persecution or war-torn countries, forced to flee their homeland to save their lives, remain nostalgic about that native land, the place of childhood, the towns and cities of youth, the land of their birth.

So it is with those of us native to Massachusetts. Even while recognizing this state's long and well-publicized record of political chicanery, confiscatory taxes, and the outright follies perpetrated on Beacon Hill, we point with pride to the glories of the past when Boston was a synonym for Liberty.

So it is with those of us native to Cape Cod. Even while we witness the physical changes occurring in small villages, the razing of lovely old homes and their replacement with sprawling commerciality, we remain loyal to the Cape, clinging affectionately to the few remaining pockets of natural beauty still to be found. Here lies a pond surrounded entirely by woodlands; over there (behind the shopping mall or industrial park) flows and unspoiled and unpolluted stream where the herring return each spring. There are even some stretches of lonely beach to be appreciated by whoever is determined enough to trudge the necessary miles from parking lots that provide public access to the oceanfront.

And so it is with those of us to whom the Town of Barnstable is home. We want desperately to continue feeling our hometown is the best, the best in the country, the best in the state, the best in the county. It's becoming increasingly difficult to maintain that belief.

Approaching Hyannis from any direction, for a native of Barnstable with a memory longer than ten or fifteen years, shocks the aesthetic senses. Every road is now lined, cheek by jowl, with unattractive motels. Or ugly condominiums con-

structed of the cheapest and shoddiest materials and with nothing of architectural integrity to recommend them. Or commercial establishments so utterly devoid of charm they forecast to the least-critical observer future economic decline.

We have the mess that is the sewer plant assailing our sense of smell, the mess that is the dump assailing our senses of smell and sight, the mess that is Route 28 making a travesty of traffic engineering skills, the mess that is downtown Hyannis which is assiduously avoided between July 4th and Labor Day weekends by any Cape Codder with the sense he was born with.

Of outlying villages, Osterville is a not-so-shining example of what the remaining ones may soon witness. Only a few short years ago, Osterville retained its village-like atmosphere; no longer. Nor will it be many years before the other villages in the town of Barnstable are in similar straits, with every possible inch of commercial property utilized for business purposes.

Single-story buildings will give way to those of maximum height to accommodate the money-grubbers bent on extracting the last cent of the tourist dollar at the ultimate expense of the character of the villages we cherish because they are home. Zoning, we were led to believe, would help prevent such destruction. It hasn't happened that way.

We thought, because the business district in our village was already lined with structures of some sort, many of them residences, that those buildings would inhibit commercial growth. Little did we imagine houses would be moved off the land to make way for shops and stores. On Main Street in the business zone, fewer than a dozen buildings retain the outward appearance that presented itself thirty years ago. Even cellars and lofts are being converted to commercial uses. The face of Osterville changes rapidly now; with each change, a strong line that anchors us to the old hometown snaps.

Change is inevitable, of course; buildings do outlive their usefulness; ancient trees do eventually succumb to disease, storms, and time; economics does dictate that land-use must be commensurate with value, based on acquisition costs and potential generation of income. As our population grows, opportunities for capitalizing on investment must dictate spatial utilization of property.

When physical change comes, however, in unbeautiful ways, our sensibilities are outraged and as, one-by-one scenes dear to the heart of our childhood disappear, our pleasure in the known and familiar place dims. Home no longer looks, acts, or feels like home. The unique character of the village dies, and in its stead stands an unfamiliar, yet strangely recognizable community.

The village keeps its bone structure, and a "family resemblance" can be seen; but the new face Osterville presents lacks the coherence and integrity we remember. While the day may never come when Osterville boasts buildings higher than Manhattan's Empire State, neither will the day ever return when Osterville offers its native sons and daughters the reassurance and stability that welcomed them in the past.