

Judith M. LaBelle

## Postcards from Home

**H**ave you ever sent anyone a postcard from the town where you live—the place where you begin and end each day, where you spend most of the days of your life?

Your answer was most likely “No.” And you were probably surprised and a bit puzzled by the question. We generally think of postcards as serving a fairly narrow purpose: telling a friend or loved one that we are “thinking of you” while away on vacation. Perhaps even bragging just a bit about the exotic origin of the postmark. So why would one ever send a postcard from home? Certainly not to brag.

But then consider all of the museum shop note cards and other stationery that you have in the drawer for occasional notes and letters. Surely a postcard would serve just as well, if you had one that you enjoyed using. Why do none of these feature your own hometown? I suggest that a major part of the answer is that Americans generally feel that they must travel elsewhere to see beautiful landscapes with distinctive, pleasant towns. We don’t expect that the places where we live will have these same qualities. We don’t expect our own hometowns to be worthy of a postcard.

But we did once. The next time you see a box of old postcards in an antique shop, take a look. While the cards from the 1930s and ‘40s may well feature the latest in highway or gas station design, the earlier cards often capture very ordinary scenes: a graceful tree-lined residential street, a

couple paddling a canoe along a shoreline park, a simple white post office (Figure 1).

But along the way, most communities lost that scale and gracefulness one project at a time. In far too many cases, we let our communities erode and become something much less than they once were. We came to believe that loss of community character and a diminished quality of life in the public realm were just part of the cost of progress.

By the 1960s, planner and critic Kevin Lynch had come to believe that most Americans had forgotten—or had never known—what they were missing. Most, he said,

are hardly aware of the potential value of harmonious surroundings, a world which they may have briefly glimpsed only as tourists or as escaped vacationers. They can have little sense of what a setting can mean in terms of daily delight, or as a continuous anchor for their lives, or as an extension of the

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Figure 1. Two “postcards from home”: Winneconne, Wisconsin, from the Wolf River Bridge. *Courtesy Judith M. LaBelle.*

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meaningfulness and richness of the world (Lynch 1960).

But in the forty years since that observation was made, communications and travel have helped Americans become much more aware of the delight of “harmonious surroundings.” At the same time, we have come to believe that they are to be found in other countries, not here.

The exception, of course, is in our parks. There, we Americans have preserved great stretches of our cultural and natural inheritance, by drawing a line around them and keeping most human activity out. Until quite recently, we were confident that that was enough. We had “saved” enough of our national heritage inside parks; outside, where people live and work, “progress” could hold sway. This dichotomy fostered the belief that progress—or change—inevitably involves the loss of community character and beauty in our everyday life. We came to believe that it is simply the price that must be paid for economic well-being.

Even as we have become more sophisticated in economic analysis and environmental impact reviews, our ability to assess the value of the finer grain—the everyday context of our lives, the things we appreciate most—has fallen behind. All too often, we seem unable to take it into account as choices are made in our communities: the value of an historic building, the worth of a quiet, tree-lined street, the option of being able

to walk where we want to go, the importance of informal places that enable neighbors to meet, the need for human scale. We have trouble articulating the importance of such things, let alone allocating a precise value to them. In this regard, we Americans are not alone.

Common Ground, a British organization, emphasizes “local distinctiveness” as a key to fostering community responsibility for cultural resources. They note the difficulty of valuing “quality in the everyday”:

Because these things are not straightforward or easy to pigeonhole, often involve emotional attachment and are hard to communicate, they are treated as ‘soft’ by the media. Because they are impossible to put a money value on or to explain through equations, the unquantifiable ‘intangibles’ are likely to be marginalized by the professionals. Debate rages, and decisions are taken which often leave out the very things that make life worth living (Clifford and King 1993).

So even as we have come to value “harmonious surroundings” enough to travel elsewhere to see them, we have a hard time making their protection a priority when decisions are made in our own communities. The “quality of the everyday” continues to erode.

Nevertheless, the constituency for protecting the distinctive and desirable elements of our communities is growing. New approaches to community development are being crafted. Many of them fall under the rubric of “heritage areas”—a loosely defined term that encompasses areas

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with a federal designation as well as those that are self-defined at the local level. All focus on an area with a distinctive identity that encompasses communities and their surrounding landscapes. They attempt to move beyond our restrictive notion of parks to provide protection for broader areas within which people live and work.

Interestingly, these new American approaches are moving toward the concept of parks and protected areas that have been common in Western Europe for decades. The landscapes that we Americans so love to visit didn't just happen. As the forces of change gathered speed after World War II, these countries realized that their distinctive communities and landscapes would be lost if special steps were not taken to protect them. They developed approaches to protecting communities and landscapes that are far more complex and expansive than the traditional American park model.

Since the late 1940s, the British countryside has been regarded as a critical national resource, first for its productive capacity and more recently for its aesthetic, cultural, environmental, and recreational values. National parks that encompass towns and the surrounding countryside, and provide an administrative and regulatory overlay, are found throughout England. A complex network of other types of protected areas, including such uniquely English designations as "areas of out-

standing natural beauty" and "sites of special scientific interest," provide further types and levels of protection to other natural and cultural resources.

The French designation "regional park" provides another interesting and less-familiar example for Americans to consider. Thirty years ago the French recognized that the special landscapes they so treasured were also working landscapes, created by the people who had lived and worked there for many generations. They saw that because landscape and culture were intertwined, neither could be protected in isolation. Landscape and culture had to be maintained together.

The result of that realization was the development of a system of regional parks. Each park is created through the development of a charter in which representatives of the several jurisdictions involved spell out what they want to protect and how they propose to do it. The planning of a French regional park begins with a broadly inclusive project of "reading the landscape." Area residents study and map their landscape and determine its key distinctive elements. This provides the starting point for the park's charter.

If the national federation agrees that the goals and methods in the proposed charter are appropriate, the park is created. It is placed on national maps and allowed to use the federation's logo for marketing purposes. Local municipalities encour-

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age economic development that is in harmony with the charter, and provide carefully targeted technical assistance and subsidies. Some parks, though not all, utilize land-use regulation to both promote and control economic activity and development.

The Brière Regional Park in Brittany is a good example. At the heart of the Brière is a marsh that the local residents have held in common for hundreds of years. Traditionally, horses were pastured there. Peat was removed for fuel, resulting in channels that provided habitat for wildlife, including eels that were actively harvested. The houses, built on the higher points which become islands during part of the year, were characterized by thatched roofs made from marsh reeds.

After World War II, the traditional architecture fell from favor. The distinctiveness of the area began to erode and the channels grew shut. When the regional park was created, one of several initiatives was to require that new houses use thatch in the traditional manner. It also provided training for craftsmen in how to use thatch, and subsidized the extra cost to the owners. The removal of the thatch helped reopen the channels. Eels and other wildlife came back. Eels and goose livers—traditional foods—are now served in the restaurant in the park auberge and sold as prepared food. The area is popular for ecotourism and environmental education.

We are, of course, a very different society from England or France, in cultural norms as well as legal framework. Property rights are particularly strong here and, as already noted, the societal values that might balance them are not as clearly developed or widely shared. Nonetheless, we have a great many legal tools and techniques that can be used to shape development patterns and protect resources. Local governments can use their zoning authority to this end and can create special designations and districts to protect natural and historic resources. Private individuals can play a role through local land trusts that protect land by buying it or acquiring a conservation easement to restrict its development. A growing number of state governments recognize that sprawl is very costly and are undertaking “smart growth” and “quality community” initiatives to curb the insatiable appetite for open space.

The recent smart growth initiatives, in particular, reflect a growing understanding that development need not run rampant in order to provide economic benefit to a community. Indeed, a growing body of literature suggests that the opposite is true. Those communities that have retained their distinctiveness and quality of life are the ones that are attracting the “lone eagles” who can bring their work with them and the entrepreneurs who can bring their companies with them. Both bring

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new energy to the local economy as well as adding their own personal skills to the community mix.

Although it runs counter to what traditional economic development practitioners believe, the community that respects and protects the qualities that current residents value will have a competitive edge in attracting the business activity that is at the heart of the “new economy.” The same is true regarding tourism. As the leisure economy grows, places that are distinctive and authentic—that are respected and cared for by the people who live there—increasingly have the edge with the upscale tourism that can contribute to the local economy without overwhelming it.

What we require is a more widely shared recognition of the importance of maintaining the distinctive character and qualities of our home-

towns. We need to find ways to discuss and assess the features that contribute to the quality of our “everyday” life, and we need to engage many “ordinary” residents in the discussion. Last but not least, community leaders must look beyond the boundaries of their own community and become much more aware of what can be learned from other “hometowns.” If they do that, in concert with their own residents, they will find the political will to protect those qualities.

A few years ago I asked writer Barry Lopez what one thing we Americans must learn if we are to protect our landscapes. His reply was stunning in its simplicity: “We must learn to stay home.”

And, I would add, work toward the day when we will be sending postcards from home.

#### References

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