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## PRESERVING Our GREEN LEGACY

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IN 1959 an old soldier, General Omar N. Bradley, gave a public address in which he took a long look at the American way of reshaping the national landscape: "In such matters as rockets," said the general, "I shall disqualify myself—except, perhaps, to say that mankind has discovered an exceedingly difficult way to take a dim view of the world in which he lives. We need not ascend into space to perceive the dimness. It is much too close at hand. It is manifested in the disappearance of our nature preserves, in the debasement of our countryside, in the pizza palaces and highway honkytonks with which we have littered the land." General Bradley then went on to express the hope that we would have the vision to leave to future generations more than "a legacy of billion dollar roads leading nowhere except to other congested places like those they left behind."<sup>1</sup>

I submit that as a nation we have done a highly effective job of ignoring the general's advice. Our work is cut out for us if we are to preserve important remnants of the forests, prairies, marshes, and mountainsides—the green legacy which is still ours to share with the future. We are destroying our countryside so fast that the concrete cloverleaf will soon be our only meaningful floral em-

blem. The symbol of our power, which was first the ax, is now the bulldozer.

We Americans have always been great levelers. Our vast public domain bred the illusion of an endless terrain that could be shaped and reshaped to suit the whims of each generation. We looked at trees in terms of board feet; we looked at the glacial moraines that glorify Minnesota and Wisconsin in terms of gravel pits; we looked on the sand dunes that adorn Indiana as factory sites. We still think in these terms, even though we no longer can afford to do so. We cannot afford to let the machine destroy the remaining islands of wilderness.

Our sanctuaries should be multiplying rather than decreasing—multiplying with our population so that our great-grandsons and granddaughters may know and feel what primeval America looked like. They will need sanctuaries even more than we—places where man can find respite from the noise of the machines, from the fierce competition of the markets, from the smoke and smog of the cities. For as city lots stretch in one continuous corridor from Boston to New York, from Seattle to Portland, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, from Milwaukee to Chicago, people will need places of solitude and quiet to renew themselves.

<sup>1</sup> "General of the Army Omar Nelson Bradley Speaks Out for Conservation," in *Planning and Civic Comment*, December, 1959, p. 1.

ROOSEVELT ISLAND in the Potomac River is still in a primitive condition—ex-

actly as Theodore Roosevelt would have enjoyed it. Modern planners recently came up with ideas that would have led to its conversion into an amusement park rather than its retention as a quiet sanctuary where the pileated woodpecker works and over which on the wild nights of March the whistling swans pass with an exciting roar, heading north and west to nesting grounds.

Once Ohio was a wilderness of wonders. Its hardwood forests were unique. Today there are only a few acres of those virgin hardwoods left in the state. Maine once had stands of white pine so thick and extensive that a squirrel, they say, could cross the whole state without leaving the treetops. Like the eastern hemlock elsewhere, the white pine has practically vanished from Maine. In a few spots in Minnesota and Wisconsin it may still be found, together with the Norway pine, but even there most of the primeval stands are gone.

A few weeks ago I spent several days with Charles A. Lindbergh. He was visiting his boyhood home and looking through his papers and those of his father at the Minnesota Historical Society. After hours of conversation with this remarkable man, whose wide-ranging mind and physical vigor belie his sixty-four years, I found that foremost among many subjects which preoccupied him was the appalling way in which wildlife is being destroyed in this country. He left with me a copy of an article he wrote in 1964 entitled "Is Civilization Progress?" It provides an incisive summary of the relationship of man to nature today:

"Wherever civilization comes," writes Lindbergh, "wildlife tends to disappear. I think of my father's stories about frontier days in the Midwest. Woods were full of deer, and the sky was often black with duck when he was a boy, he said. He had seen a bear run through his school yard. One generation later, I never saw a deer in the woods around our farm. Duck seldom rested on the creek or river, any bear existed only in the stories my parents read or told to me."<sup>2</sup>

The pressure of civilization on wildlife

has already reached a dangerous point. While the passenger pigeon, wiped out nearly a century ago, has faded from memory, the wolf and the coyote—still with us—seem doomed. The antelope that must migrate to live is being confined by fences that the federal government is building at public expense to keep the public out of public lands. The vast expanses of duck-breeding wetlands in the northern parts of Minnesota and the Dakotas have been reduced to a sixth of their original area. Since the end of World War II Minnesota's remaining wetlands have been lost through ditching and drainage at an estimated rate of 5 per cent per year, and this, it should be remembered, was at a time when farm surpluses were pyramiding and the government was seeking to retire excess agricultural land from production. The story is similar in other parts of the nation. In eastern Arkansas rivers that overflowed into hardwood bottom lands and produced watery sides for millions of ducks and geese have been converted into ditches. Backwater areas have shrunk; waterfowl and deer have moved elsewhere or disappeared.

Our rivers are so badly polluted that it taxes the ingenuity of public health officials to make the water palatable. Sewage disposal plants are inadequate for the population, and they are not equipped to handle the ever-increasing load of industrial and chemical wastes. In the 1960s our waters are twice as polluted as was considered safe in the 1950s, and the end is not in sight. The magnitude of the problem can be sensed by recalling the billion dollar bond issue passed by the voters of New York State last fall to try to stem the tide of pollution. It is hoped that other states will follow suit. The crisis looming across the Hudson River and Lake Erie is too well known to require comment.

The problem was brought forcefully to the attention of Minnesotans in March, 1963, when oil which had been carelessly allowed to leak into the Minnesota River and carried

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Lindbergh, "Is Civilization Progress?" in *Reader's Digest*, July, 1964, p. 7.

from there into the Mississippi killed nearly ten thousand wild ducks on their way to northern nesting grounds. Alighting on a river-connected lake near Hastings, the birds were trapped in the sticky mess, and with oil-soaked plumage, they either drowned or struggled ashore to die. Volunteers rescued a few of the victims, but it took the combined efforts of the Minnesota conservation department, the United States fish and wildlife service, the corps of engineers, and the national guard to prevent the oil from traveling down the river, destroying untold numbers of birds and animals.

A *New Yorker* cartoon recently portrayed the national crisis which faces our waterways. It pictured two Harvard undergraduates standing on a bridge overlooking the Charles River, gazing at the murky water below. One said to the other: "My old man tells me that this sewer used to be a river."

In Washington they say it will take forty-four billion dollars to put a man on the moon. By coincidence it will also cost forty-four billion dollars to clean up our rivers and lakes, making them healthful and wholesome for people and for all forms of aquatic life. I fear that priority will go to the moon rather than to the earth and its waters—though I have a suspicion that most of us now and in future centuries will remain earthbound.

NOT ONLY nature's heritage is threatened by our blind urge to build and "develop"—to blot out and reshape the environment which has in part made us what we are. As the bulldozer transforms our countryside and urban centers, a terrific sacrifice is also being offered up in historic landmarks that have contributed to the flavor of our communities and to the very essence of our national tradition. We need monuments to mark the attainments of those who gave America the character of which we are proud. Monuments erected at sites of past follies are also needed, for they express the ideals of a people as well as atonement for wrongs committed.

Historians throughout the ages have giv-

en personal testimony to the aid they have derived from historic places. Herodotus thought it worth his time to visit the various countries which were the scenes of his narratives, not only to question persons and examine records, but to view for himself the palaces and temples, rivers and battlefields that were the stage on which his characters moved. Before Francis Parkman wrote some of his vivid books, he felt it necessary to visit the scenes of the events he wished to describe. In his later years it was a lasting source of distress to him that so much of what he considered vital in the West as he knew it had been destroyed—the forests, the herds of buffalo, and the frontier cabins.

Thomas Jefferson left us a complete set of papers which document his remarkable career. But he also left us testimonials to his mentality and character which cannot be tucked away in a file: Monticello, the Lawn of the University of Virginia, and the Capitol building at Richmond. Should any of these be destroyed, a part of Thomas Jefferson would be lost to us forever.

Our traditions as a people are threatened not only by the blotting out of specific historic places—important as this may be—but by the loss of those subtle qualities of individuality and cultural continuity that have distinguished our communities one from another. These, too, have their roots in the past. They are the unpretentious kind of history that lives, perhaps, in the garish but commanding mansion of a town's first millionaire, or in the Old World look of a church built by some ethnic group that clung briefly to its identity and left its mark upon a neighborhood. It is the kind of history that is seen, felt, and lived with every day in those communities where it has been preserved.

THE FORMIDABLE forces of freeway construction, urban renewal, and unchecked population growth are transforming our cities so rapidly that too many of us have become resigned to the consequences. After viewing freeway construction in Minneapolis—where 20 per cent of the land

surface is covered by asphalt or concrete — one understands Lewis Mumford's lament: "When the American people, through their Congress voted a little while ago (1957) for a twenty-six billion dollar highway program, the most charitable thing to assume about this action is that they hadn't the faintest notion of what they were doing. Within the next fifteen years they will doubtless find out; but by that time it will be too late to correct all the damage to our cities and our countryside."<sup>3</sup>

Many of our most charming cities, including Washington, New Orleans, and San Francisco, face the inexorable onrush of freeway construction. In Philadelphia an intense battle is being waged over the preservation of the area around Independence Hall — often called "America's most historic square mile." The United States bureau of public roads and the Pennsylvania department of highways propose to cut this area in two with ten lanes of unbroken, high-speed traffic. Fortunately, preservationists have enlisted the energetic support of two highly regarded United States Senators — Joseph S. Clark and Clifford Case — to carry the battle to the bureaucracies. The issue, however, is by no means resolved.

Recently the international consulting firm of Arthur D. Little, Incorporated, charged that federal plans for a 600 million dollar network of freeways in Washington give inadequate consideration to "social, economic, and cultural effects" as well as to the disruptive impact of freeways upon bisected neighborhoods. The Little report concluded: "Washington still can choose among a number of transportation options. It must accommodate the automobile, to be sure, but it need not destroy the fabric of a city in doing so."<sup>4</sup>

Expressing concern over a proposed thoroughfare through New Orleans, the *Dallas Morning News* recently exclaimed: "In our rush to improve, to streamline, to update, we have been guilty in this country of destroying irreplaceable evidence of our heritage. Freeways are fine in their place,

but their place is not over the wreckage of historic sites like the French Quarter."<sup>5</sup>

The boldest move of all has been taken by the city council of San Francisco, which rejected two interstate freeway routes and also 280 million dollars in federal aid. "Just what is it," editorialized the *Wall Street Journal*, "that's proving so formidable for the freeways? In large part, it's that old adversary, beauty. With some of the freeways built in recent years to point to as evidence, a number of vocal urban groups are managing to convince city fathers that too stiff a price in terms of lost charm is being paid for the traffic-easing benefits of super-highways."<sup>6</sup>

THE IMPACT of urban renewal is also being felt in the cities. Its target, understandably, is the city slum. Yet, this same blighted area almost always turns out to have been the cradle of the city's beginnings. In the wake of wholesale urban renewal, communities have lost irretrievable landmarks. What is needed is a program selective enough to save those vestiges of a city's past that have something to say to future generations. Far-seeing cities such as Philadelphia, San Francisco, St. Louis, and New Orleans have given preservation a prominent place in their overall urban renewal programs. The result is a combination that adds flavor and variety to the appearance of the city.

Americans have been slow to learn the long-range value of preserving the character and individuality of their cities. We send millions of tourists to Europe each year. Many of them want to see the picturesque places — to prowl along narrow, twisting streets with echoes of another age — to stroll through magnificent public gardens admiring the fountains and standing in awe before the Old World masterpieces of archi-

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Highway and the City*, 234 (New York, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Charles E. Alverson, "Beauty and the 'Beasts,'" in the *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 1966, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> An editorial from the *Dallas Morning News*, reprinted in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, January 15, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Alverson, in the *Wall Street Journal*.



ture. Yet these are the very aspects of our own cities that we ignore.

Perhaps as a nation of immigrants we have been cut off from the ancient monuments of our ancestors and thus lack a sense of history. America was, after all, built upon a philosophy of discarding the shackling traditions of the past and starting all things anew. Or it may be that we have an antiseptic complex: unless a structure is shiny and clean—though it be able to stand a thousand years—it must be discarded like a Kleenex tissue to make way for a new one.

Whatever the reasons, even the best of our architecture has great difficulty surviving. Whether it be a monumental structure like New York's Pennsylvania Station, or a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, it must make way for "progress." Even those masterpieces of building that at the turn of the century made the name of Chicago synonymous with architectural brilliance are now threatened, one by one, with the wrecker's ball.

Minnesotans can recall a long list of vanished landmarks. Perhaps the greatest loss in terms of architecture was St. Paul's charming old Customs House, demolished in 1939. Those that have followed—the West Hotel, the Globe Building, the Metropolitan Building, the Ryan Hotel, the Amherst H. Wilder house, the Merriam mansion, and many others—were all solidly and proudly built, symbols of a confident era in the state's past and unique to the Twin Cities in a way that today's glass and steel cubes and the trademark architecture of national chains will never be.

Although the pressures are greatest where growth is rapid, the havoc is not limited to major cities. Stillwater's lovely and historic courthouse—the oldest in the state—was threatened a few years ago with imminent destruction. Fortunately, the defeat of a bond issue that would have authorized razing the structure, plus growing appreciation of its value on the part of the public and the county board of commissioners have improved the chances of its survival. It is

also among the places now protected under the Minnesota Historic Sites Act passed by the state legislature in 1965.

The quality of life in both towns and cities suffers in other ways, too. The village square appears destined for extinction. Long the centerpiece of many communities, this block of green open space is too often viewed by the city fathers as an ideal location for a new post office, armory, or chamber of commerce headquarters. Availability of federal funds for such projects is almost certain to erase the small parks which have added so much to the attractiveness of business centers across the nation.

A horde of automobiles stand ready to gobble up any unprotected patch of green for parking space, and their effect has also been to stifle the use of city parks. They have not only rendered walking needless for most of us, but have made it virtually impossible for those who prefer to walk. Notice a downtown park when you are next in a big city. Its chief users are pigeons and starlings and derelicts who have long been alienated from the mainstream of city life.

Yet to the urban dweller this spot is often all that remains of our green legacy, and we are becoming ever more a nation of urbanites and sons of urbanites. The farm boy is now a scarce item in our population statistics. More and more frequently is it true that the city park is a child's only gateway to the world of wildlife and growing things. In fact, the wild birds and small mammals of our city parks and gardens will soon be the most important wildlife in America. The presence of these creatures can be one of the best barometers of progress in improving the quality of urban living, for maintaining a wide variety of wild animal life within our cities requires attention to all other forms of urban beauty and open space. The city with the greatest number of wild birds may well be the one which provides the highest quality of human environment as well. A city with only starlings and pigeons had better examine its landscaping program and the credentials of its planning director.

THE COMMON denominator of all these problems is the stake each one of us has in our environment. The fundamental question before us is whether we improve the quality of our lives by exchanging a historic site for a stretch of freeway, a marsh for a parking lot, a grove of hundred-year-old oaks for a housing development. These questions concern each of us in our own community. Each back yard and each street can take on added meaning if there is an awareness of the value of one's environment.

The planting of a flower does not constitute a revolution in urban planning; neither does the restoration of a fine old mansion. But flowers can be followed by trees, and trees by neighborhood parks; and even one large old house, bespeaking the graciousness and leisure of nineteenth-century life, can break the monotony of a row of ramblers. Both can be followed by far-ranging urban planning; and better planned cities will mean richer and more livable surroundings.

It is not that we lack space: 130 million of our people live on one per cent of our land in urban complexes; yet the increasing tempo of urbanization is already depriving many Americans of decent surroundings. Cities reach out into the countryside, destroying streams and trees and meadows as they go. A modern highway may wipe out the equivalent of a fifty-acre park with every mile. People move out from the city to get closer to nature, only to find that nature moves farther from them.

Wherever one goes in the world he sees that man's greatest capacity is destruction. It will take a revolutionary change in the attitudes and practices of the bureaucracies that regulate our lives if we are to avoid despoiling the earth. As William O. Douglas has put it: "We need a new wilderness ethic. We need to raise the next generation to carry out of the woods all the tin cans and bottles that are brought into them. We need a high sense of housekeeping among those who walk our trails and camp by our lakes and rivers. We need to look on rivers, meadows,

forests, and all their creatures with the same wonder that we look on sunsets."<sup>7</sup>

We must fashion a program of education that changes the image of America in the eyes of the child. Today that image is the bulldozer that levels trees as if they were matches and the big earth-mover that strips our slopes not only of trees but of the precious layer of humus that took thousands of years to build. To replace these symbols of careless destruction will involve a vast program of re-education, but it must be undertaken if the image of conserving rather than leveling is to be created in the mind of the oncoming generation.

Leveling the frontier was part of the building of the nation. Preserving what is left of it is the task for the future. It must be undertaken, or we will end by turning a continent of unequaled richness and beauty into a place of soot, pollution, and poison. Moreover, we will leave the nation we have built without visible ties to a past of idealism and sacrifice and stripped of those common possessions of culture and tradition that make it a community of people and not a mere political entity.

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<sup>7</sup> William O. Douglas, "The Past is Prologue," 21, an address to the 113th annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, May 26, 1962. A copy is in the society's library.

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## Memorials

THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY has a Memorial Fund to which contributions can be made upon the loss of a relative or friend. Such gifts not only serve as appropriate expressions of sympathy and condolence, but they help to support work that is a fitting memorial to any Minnesotan.

Whenever a contribution is received for the Memorial Fund, a suitable card is mailed to the bereaved family, and the names of those whose memories are honored, as well as of contributors, are recorded in a Memorial Book.

Send your contribution to the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul 1, Minnesota, along with your name, the name of the person to receive the card, and the name of the person in whose memory the contribution is given.



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