

Why Take a Trip to Bountiful —Won't Anaheim Do?

Perception and Manipulation of the Historic Past

Richard West Sellars

IN A RECENT MOVIE, *The Trip to Bountiful*, an old woman, Mrs. Carrie Watts, is determined to visit the farm where she grew up near Bountiful, Texas. Her indifferent son and daughter-in-law repeatedly prevent her going, claiming she is not well enough to make the trip. But Mrs. Watts finally escapes on a bus. Then through the kindness of the local sheriff she is driven to her old home, a now-abandoned farmstead. To Mrs. Watts the visit is deeply rewarding. She sees for one last time the place where she lived.

Now suppose the sheriff had not taken her there but rather had said, "Sorry, Mrs. Watts, I'm going in the opposite direction. I'll be glad to take you to this other farm about ten miles away. It looks a lot like the one where you grew up, and I think you'll like it just as well. Why, the house has even been refurnished with period pieces, and there are costumed interpreters to tell you what it was like in olden days! That should do it, shouldn't it?"

The Trip to Bountiful deals with the profound meaning a place can have for an individual. If Mrs. Watts had been taken to another farm, she would have certainly been disappointed. She had intense personal associations with her home, and nowhere else would satisfy her.

Many people have strong attachments to places connected with their personal past. We each have our own Bountifuls. Ordinarily such places do not qualify as "historic." Because they are tied to personal memories they are likely to be relegated to the category of family history. Other places, however, have significance for more than one person or family. Over time they attain value for many people and become historic, widely recognized as a meaningful part of the past.

Part of the process of history is the constant necessity to look back at what has happened. Such remembrance may focus on a particular place. *The Trip to Bountiful* explores Mrs. Watts's compulsion to look back at her child-



The Trip to Bountiful, a film about the value of place, depicts an old woman who wants to visit her childhood home. Island Pictures, 1985.

hood and visit a cherished site in her personal history. On a broader human scale, for some events the looking back may occur repeatedly and assume a significance of its own. Recalling the Battle of the Little Bighorn, for example, has become unusually meaningful, with ongoing commemoration and preservation at Custer Battlefield, and a lasting, widespread public interest in that historic episode. The focus of this looking back is the site, the battlefield itself, a Bountiful for Custer buffs worldwide.

Although a historic event itself is of primary importance, the place where it happened assumes significance through association, by having been the stage on which history occurred. People involved in a historic event move on, but the site remains, its importance elevated above the ordinary. Around it develops a commemorative history, usually set apart from the main flow of daily life.

THE CADENCE OF HISTORY

In looking back, it appears that every locality develops a body of history at its own cadence, slowly or rapidly, until we perceive sites as historic. To begin with, most areas have experienced a long span of prehistory, which we ordinarily see as having proceeded in slow, rhythmic patterns that included subsistence activities, trade, migration, architecture, and art. This modern perception results from having only limited access to the specifics of life in prehistoric societies.

With the beginning of the historic era, however, the cadence of history appears to accelerate as the written word fills periods of time with detail and nuance, highlighting even individual people and events. But the cadence is erratic. Most localities develop gradually, as farms, communities, and cities evolve through the yearly minutiae of events toward contemporary times—all told, an often thin wash of history. This steady pace suddenly changes when a

rush of significant events fills a time and place with history of greater magnitude than that of ordinary life. Vivid details, amassed and concentrated, seem to accelerate the cadence of history, intensifying and crowding an era with historic action and fact.

In the United States, perhaps the most widespread phenomenon to accelerate the cadence of history was the frontier movement. Explorers and pioneers arrived with a burst of significant activity. This first contact was a major threshold, a time crowded with events deemed to be of historical importance. Those who led the way—exploring, settling, and establishing communities—have become heroes of a mythic, golden era, their stories told and retold and their deeds celebrated. But as the excitement of the threshold era subsided, those who followed could not compete with the conquering pioneers for a place in history.

The American Revolution touched areas in a similar way, as did the Civil War. Localities such as Lexington and Yorktown, and later Vicksburg and Gettysburg—long steeped in a steady, conventional history—suddenly experienced violent and disruptive warfare of far-reaching consequence. At these places the cadence of history intensified dramatically, awash in military incident. Details of these battles have been microscopically studied, reverently recounted, and even reenacted.

For many localities the frontier era, the Revolution, the Civil War, or perhaps some combination of these, still form the principal anchor to the past, the keystone to a community's identity. The different communities returned to their own steady pace of history, but the remembrance of the outstanding historic events has remained strong, and places associated with them stand apart.

In most places a pattern of history and associated sites emerges that reflects a gradual, generally uneventful past, punctuated with a few prominent events. Folklorists and



At Abraham Lincoln's birthplace in Kentucky, a cabin of doubtful authenticity was enshrined in a temple during the early 1900s. The strange monument illustrates that our attitudes about appropriate ways to preserve historic sites have changed. Courtesy of the National Park Service.

anthropologists are not likely to be so interested in the conspicuous seams of this historic cloth. Such scholars, along with historians of everyday life, would probably find the seams interesting, but they would more closely examine the cloth's weaving and its overall pattern. Of more popular interest, however, are the seams—the salient aspects of history.

PERCEPTION AND TREATMENT OF HISTORIC SITES

Whether slowly or suddenly, a historic site emerges from the commonplace, assuming values beyond mere landscape or real estate. A transition occurs. Historical qualities are perceived, causing changes in attitudes toward a site.

Our perception of history, however, is like the view through a broken camera lens: images of the past are blurred and can never be brought perfectly into focus. Moreover, one group after another abandons objectivity. Whether we think of a site as merely historic or as hallowed ground, our perception is likely to be influenced by factors such as ethnocentricity, nationalism, localism, and filiopietism. Hallowedness is, in fact, in the eye of the beholder, and perceptions of historical significance or hallowedness are often very personal, such as feelings about a family gravesite, or, for Mrs. Watts, memories of the farm near Bountiful.

Also, our attitudes toward sites change over time. Abraham Lincoln's birthplace near Hodgenville, Kentucky, consists of a small log cabin enclosed by a granite and marble Greek-style temple built in the early twentieth century. Supposedly, parts of the cabin are authentic survivors from the time of Lincoln's birth, although this is in serious doubt. Patriotic Americans who believed the site was sacred erected the temple to Father Abraham, the revered emancipator. Today, however, this site's hallowedness is limited, if it exists at all. The temple and cabin have become more a curiosity than a shrine because our attitudes are different. Today's generation would probably not construct anything so explicit as a temple at the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, because to us, he is no longer Father Abraham.

The history of the Texas School Book Depository Building, used by Lee Harvey Oswald during the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, also reflects how our shifting perceptions can affect a site's ongoing history. After the assassination, serious proposals were made to demolish the depository to remove its objectionable and tragically symbolic presence. The building remained standing, although several groups opposed its nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. Eventually the structure was entered in the register, but only as part of a large warehouse district representing local business and economic history. The National Register nomination mentions Kennedy's assassination only incidentally. Now, long after the president's murder, the depository houses part of the Dallas County court system, an adaptive use that has en-

abled the building to be preserved. Furthermore, a local historical foundation has opened an exhibit on the sixth floor where the fatal shots were fired.

With the assassination, the Texas School Book Depository Building emerged instantly as the principal feature in the historic landscape of Dallas. The building survived to be accepted as worthy of preservation and interpretation to the public. The focus of the new exhibit is clearly on the assassination, while the historic warehouse district is a negligible aside. Changing perceptions have affected the depository building's treatment and thus its ongoing history.

When our perception of historical significance starts to influence our treatment of a site, historic preservation begins. The rules change: the past becomes the primary point of reference. An earlier time and an earlier use or activity assume importance in determining present-day treatment of a place. Those in charge may merely think twice before bulldozing a site. Or, past events may be perceived as so deeply meaningful that the places where they occurred cannot be ignored. People may invoke elaborate commemorative rituals, including preservation and interpretation, to confirm the importance of a moment in the past and to perpetuate its memory. In effect, we may look back at Bountiful and return again and again to seek satisfaction and understanding.

MANIPULATION OF HISTORIC SITES: THE ROAD TO ANAHEIM

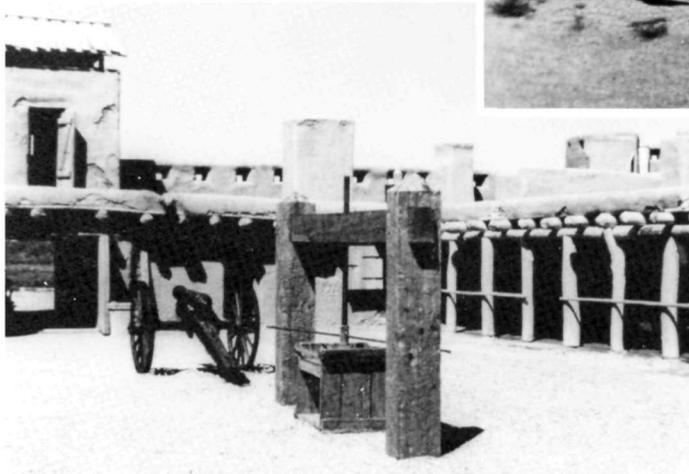
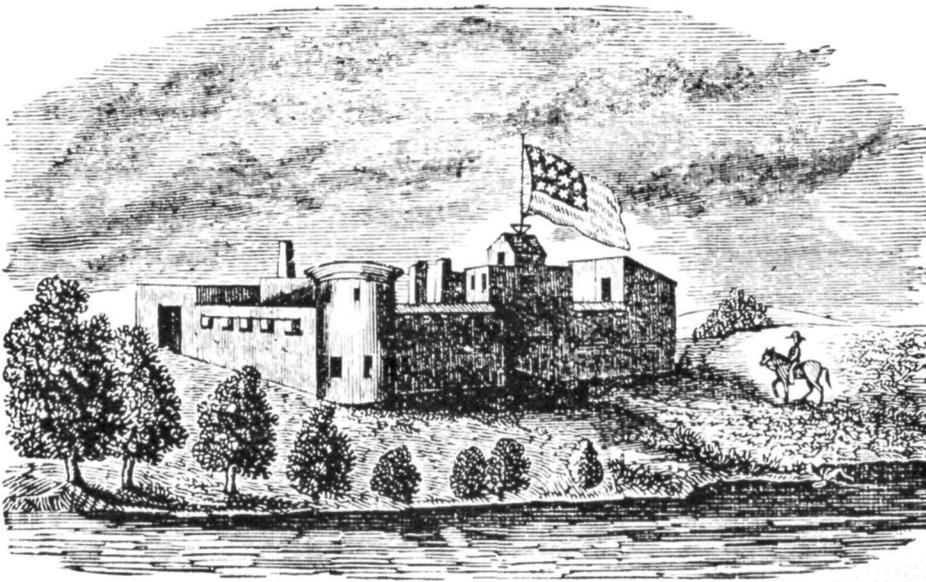
As perceptions of history change, so do the places where history occurred. They undergo physical changes throughout their existence. Preservation does not halt this change. Rather it directs the change toward a special purpose—maintaining or recapturing a particular historic appearance. However, succeeding generations may manage a site with different “historic” appearances in mind, sometimes based solely on whim or personal taste, or perhaps to make the place look “nicer.” If so, a historic site's appearance may fluctuate dramatically over time.

In an effort to give a site a public face reflecting a desired image of the past, we sometimes manipulate a site extensively rather than strictly preserving the historic remnants and allowing them to speak for themselves. A historic place may become completely contrived, even to the point of having all historic material removed, including that beneath the surface, in order to place a replica where the original once stood.

At Bent's Old Fort, a frontier post in southeastern Colorado, the original foundations, which were the only structural remnants of the historic era, were dug up and replaced by a new “historic” fort completed in 1976 at a cost of several million dollars. This modern building is furnished with period pieces and reproductions, and costumed interpreters explain to visitors what the fort was supposedly like when the Bents were there. The total reconstruction of Bent's Old Fort is a form of historical *representation*, not preservation. Only the terrain itself, upon which rests a make-believe historic structure, has



President Kennedy's assassination made the Texas School Book Depository historic, but preservation has been controversial. Photo from the Dallas County Historical Foundation.



Bent's Old Fort in Colorado crumbled to the foundations before it was reconstructed in the 1970s as a historic site. Illustrations courtesy of the National Park Service.

genuine ties to the historic past, a kind of latitudinal and longitudinal matter, the place where it happened. The fort may to some degree reflect the past, but it is not *of* the past.

As a rule, the greater the intervention at historic places, the greater the manipulation. And the greater the manipulation, the greater the contrivance. As we stray from strict preservation, we come nearer to pure entertainment, and, ultimately, the land of the imaginary: we take the bus to Anaheim, and not to Bountiful.

ANAHEIM: *SIC TRANSIT GLORIA*

Because *preservation* can involve anything from daily maintenance to extensive manipulation and contrivance, why is preserving original historic material important? Why not rebuild vanished forts and imply they are no different from the originals? Does it make any difference? Why not go with the sheriff to the *other* farm near Bountiful, and take little Smedley and his friends to watch candlemaking and feed tame deer?

If historic preservation, as it differs from mere representation, is a valid pursuit, then the original historic mate-

rial does matter because it has acquired genuine historical values, irreplaceable qualities that cannot be legitimately transferred.

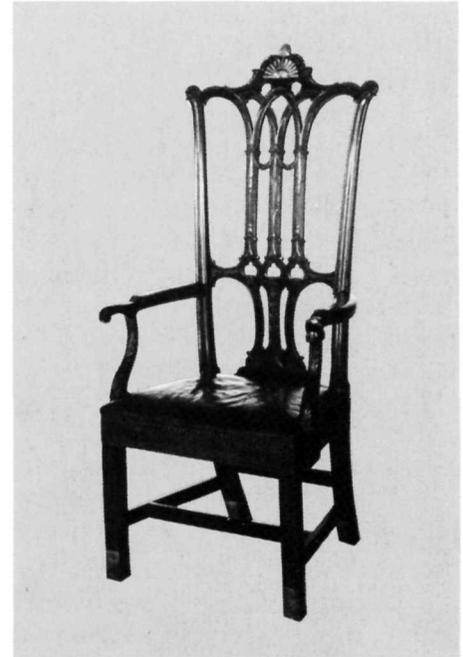
Consider this at a personal level with, for example, pieces of furniture and the meanings they hold for individuals. A cabinetmaker might build a dining table for you in period style. The table might look as if it had been built in the 1870s and kept in good condition, but in fact the table is new. It is not a true survivor from the nineteenth century.

On the other hand, you might purchase an antique dining table. This table is a product of the artisan who built it and generations who used and cared for it. However, this antique is a survivor of an anonymous past. You do not know who owned it over time. The table conveys a true feeling of the past, but it is mute as to specific associations.

Finally, you might have inherited your great-grandparents' dining table. They had it made when they married in the 1870s and kept it all of their lives. Each succeeding generation has owned it, used it, cared for it, and passed it on to the next generation. You knew this piece as a child growing up. First it belonged to your grandparents, then to your parents, and now to you. This table does not have an anonymous past; rather it is part of your own past. The table's associations are specific and meaningful, and in this regard it is irreplaceable. If it were somehow destroyed, an artisan could make an exact replica, or perhaps you could find a similar piece from the 1870s. But something would be missing. No other table would convey the same deep values; no other would possess the *final qualification* of being the original piece.

This example using personal values also has validity for objects of national value. The original Rising Sun chair used in 1787 by George Washington during the Constitutional Convention in Independence Hall is on exhibit in the Assembly Room where the Constitution was written. The chair is the only piece of furniture unquestionably documented to have been in Independence Hall at the time of the convention. Visitors to the Assembly Room are told the chair is original and that it was used by Washington. The Rising Sun chair then takes on extraordinary qualities that the period pieces and reproductions in that room do not and cannot legitimately possess. The chair is perceived, valued, cared for, and presented in a special way. It is different. It was there.

Ultimately, though, preservation is a losing battle, because with time everything decays. A scientist once remarked that in spite of all we do, historic things do not last forever, so why worry with them. In response though, neither will the Yosemite Valley last forever, so it's all a question of perspective. Besides, historic preservation is like the work of morticians: preserving the body only for the duration until it no longer matters. But for the time being, it does matter. □



Because the Rising Sun chair was used by George Washington during the Constitutional Convention, it has special value not found in reproductions. Courtesy National Park Service.

FURTHER READING

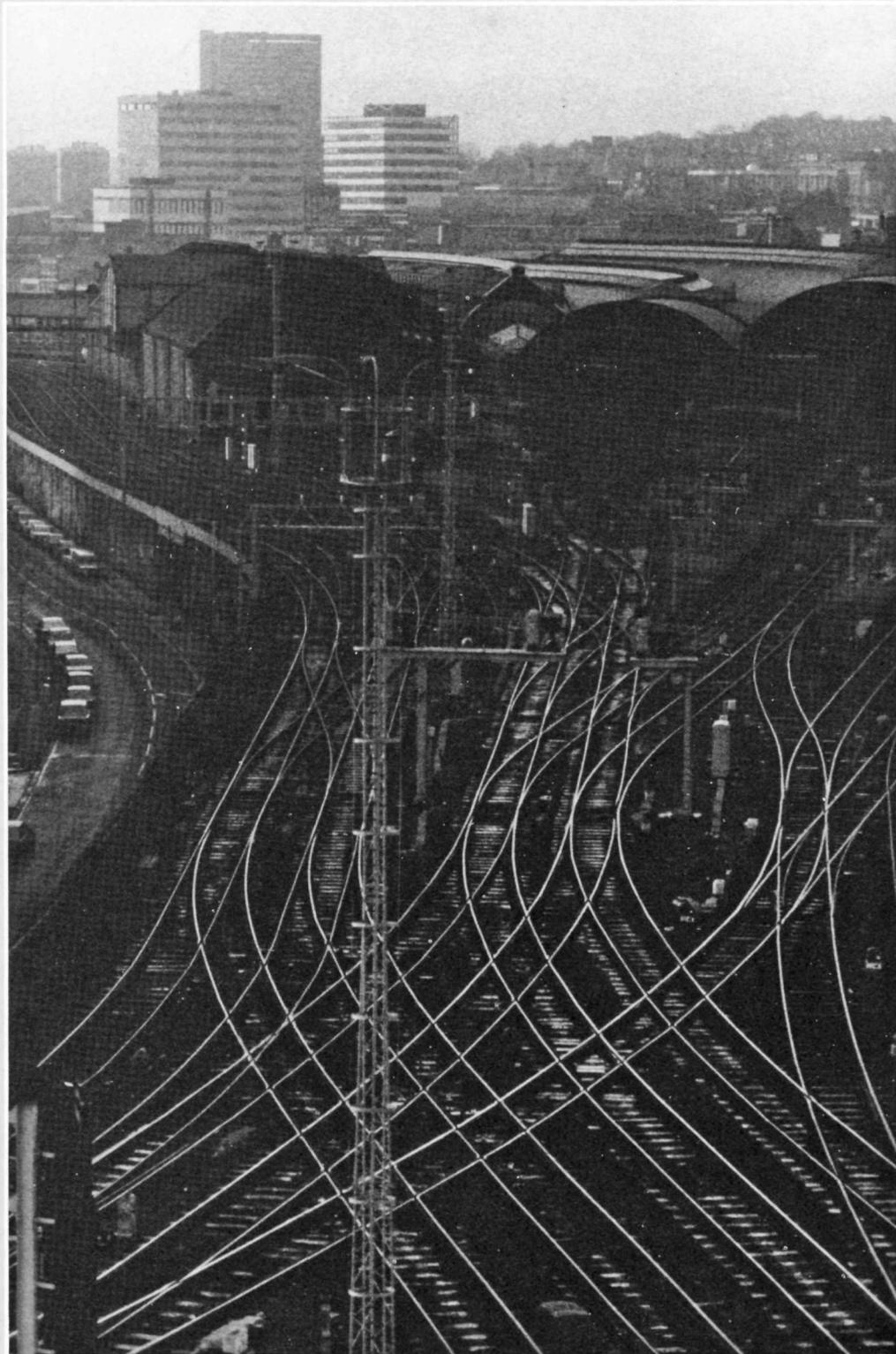
Other articles by Richard West Sellars relating to this topic:

- "The Interrelationship of Literature, History and Geography in Western Writing." *Western Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (April 1973): 171-85.
- "Vigil of Silence: The Civil War Memorials." *History News* 41, no. 4 (1986): 19-21.
- "The Granite Orchards of Gettysburg." *History News* 41, no. 4 (1986): 22-23.
- "The National Parks: A Once and Future Frontier." *NPS Courier* 31, no. 11 (1986): 20-21.
- "Custer at the Little Big Horn: The Great Retrospective." *NPS Courier* 32, no. 9 (1987): 23-25.
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- "The Texas School Book Depository: Preserving the Dark Side of History." *History News* 43, no. 6 (1988): 24-26.
- "Science or Scenery? A Conflict of Values in the National Parks." *Wilderness* 52, no. 185 (Summer 1989): 29-38; and *Washington Post*, 9 April 1989.

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ROBERT L. THAYER, JR.	1	Pragmatism in Paradise Technology and the American Landscape
	12	Evolving Landscapes
RICHARD WEST SELLARS	14	Why Take a Trip to Bountiful —Won't Anaheim Do?
EDMUNDS V. BUNKŔE	20	A New Look at The Luminist Landscapes of F. E. Church
PAUL GROTH	29	Lot, Yard, and Garden American Distinctions
JUDITH A. MARTIN	36	European Models & American Realities A Perspective on Urban Design
HELEN LEFKOWITZ HOROWITZ	44	Review of Two Documentaries about J. B. Jackson
	46	Last Words
	48	Contributors
	48	Subscription Information
	49	Index to Volume 30

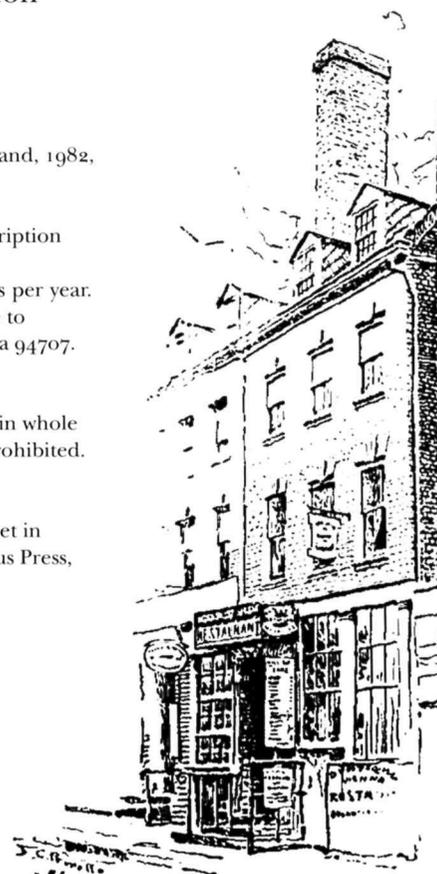
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