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THE PIONEER LANDSCAPE: AN AMERICAN DREAM

DAVID LOWENTHAL

To speak of pioneers, of the pioneer character, of the pioneer spirit, instantly brings vivid impressions to mind. But what and where is the pioneer landscape? No more elusive or evanescent place exists. The pioneer landscape appears here, there, almost everywhere, for only a moment early in the chronicle of any locale; then it vanishes, never to return. Only once in its history is a place a pioneer country. Other pioneering efforts may follow—the extraction of some hitherto unknown or unusable resource, the creation of some new social order—but these efforts do not occur in pioneer landscapes or circumstances. Lindbergh “pioneered” in a complex machine produced by a team of experts and funded by big business. The whole world celebrated Lindy for “doing it alone,” but “the flight was not the heroic lone success of a single daring individual,” as John W. Ward has said, “but the climax of the cooperative effort of an elaborately interlocked technology.”¹

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The landscapes we mainly pioneer today are those of tourism, the fastest moving modern frontier after Dutch elm disease. Cleveland Amory's *The Last Resorts* sets forth a Turnerian process of replacement—a sort of Gresham's Law of intellectual pioneers followed by good and then bad millionaires.² And some natives fear that England is fated to end up as a living museum for the delectation of American visitors—visitors as eager to see the lineaments of their remote European past as of their pioneer American heritage. But there is still a long way to go before tourist pioneers resettle the whole world.

As the beginnings of settlement recede into the past, ever fewer people survive who have experienced actual pioneer landscapes. This helps to account for the present popularity of those landscapes. We increasingly hark back to a past we ourselves have never known, one more imagined than real. The romance of pioneering suits our wistful longing for ways of life so briefly and variously experienced that we invest them with whatever forms we choose. This longing brings us full circle from the original pioneers' nostalgia for their previous homelands, celebrated in scores of doleful ballads collected by Theodore Blegen and others.³

PIONEER SCENES IN MODERN DISPLAY

The pioneer landscape is but one of many realms of modern nostalgia. Preserving and recreating historic areas that exemplify bygone epochs and ways of life is a particularly American mode of expression. During the first third of this century, colonial homes and eastern seaboard villages captured the popular imagination, museum period rooms and restored Williamsburg being the best-known examples. These displays featured aristocratic elegance, avoiding the commonplace or the humble. Later rebirths involved more representative workaday communities: Ford's Greenfield and Old Sturbridge Village, refurbished Victorian towns with old-fashioned Main Streets and cracker-barrel stores, and, more recently, antebellum slave quarters and nineteenth-century New England factories and mill towns. The bucolic landscapes of Shaker and Amish and Mennonite communities; boom-town mining camps instantly settled, violently occupied, and quickly abandoned; fortresses, battlefields, and sites of famous historical episodes likewise have widespread appeal. Frontier and wilderness nostalgia are catered to in the national parks, in Hollywood films, and in the rodeos and dude ranches of cowboy country that were popular resorts for effete easterners for almost a century.⁴ Facsimiles of all these historic locales converge in Disney World's fabulous pastiche.

Pioneer locales are relatively recent adjuncts to outdoor museums. Dude ranches made a man a man, but pioneer environments were long seen as debilitating and corrupting rather than virtuous and enlivening. Log houses were "symbols of the frontier, of backwardness, deprivation," writes Terry Jordan; shameful reminders of failure to get ahead, they were to be discarded as soon as possible for frame, brick, or stone houses. Jacksonian democracy made it desirable for a presidential candidate to have been born in a log cabin, but "it was definitely not fitting for the candidate to continue living in one";⁵ the log cabin was a symbol of how low you could start and still

succeed, not a mark of environmental virtue. Thus Lincoln's early biographers considered New Salem a handicap he had managed to overcome, "a stagnant putrid pool," a "dunghill." Only after Turner panegyricized the frontier as the seedbed of democracy was New Salem reborn as the locale that had shaped Lincoln's character, under the auspices of the Old Salem Lincoln League in 1916-18, "to look like it did when Lincoln lived there."⁶

Some Texas log cabins, Jordan notes, are still displayed amid skyscrapers, as if city fathers meant to say, "See how far we have risen from our humble beginnings." But most now find primitive beginnings quaint and romantic. Texas weekenders have snapped up remaining old cabins, restoring them with plumbing and air conditioning. And those unable to buy the real antiquity can now get prefabricated milled-log models.⁷

Pioneer structures and locales have recently begun to compete for tourist attention. At least fourteen of the eighty-four sites listed in the *Restored Village Directory* emblazon *pioneer* on their mastheads, and pioneering is their central theme.⁸ It is significant that the key word is more often *pioneer* than *frontier*, let alone *wilderness*. The difference in meaning between *pioneer* and *frontier* is often thought obscure, but the distinction is crucial: the frontiersman was a perpetual migrant at home in the wilderness, which he left little altered; the pioneer was essentially a settler who detested and eliminated the wilderness. Visitors relate to restored and re-created scenes of pioneers pushing out *beyond* the frontier and *transforming* the wilderness. They may mourn the passing of the untrammelled landscape of the frontiersman and backwoodsman, the cult of the loner and the machismo of the West immortalized by Hollywood and Marlboro cigarettes, long enshrined in the wide open spaces—but these spaces are wide open because they are irredeemable, good for nothing else. They are not part of our *own* history.

It is rather with the landscape of the pioneer, a landscape of transformation, that we identify. This was the terrain that gave our forefathers

apparently limitless prospects of pastoral gratification, as Annette Kolodny puts it. Once having "developed"—that is, ruined—one paradise, the pioneer simply moved west to another. Since all this supposedly could be had for the taking, three centuries of Americans believed that "infantile fantasies were about to become adult realities."⁹

Like the landscapes they commemorate, recreated pioneer scenes embody a wide range of features—a Kentucky blockhouse, a log house in Missouri, or a sod-roofed dugout in Nebraska. These are scattered across the continent and down the centuries from the Massachusetts forest of the 1620s to the Saskatchewan prairie of the 1920s, and westward to Walla Walla. But the heartland for pioneer reconstructions is the Great Plains, with two "pioneer" villages in Nebraska and one each in North Dakota and Saskatchewan.

These pioneer depictions are less similar as scenic features than as states of being. They are alike only in their remoteness from present-day circumstances; even those of fifty years ago, within living memory, convey an atmosphere utterly different from the present. More than most human landscapes, even more than the wilderness, the pioneer scene is gone for good. Few vestiges survive. It cannot be brought back, and can be only feebly reconstituted. A recent attempt to replicate pioneer life in the Great Plains, modeled on the seventeenth-century colonial simulation at Plimoth Plantation, showed how hard it was realistically to relive even this quite recent pioneer past. Only four of thirteen workshop participants at the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Nebraska remained full-time on the nineteenth-century site over the entire five days, the others commuting daily and nightly between past and present; they had no farm animals, did no plowing or harvesting, and were well aware that, unlike true pioneers, they faced no real physical threats.¹⁰ Popular as pioneer villages are, they are among the least authentic of historic reconstructions. Relics of pioneering days that do claim authenticity are often displayed in totally incongruous settings, like

Lincoln's birthplace cabin lost within its huge classical temple.

Lacking a coherent or consistent physical form, pioneer villages more than most outdoor museums feature a plethora of ancillary activities—log squaring, grain flailing, sheep shearing, wool dyeing, blacksmithing, broommaking, sawmilling, cooperage, making beef jerky, loading and firing powder-horn muskets. The Idaho Museum and Pioneer Village historical society meeting in 1980 caught this flavor, with demonstrations of flint knapping and wheat weaving, an operating model railway, Boise Little Theater actors in period costumes, a performance of "Bertha Goes West" by the Boise Puppetry Guild, and souvenir handbills pouring out of an 1851 press. Honkytonk music in the bar was punctuated by volleys from the Ee-da-how Long Rifles and North-South Skirmish Association.¹¹

Most pioneer villages aim at process rather than landscape; what people did matters more than the structures and locales that sheltered them. "We do not portray any real or particular town," the educational director of the Stuhr Museum wrote me. "The structures are certainly important 'containers', but the most important things are the lives of the people who lived and survived there."¹²

IMAGES OF PIONEERS, PAST AND PRESENT

Pioneer people have undergone reevaluation no less than their locales—indeed, the changing images of pioneer environments, noted above in connection with Lincoln's birthplace, stem largely from revised stereotypes about pioneers themselves. Over the past half century the popular media have created the familiar pioneer look—big stalwart men and women of great strength and perseverance, plain and simple folk with an unswerving sense of duty, direct, quiet, self-possessed, their characters formed by and equipped to cope with their awesome environments.

This portrait in no way resembles earlier assessments. Pioneers were initially as maligned

as their locales, and for similar reasons: free land, which gave subsistence with little labor, induced "Habits of Idleness and Intemperance," the Reverend Thomas Barnard noted in 1738; people who wandered into the wilderness and settled far apart suffered "Savageness of Temper, Ignorance, [and] Want of the Means of Religion."¹³ In an oft-quoted diatribe, Yale's president Timothy Dwight adjudged pioneers "too idle, too talkative, too passionate, too prodigal, and too shiftless, to acquire either property or character."¹⁴ Based on observations in Vermont in the early 1800s, Dwight's assessment is worth quoting at greater length, for its inconsistencies yield a quite different evaluation of pioneers than Henry Nash Smith concluded in *Virgin Land*.¹⁵ Dwight begins with a definition:

A considerable part of all those, who *begin* the cultivation of the wilderness, may be denominated foresters, or pioneers. The business of these persons is no other than to cut down trees, build log-houses, lay open forested grounds to cultivation, and prepare the way for those who come after them. These men cannot live in regular society.

Then follows the denigration of pioneer character cited above. But Dwight had still worse to say of pioneers; as misfits in the New England hierarchy,

They are impatient of the restraints of law, religion, and morality; grumble about the taxes, by which rulers, ministers, and schoolmasters, are supported; and complain incessantly . . . of the extortions of mechanics, farmers, merchants, and physicians, to whom they are always indebted. At the same time they are usually possessed, in their own view, of uncommon wisdom. . . . Finding all their efforts vain, they become at length discouraged; and under the pressure of poverty, the fear of a gaol, and the consciousness of public contempt, leave their native places, and betake themselves to the wilderness.

Here they are obliged either to work, or starve. They accordingly cut down some trees and girdle others; they furnish them-

selves with an ill-built log-house, and a worse barn; and reduce a part of the forest into fields, half-enclosed and half-cultivated.¹⁶

So far, so bad. But bad as it is, such a pioneer legacy does give hope for the future:

A farm, thus far cleared, promises immediate subsistence to a better husbandman. A log-house, thus built, presents, when repaired with moderate exertions, a shelter for his family. Such a husbandman is therefore induced by these little advantages, . . . to purchase such a farm, when he would not plant himself in an absolute wilderness. . . . The second proprietor is commonly a farmer; and with an industry and spirit, deserving no small commendation, changes the desert into a fruitful field.

Unlike this farming paragon, the initial proprietor is "always ready to sell; for he loves this irregular, adventurous, half-working and half-lounging life; and hates the sober industry and prudent economy, by which his bush pasture might be changed into a farm." With the money he gets for it, the forester-pioneer goes off to girdle, hunt, and saunter in another place. His poor wife perhaps "secretly pines for the quiet, orderly, friendly society, to which she originally bade a reluctant farewell," but "her husband . . . becomes less and less a civilized man."

Dwight conflates the frontiersman or backwoodsman with the pioneer and gives the composite a split personality. He attributes all pioneer virtues to the second settler and arrogates all uncivilized, antisocial traits to the first—to whose "greediness unlimited and inextinguishable" he ascribes the ruin of the republics of Greece and the commonwealth of Rome. But in New England, Dwight was ambivalent even about these destructive forester-pioneers, most of whom had by then already straggled on to the Louisiana Territory. "In mercy . . . to the [remaining] sober, industrious, and well-disposed inhabitants, Providence has opened in the vast western wilderness a retreat, sufficiently alluring to draw them away. . . . Their emigration is of very serious utility to the ancient settlements."

Examined more closely, Dwight's shiftless

pioneers turn out to be not merely a departing but a chimerical danger, more rhetoric than reality. As a New England theocrat, Dwight feared the subversive effects of equality and democracy; but otherwise his pioneers curiously resemble Frederick Jackson Turner's frontiersmen, for the possession of land improved even such dreadful fellows. "A considerable number even of these people become sober, industrious citizens, merely by the acquisition of property, . . . when they find themselves really able to accumulate it, and [are thus] persuaded to a course of regular industry." Having sold their first farm for

a considerable sum, the possession of this money removes, perhaps for the first time, the despair of acquiring property, and awakens the hope and the wish to acquire more. The secure possession of property demands every moment the hedge of law, and reconciles a man, originally lawless, to the restraints of government. Thus situated, he sees that reputation also is within his reach. Ambition forces him to aim at it, and compels him to a life of sobriety and decency.

At length, at least for his children's sake, he has to support a schoolmaster and a minister and is home and dry in Dwight's cultivated, genteel society. Such improvement Dwight sees as the rule rather than the exception; "the greater number of the first planters are, probably, of this description."¹⁷ Thus even the frontier backwoodsman who supposedly subverted the social order normally became or gave way to the true pioneer settler, the man who stayed.

But such men were both ordinary and unheroic. Whatever they achieved, they were of small account in the social hierarchy—a hierarchy supremely important to many easterners. Dwight anathematized "foresters" for refusing to recognize and acquiesce in their lowly station and for pretending to be as good and as smart as the community's leaders. Pioneers who moved west and acquired property remained peasants, no less than the old-world immigrants who followed them into the prairies. "The frontier farmer could not be made into an

acceptable hero," Henry Nash Smith remarks. "His sedentary and laborious calling stripped him of the exotic glamor that could be exploited in hunters and scouts of the Wild West. At the same time his low social status made it impossible to elaborate his gentility."¹⁸ The Kentucky backwoodsman Ishmael Bush of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Prairie* (1827) exemplifies the dilemma. Unlike Leatherstocking, Bush is a settled farmer, a part of society with "an intelligent people." But he is below their level. Along with the "coarsest vestments of a husbandman," Bush's "singular and wild display of prodigal and ill-judged ornaments" bespeak a half-barbaric taste. The lower half of his face is "coarse, extended, and vacant," the upper half "low, receding, and mean"; although endowed with great muscular strength, Bush is apathetic and indolent.¹⁹ What a contrast with the modern stereotype of pioneer virtues!

Inbuilt snobbery was still too potent to ennoble the nineteenth-century pioneer. Caroline A. Soule's *Little Alice* (1863) illustrates the enduring eastern attitude toward pioneers, as Smith points out. At a wedding party "fifty sturdy pioneers, clad in clean homespun, stood about in various attitudes, their frank open faces radiant with light from their honest hearts. Upon the mossy logs, sat as many noble women, their coarse garments betokening thrift and neatness." But the nobility of these primitives is only metaphorical; *Little Alice* and her spouse are superior to them because they are genteel easterners in pioneer disguise.²⁰ Up to the 1920s, pioneer heroes in fiction had to be aristocrats, Nicholas Karolides shows; only later did plain, middle-class folk become full-blooded exemplars of pioneer virtues.²¹

Modern reconstructions of pioneer life reflect these virtues rather than any specific types of landscape. They stem mainly from pioneers' presumed relationship with nature. To see that relationship as it really was, we must look not to areas but to attitudes, not to features but to perceptions, and to the duration and character of pioneer experience.

PIONEER EXPERIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ATTITUDES

Nothing was more crucial to pioneers' perceptions than the brevity of that experience. The frontier might endure from a fleeting moment up to a century or more, but the pioneer landscape lasted a generation at most, becoming more ephemeral and transient as pioneers moved west. Elements of those landscapes survived much longer, to be sure; but the sense of a pioneer environment rarely endured in toto more than a few years before giving way to a settled order increasingly seamed by civilization.

During this brief span, however, little intervened between the pioneer and the natural environment. At no other point were settled men so much on their own. The solitary trapper and trader were less isolated; they moved about, alternating time in the wilderness with sojourns in towns and at trading posts. The pioneer settler was marooned in his relatively lonely place. He was not so bereft of social companionship as is sometimes supposed, for community institutions developed rapidly in pioneer societies; log rolling, house raising, husking bees, and squatters' associations rapidly crystallized as social processes. Merle Curti's study of Trempealeau County, Wisconsin, shows how important cooperation and planning were in the making of a pioneer prairie community.²² But compared with other circumstances, pioneer life enforced much solitude and required much self-reliance. Neighbors in pioneer Nebraska were said to be so far apart that "everyone had to have their own tom cat."²³

Self-reliance was at once exhilarating and disheartening. "For a short period," writes Hugh Prince, "the pioneer ceased to be dependent on native people as a missionary or a trader, and was not yet subservient to merchants from the Old World. He had learned to survive and subsist without help from outsiders."²⁴ The pioneer enjoyed freedom from the dead weight of inherited structures that elsewhere impeded change and crippled progress.

He could develop a full range of skills to organize the world around him, constrained only within the limits imposed by nature.

But this freedom from antecedents exacted a cost in loneliness. "Of all the bewildering things about a new country," wrote Willa Cather in *O Pioneers!*, "the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening."²⁵ Pioneer women, less engaged than men in the process of transformation, often found the solitude unbearable, as did Beret in R  lvaag's *Giants in the Earth*.²⁶ Loneliness was often "a fatal disease" for people not born to the plains, said the painter John Noble.

You look on, on, on, out into space, out almost beyond time itself. You see nothing but the rise and swell of land and grass, and then more grass—the monotonous, endless prairie! A stranger traveling on the prairie would get his hopes up, expecting to see something different on making the next rise. To him the disappointment and monotony were terrible. "He's got loneliness," we would say of such a man.²⁷

A prime urge that animated pioneers to transform their environments—and thus abbreviate their pioneer existence—was to relieve that solitude. This could be done only by subduing the wilderness. To be a pioneer was above all to transform a barely touched if not wholly wild tract into a fruitful and productive countryside. It was the act of conversion itself that took the pioneer's fancy, just as it catches our own imagination.

The New England pioneers and their midwestern descendants regularly invoked the Scriptural command in Genesis 1:28 to conquer the earth. Pioneers viewed wild country "through utilitarian spectacles," writes Roderrick Nash; "trees became lumber, prairies farms . . . The pioneers' self-conceived mission was to bring these things to pass . . . 'to cause the Wilderness to bloom and fructify.'"²⁸ The benefits transcended economic gain. On behalf of his fellow Americans, the pioneer broke "the long chain of savage life" and substituted "civilization, liberty, and law" for "primeval barbarism."²⁹ "What good man," asked President



Sketch No. 1. It is Winter

Ebenezer Mix

Jackson in 1830, "would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms?"³⁰ Pioneers and historians of westward expansion alike employed military metaphors. The wilderness was an "enemy" to be "conquered," "subdued," or "vanquished" and "subjugated" by a "pioneer army."³¹ Such figures of speech persisted at least into the 1960s.

Pioneers often displayed intense repugnance for their initial environments. The New England wilderness was "howling," "dismal," "terrible"; the dense primeval forest with its baffling swamps and "flesh-tearing" thickets frustrated settlers. The pioneering settlements of the Old Northwest, of upstate New York, and of Kentucky and Tennessee were crude islands of open space hacked out of the close surrounding trees. Beyond the forest frontier, nature remained malign for different reasons. Prairie pioneers had to cope with heat, drought, hunger, blizzards, and locusts.

Images of the transformation into fields and towns, such as Ebenezer Mix's lithographs of

New York's Holland Purchase,³² consistently prefer the later scenes—contrasting darkness with light, the mournful forest or windswept prairie with smiling fields and busy farms and buoyant towns, a land no longer boundless and undifferentiated but all fenced and ordered.

Pioneers sometimes poked rueful fun at their own distaste for nature raw. Here is one of Blegen's Nebraska ditties:

Hurrah for Lane County, the land of the free,
The home of the grasshopper, bed-bug and flea,
I'll holler its praises, and sing of its fame,
While starving to death on a government claim.

How happy I am as I crawl into bed,
The rattle-snakes rattling a tune at my head,
While the gay little centipede, so void of all fear,
Crawls over my neck and into my ear.³³

But on every pioneer frontier, "intense enthusiasm greeted the transformation of the wild into the civilized," concludes Nash. Diaries reiterated pioneer reminiscences of "unbroken and trackless wilderness" . . . 'reclaimed' and 'transformed into fruitful farms and . . . flourishing cities.'³⁴ Surveying Nebraska's pioneer

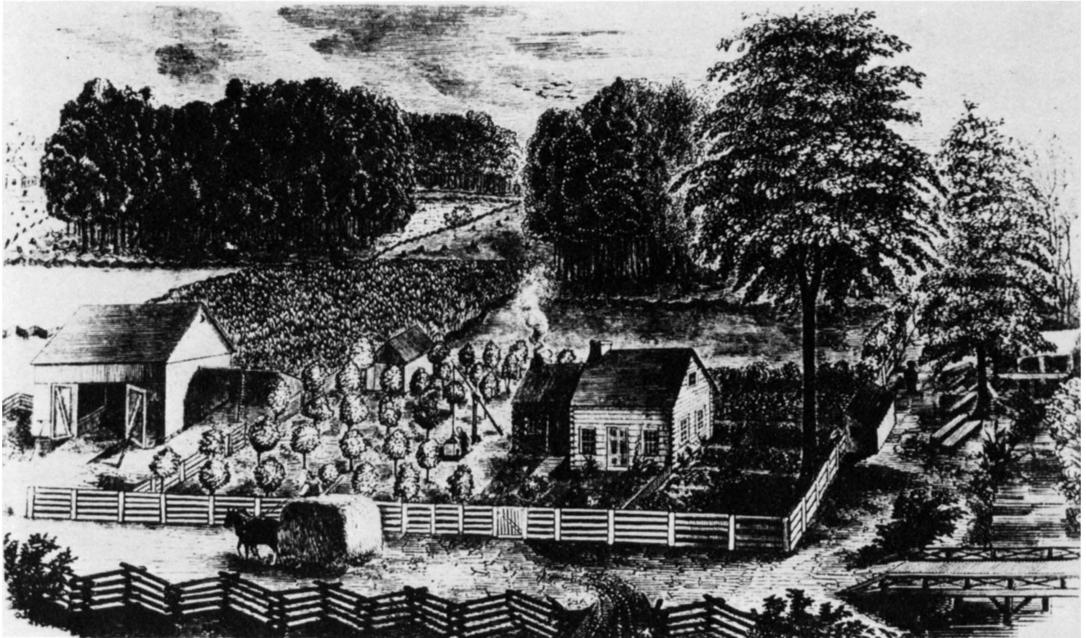
*Sketch No. 2. It is Summer**Ebenezer Mix*

progress about 1880, Charles Dana Wilber thought his most important discovery “a quarter section . . . covered with fields of grain, whose market proceeds would more than pay for the land; [with] a spring and a grove which encircled a happy home filled with many tokens of prosperity and the merry music of children; . . . barns, pens, coops, granary, shed for wagons, plows and machinery, all in good order,” and farther off a white school house in a grass plot shaded by two friendly elms, which looked in the distance “like a pearl in an emerald setting.”³⁵

The landscape pioneers liked best the imagined future, with nature transformed into settlement. “A pioneer should have imagination,” believed Cather, “should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves.”³⁶ The landscape he was domesticating was only a harbinger of better to come. “Even as he dwelt among the stumps of his newly-cut clearing,” runs a classic Turnerian panegyric, “the pioneer had the creative vision of a new order of society. In imagination he pushed back the forest boundary to the confines of a mighty

Commonwealth; he willed that log cabins should become the lofty buildings of great cities.”³⁷ Fictional pioneer heroes were portrayed sacrificing themselves for their successors’ sakes. “We’re going out to suffer—to die,” says a character in Courtney Ryley Cooper’s *The Last Frontier* (1923), “that others might come in safety. This was not a thing of today—it was a matter of Tomorrow.”³⁸

Foreign visitors again and again commented on that emphasis on the future. “Others appeal to history; an American appeals to prophecy,” according to an 1821 London periodical, “and with Malthus in one hand and a map of the back country in the other, he boldly defies us to a comparison with America as she is to be.”³⁹ Tocqueville observed in the 1830s that Americans “care but little for what has been, but they are haunted by visions of what will be.”⁴⁰ Americans “love their country, not, indeed, as it is, but as it will be,” noted the German traveler Francis J. Grund during the same decade.⁴¹ Americans themselves often said as much. A New York State settler in the 1760s or 1770s challenged Crèvecoeur to



Sketch No. 3. It is Summer

Ebenezer Mix

"return in ten years' time and you will not recognize this . . . wild and savage . . . district. . . . Our fields will be fenced in, and the stumps will have disappeared."⁴² Zebulon Pike in 1806 saw the wild prairies near the Osage River as "the future seats of husbandry"; he relished the thought of "the numerous herds of domestic cattle . . . destined to crown with joy these happy plains."⁴³

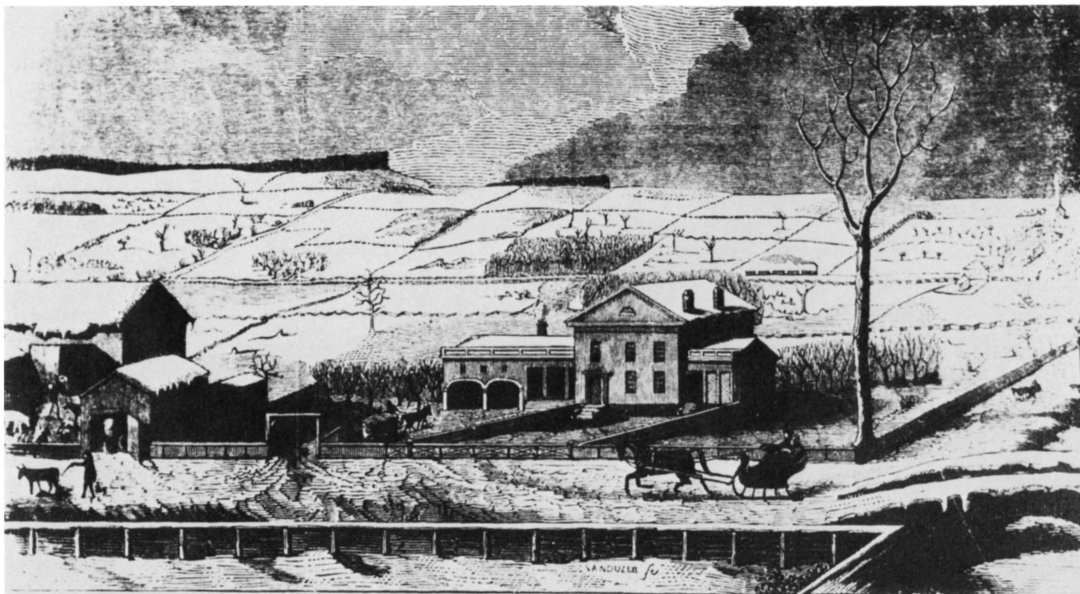
Several pioneer traits became engrained in the national character. "If, indeed, we ourselves were not pioneers, our fathers were," wrote Turner. "This experience has been wrought into the very warp and woof of American thought."⁴⁴ The new survivalist communities throughout today's West illustrate the persistence of certain pioneer ideals, though perhaps not those in which Turner took pride.

The habit of neglecting present for future landscapes is another mode of thought inherited from pioneer forebears. Showing me the view from the roof of a new building, my hosts at the University of California at Los Angeles in 1966 ignored the actual campus and described how it would look in 1980. Leopold Tyrman

reported that in Houston "the past tense is out of use. The present tense is avoided. Everyone speaks only in the future. For example, trying to flatter my host, I say 'This steak is delicious.' 'You'll have to come back next year,' he assures me. 'You'll see what steaks we have in Texas.'"⁴⁵ A recent British review of the American scene conjured up the vision of a

well-to-do business-man, a manufacturer of psychiatrists' sundries, who actually keeps his desk-calendar a week ahead of anybody else's. "Nobody's going to steal a march on me, Mac," he explained. On one wall of his office there was a sign which read: "It's Too Late Already," and he told me that he had started excavations for a deep shelter before the ink was properly dry on Einstein's Theory of Relativity.⁴⁶

Today's survivalists may be Johnnies-come-lately after all. F. Scott Fitzgerald's "eternal pioneer in search of the golden moment dreamed in the past and to be recaptured"⁴⁷ is half misconceived; the pioneer's golden moment was never in the past, it always lay ahead. Pioneering was

Sketch No. 4. *It is Winter*

Ebenezer Mix

a mission designed to generate an ever more beneficent future.⁴⁷

Regenerative action may be another habit inherited from pioneer, along with puritan and transcendental, views. Manifest Destiny was fueled not simply by land for the taking, but by the desire to subjugate the wilderness, to extend Christianity, and to fulfill individual achievement. One settler's handbook promises pioneers they will be able to say: "I vanquished this wilderness and made the chaos pregnant with order and civilization; alone I did it."⁴⁸

IDEALIZING PIONEER ATTITUDES

The values Americans today associate with pioneer milieus only partly conform with the goals of the pioneers themselves. I shall discuss them under four headings: being there first, making one's own mark, freedom from constraint, and ecological nostalgia. Then I shall point to the paradoxes these goals imply and the falsifications of history they enjoin.

Being first may have motivated and certainly

sustained many pioneers. To be sure, discoverers, explorers, and backwoodsmen had already seen and sometimes surveyed lands previously known only to Indians. Pioneering primacy came from the settler's feeling of being the land's first absolute owner, the first to *possess* it. The simile is often avowedly sexual, as in Dick Summers's description of the hills and timber of Kentucky in the 1830s in Guthrie's *The Big Sky*: "Wild. Wild and purty like a virgin woman. Whatever a man does he feels like he's the first one done it."⁴⁹ Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* argues that such possession obsessed many pioneers.⁵⁰ But the thrill was not just of the *droit de seigneur*; brand-new ownership made the pioneer a creator, the land his Pygmalion.

Linked with primacy is the notion of making one's mark. Summers remembered when the country between the Wind Range and the Grand Tetons was new, "and a man seeing it could give names to it."⁵¹ Unlike the discoverer who marvels at the new and moves on, the pioneer stays to see everything around him, save the residues of nature, the product of his

own labor. But we may attribute more such pride to the pioneer than he himself felt; retrospection is less characteristic of men of action than of moderns poignantly aware of being unable to affect their environments.

We also envy pioneers' freedom from modern social constraints, beyond the reach of planners and policemen, tax collectors and social workers. Even those who know that most pioneers in fact lived by a stricter and less tolerant social code than our own fancy that proximity to the wilderness made them virtually a law unto themselves. The stereotype resembles that held by such New Englanders as Dwight, but today we applaud the traits Dwight reprobated. In so doing, we are apt to forget that whereas the frontiersman was at home in the wilderness beyond the law and the confines of civilization, which he rejected, the pioneer displayed none of these traits. He meant to replace the wilderness with civilization and relied on his own ready-made society to protect his family from backwoodsman and Indian alike; far from contravening legal codes, the pioneer supplemented them by vigilante action.

We differ most of all from pioneers in enjoying fictional and reconstructed pioneer landscapes as ecological nostalgia. We envisage the pioneer alone in the great world of nature where the air was clean, the water pure, the flora and fauna inexhaustible (however profligate he might be)—an environment far superior to our own.⁵² Against that environment the imagined pioneer pitted his strength, sharpened his powers of observation, and gained intimate knowledge of all creatures great and small. Thus seen in retrospect, the pioneer landscape is at the same time a natural paradise and a perfect setting in which to master nature. Even the hardships and miseries of pioneer life are exhibited to show what it took to settle the country—a demanding environment that brought out the best in our forebears, by contrast with the earlier theocratic image of a bountiful milieu that promoted slothful indolence.

The disparities between our own and the pioneers' views of their lot and their landscapes are obvious. We ascribe spiritual sustenance

to an environment they found gloomy, depressing, mournful, and lonely, and bent every effort to replace with order and artifice. Only frontiersmen appreciated empty, untouched nature—like Benton Collingsworth in Guthrie's *Arfive*, who enjoyed the size of his world, with its "depth of sky, reach of miles, elbow room for mind and muscle." But most settlers shared a perception of Montana as "bottomless and without end in any direction"; it was this feeling that made Jay Ross's wife "feel so flung out, . . . so bare and so scattered."⁵³

It is still odder that our conservation-minded, would-be frugal age should celebrate pioneer activities so wasteful of nature's goods, so heedless of gutting resources, so unaware of their ecological impact. Pioneer strength and zest came from the *lack* of any felt need to conserve. Interest in the future animated the pioneer's every move, but he saw no call for precautions against using up resources. Woods, swamps, and wildlife were nuisances unless convertible to immediate use.

Turner considered the rifle and the ax to be pioneer symbols, for "they meant a training in aggressive courage, in domination, in directness of action, in destructiveness."⁵⁴ Parson Weems's fiction of George Washington's hatchet, immortalized in the American mind, highlights our ambivalence toward pioneer destructiveness—an ambivalence that ever since Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* has made Americans feel at once proud and ashamed of conquering the wilderness, as Nash puts it.⁵⁵ How appropriate, suggests James Robertson, to give a hatchet, the essential tool for civilizing the wilderness, to the Father of His Country on his own birthday! Washington's use of it reflects both dexterity and forthrightness—two prime pioneer traits. "Do you want destruction of the wilderness reconciled with admiration of the wilderness? Shame at its destruction reconciled to a vision of a virtuous people? Tell the cherry-tree story."⁵⁶

Today we neither inhabit nor remember the pioneer landscape. The pioneer took possession so as to replace the wilderness with his own creation. The creation justified the destruction,

and was its main purpose. We now admire the pioneer's single-minded energy but deplore its object, because we are neither creators nor destroyers, but passive spectators of a played-out process. Change continues, but the pioneer episode is now a matter only of historical record and nostalgic reverie. The pioneer landscapes of America, some of them just recently past, are gone as irrevocably as the ruins of ancient Rome. But our awareness that they are irrecoverable lends them much of their exotic charm.

The very uniqueness of the pioneer experience gives it a value in retrospect it never had in actuality. "I guess I'm a born pioneer," says a character in Susan Ertz's *The Proselyte*, "for when things get settled and finished I want to push on somewhere's else. . . . Here in Salt Lake City, everything's made too easy. I want my children to know what it is to start from nothing, the way we did."⁵⁷ But the experience cannot be repeated by staying in the same place, only by moving on. Despite all the ills and hardships of Iowa, Herbert Quick's old Vandemark would "rather have my grandsons see what I saw and feel what I felt in the conquest of these prairies, than to get up by their radiators, step into their baths, whirl themselves away in their cars, and go to the universities. I am glad I had my share in those old, sweet, grand, beautiful things—the things which never can be again."⁵⁸

But if they can never be again, how can his grandsons share that experience? By visiting Harold Warp Pioneer Village in Minden, Nebraska, to "marvel at the stamina of their forebears?"⁵⁹ Some reconstructions aim to deny, against all the evidence, that pioneer days are gone, to reassure us that those times are still with us. A prime reason for visiting the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, according to the brochure, is to realize that "the problems of the people in 1880 are still very much the same problems of the people in 1980"—namely, farm prices and energy. A whole century of massive change is disregarded for the sake of this wistful identification with pioneer days.

Above all, these reconstructed pioneer

villages seek to convey the old pioneer delight in action, faith in progress, and hope for the future. Saskatoon's Boomtown celebrates the "energetic" years of the 1910s, where the modern visitor tiptoes past not only the parson preparing his sermon and the teacher midway through her lesson, but more to the point, "the bank manager signing another promising loan." It is no coincidence that the Pioneer Village of the Cass County Historical Society in North Dakota is entitled "Bonanzaville, U.S.A." Pioneer Arizona prides itself on its "mission improbable"—the moving and restoration of Senator Henry F. Ashurst's old log cabin. The Harold Warp Pioneer Village emphasizes "Watching America grow!" This is certainly true of pioneer reconstructions themselves; Black Creek Pioneer Village in Ontario boasts that it is "Canada's fastest growing folk village."

What modern American would not wish to share the experience of Timothy Dwight's pioneer farmer,

cheered by the continual sight of improvement in every thing about him. His fields increase in number and beauty. His means of living are enlarged. The wearisome part of his labour is gradually lessened. His neighbours multiply; and his troubles annually recede. Hope, the sweetener of life, holds out to him at the same time brighter and brighter prospects of approaching ease and abundance.⁶⁰

Nostalgia for pioneer days is a yearning for a landscape of the spirit—a landscape of active, positive change. When progress falters, the celebration of such memories helps us to endure the seemingly intractable degradations of the present-day scene.

We know we could not return to pioneer landscapes, even if we wished to. Evoking their spirit affirms hope that memories of the past will sustain a wholly different future.

NOTES

1. John W. Ward, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight," *Studies in American Culture*, ed. by Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), p. 37. See also James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), pp. 201-2.

2. Cleveland Amory, *The Last Resorts* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), pp. 23-24.

3. Theodore C. Blegen, "Singing Immigrants and Pioneers," *American Culture*, ed. by Kwiat and Turpie, pp. 171-88; Ronald Rees, "Nostalgic Reaction and the Canadian Prairie Landscape" (paper delivered at Great Plains Symposium, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, April 29-May 1, 1981). The desire to preserve memories of pioneer experiences, if not their actual locales, began almost before the pioneers themselves had passed on. Beginning in the 1830s the historian Lyman Draper made it his lifetime mission to search out and transcribe for posterity the records and recollections of aged western pioneers that would perish with them if not quickly rescued. See William B. Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman Copeland Draper* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1954). Hundreds of reminiscences published in the second half of the nineteenth century attest to the eagerness of the immediate descendants of pioneers themselves to save pioneer experiences from oblivion. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth Century Response* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 76-77.

4. E.g., see Earl Pomeroy, *In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957); Linda H. Graber, *Wilderness as Sacred Space*, Association of American Geographers Monograph Series no. 8 (Washington, D.C., 1976); Martyn Bowden, "Creating Cowboy Country," *Geographical Magazine* 52 (July 1980): 693-701.

5. Terry G. Jordan, "Cabin Fever," *Texas Monthly* 6 (1978): 215.

6. Richard S. Taylor, "How New Salem Became an Outdoor Museum," *Historic Illinois* 2 (June 1979): 1-3.

7. Jordan, "Cabin Fever," p. 216.

8. *Restored Village Directory*, 5th ed. (New York: Quadrant Press, 1978).

9. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University

of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp. 154-56.

10. Roger Welsch, "Very Didactic Simulation: Workshops in the Plains Pioneer Experience at the Stuhr Museum," *History Teacher* 3 (1974): 356-64.

11. *The Mountain Light* 19 (Fall 1980): 4.

12. Warren Rodgers to the author, November 19, 1980.

13. Thomas Barnard, *A Sermon Preached in Boston*, quoted in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1957), pp. 251-52.

14. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New-England and New-York*, 4 vols. (London: William Baynes and Son, 1823), 2:440.

15. See Smith, *Virgin Land*, pp. 252-53.

16. Dwight, *Travels*, 2:439-40.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 440-43.

18. Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 250.

19. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie*, quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, pp. 256-57.

20. Caroline A. Soule, *Little Alice; or, The Pet of the Settlement, A Story of Prairie Land*, quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 249.

21. Nicholas J. Karolides, *The Pioneer in the American Novel, 1900-1950* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 260.

22. Merle Curti et al., *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959). See also Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Gilbert C. Fite, "Prairie Farmer: A View after Three Centuries," *Agricultural History* 50 (1976): 275-89.

23. Roger Welsch, *Shingling the Fog and Other Plains Lies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 46.

24. High Prince, "Old World into New, New World into Old: Some Reflections on the Frontier Theme of Cuzankus '79," *Historical Geography Newsletter* 9 (1979): 15-18.

25. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913; reprint ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 19.

26. O. E. Rølvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1927).

27. John Noble in *The American Magazine* (1927), quoted in Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), p. 488.

28. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 31-32. To early New Englanders the wilderness meant more than this: it was specifically identified with the biblical wilderness. See Peter N. Carroll, *Puritanism and the American Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the New England Frontier, 1629-1700* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

29. Quotes from William Cooper (1810) and others in Nash, *Wilderness*, pp. 32 and 41.

30. Andrew Jackson, "Second Annual Message," December 6, 1830, in *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. by James D. Richardson (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1879), 3: 1084.

31. Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 27.

32. Orasmus Turner, "The Pioneer Settler upon the Holland Purchase and His Progress," *Western Historical Quarterly* 6 (1975): 225-35. Ebenezer Mix's engravings originally appeared in Orasmus Turner, *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase* (Buffalo: Jewett, Thomas, and Geo. H. Derby, 1849), from which this is an excerpt.

33. Blegen, "Singing Immigrants," pp. 174-75.

34. Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 40.

35. Charles Dana Wilber, *The Great Valleys and Prairies of Nebraska and the Northwest* (1881), quoted in Smith, *Virgin Land*, p. 212.

36. Cather, *O Pioneers!* p. 48.

37. Frederick Jackson Turner, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy" (1903), in *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), p. 263.

38. Courtney Ryley Cooper, *The Last Frontier* (1923), quoted in Karolides, *Pioneer in the American Novel*, p. 250.

39. Quoted in Turner, *Frontier*, p. 345.

40. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. by Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (1835; reprint ed., New York: Knopf, 1951), 2:73.

41. Francis J. Grund, *The Americans in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1837), 2:263-64. See David Lowenthal, "The American Scene," *Geographical Review* 58 (1968): 61-88, especially pp. 75-76.

42. Michel-Guillaume St. Jean de Crevecoeur, *Journey into Northern Pennsylvania and*

the State of New York (1801; reprint ed., Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964), p. 493.

43. *The Expeditions of Zebulon N. Pike* (1893), quoted in Nash, *Wilderness*, p. 32.

44. Turner, *Frontier*, p. 264.

45. Leopold Tyrman, "A Reporter at Large: American Diary," *New Yorker*, November 11, 1967, p. 76.

46. Alex Atkinson and Ronald Searle, *By Rocking-Chair across America* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1959), p. 15.

47. Milton R. Stern, *The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 165.

48. Sidney Smith, *The Settlers' New Home: An Emigrant's Location* (1849), quoted in Nash, *Wilderness*, pp. 42-43.

49. A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Big Sky* (1947), quoted in Donald C. Stewart, "A. B. Guthrie's Vanishing Paradise: An Essay on Historical Fiction," *Journal of the West* 15 (July 1976): 84.

50. Kolodny, *Lay of the Land*.

51. Quoted in Stewart, "Vanishing Paradise," p. 84.

52. For example, S. Lyman Tyler, "Americana Collections Reflect Our Continuing Fascination with the Frontier and the West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (1977): 443-54.

53. A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *Arfive* (1971), quoted in Stewart, "Vanishing Paradise," p. 92-93.

54. Frederick Jackson Turner, "Pioneer Ideals and the State University" (1910), in *The Frontier in American History*, pp. 269-70.

55. Nash, *Wilderness*, pp. 76-77. This ambivalence was not wholly lacking among early pioneer chroniclers, as Lee Clark Mitchell demonstrates in scores of descriptions of "magnificent forests which the axe has not yet despoiled," of "the wilderness that still glowed in its pristine luxuriance," and of "innumerable spots where nature is still invulnerable." These hesitant *yets* and *stills* bespeak regret over the despoliation of nature much like that conveyed by Cooper, Crevecoeur, and the artist Thomas Cole. Their uneasiness gave way to outright concern and consternation as the century wore on. See Mitchell, *Witnesses to a Vanishing America*, pp. 31 and 37.

56. Robertson, *American Myth*, p. 14.

57. Susan Ertz, *The Proselyte* (1933),

quoted in Karolides, *Pioneer in the American Novel*, p. 205.

58. Herbert Quick, *Vandemark's Folly* (1922), quoted in Karolides, *Pioneer in the American Novel*, p. 77.

59. The quotations in this and the next paragraph are all from frontier-village brochures.

60. Dwight, *Travels*, 2:447.