

The Neurosis of Nostalgia

Philip D. Jordan

ARE AMERICANS backtracking to the past to escape the present? This question arises when people who have always been proud of their get-up-and-go and confident they held the future in their hands seem to be turning more and more to memories and less and less to current realities. The cuts and wounds and the bewilderment of contemporary problems — economic, social, religious, political — have struck hard at earlier beliefs in self-confidence, self-reliance, and rugged individualism and independence.

Economists differ and bicker; sociologists only guess at the causes and results of dramatic social and behavioral patterns, both within and without the home; bitter controversies rage both over the theology and the role of the church; and political parties war upon one another with the result that a disillusioned public decides, rightly or wrongly, that all politicians (one seldom hears the term *statesmen* any more) are not to be trusted.

Are ever-increasing numbers of Americans subconsciously searching for a time when things were good and life was fun by retreating into yesteryears? The eighteenth-century spinning wheel becomes a symbol of domestic security, the nineteenth-century tin campaign torch represents politics at its best, the sweet sentimentalism of old sheet music plucks at heart-strings. Old post cards, old glass, old iron, old funeral spoons, old tools, old fruit jars, old railroad spikes, old furniture — all these and many more are eagerly sought and displayed. Never in the history of the nation have so many collected so much. Old carriages, old automobiles, and even old homes are bid in at fantastic prices.

The current conception is that anything old is an antique and that all antiques are worthy of preservation because they are "historical." The Utah State University at Logan recently established a center to house "pertinent materials" relating to outlaws and bad men. The Questers, a national group devoted to antiques, is most catholic in its collecting. Any old book possesses his-

toricity. Old mansions in which nothing of historical significance occurred are baptized as "historic" houses and opened for a fee to a gullible public. While many young persons react dramatically to present problems, some find value and excitement in collecting. Older persons bury their heads in yesterday's root cellars.

Americans seek security by buying their history, reading into old toys and ancient gimcracks a way of life which never was. They purchase the past for cash, but they do not understand it. They are possessed with things but indifferent to ideas. A night school course in "learning to know antiques" puts up a standing-room-only placard; a high school offering adults sessions in colonial history (because of the coming bicentennial celebration, which has been less than a conspicuous success) draws so few that the course is canceled. Generally, memberships in local and state historical societies remain about at the level they were a decade or more ago, but, happily enough, both the state historical societies of Minnesota and Wisconsin show a significant membership increase.

Readers of historical journals seem relatively unimpressed with well-written, scholarly articles even if they pertain to their own area and apparently are turning more and more, if they pretend an interest in history at all, to the more popular, but generally sound, *American Heritage*, *Civil War Times*, *American History Illustrated*, and, to offer one other example, the new *British History Illustrated*. Only recently, *The Intellectual Digest*, whose contents reflected its title, failed because of inflation and lack of subscribers. In residence after residence, shelves are stocked with pewter, pretty china, and souvenir plates, each item reflecting a real or imagined image of the gone-before, but there may be no books except, perhaps, volumes of best sellers, condensed for rapid reading.

The neurosis of nostalgia may carry the unwary into a never-never world where the pride of sheer possession shrouds its victims in myth and fantasy and, in their subconscious struggle to escape, imprisons them

in a jail of which they are unaware. No matter how lovely a hand-wrought cherry chest is, it cannot challenge the intellect as does, for example, the intricate logic of those political philosophers who wrestled to lay down the precepts upon which the nation was built and upon which it now rests. The chest is perishable, the concept is not. The price of corn and wheat and gasoline is a more popular conversation piece than the price of liberty.

It is curious how so many Americans discard so many historical principles and scramble to rescue from some landfill physical items which, because they are old, are worthy of preservation. Only the uneducated and the silly would maintain that history is alive and well today merely because of preservation. At auction sales enthusiasts bid sky high for a corner cupboard with original blown-glass panes, yet few would consider spending a relatively modest amount for a reprint edition of, say, *The Federalist Papers* or the political writings of Thomas Jefferson, or even the United States Constitution itself. At a recent social gathering, when discussion was hot and opinions smoked and when references to the Constitution were tossed back and forth, an informal survey revealed that not a single participant owned a copy of the Constitution and that only three of the twenty-six present — and these were attorneys — had read the document within the previous five years.

ALL THIS is no ill-tempered attack upon antique collectors and, most certainly, no attack by an arrogant “intellectual.” The author enthusiastically collects several types of antiques and relishes both the acquisition and display of them. He views them as evidences of a former culture, as attractive, and as rare outward manifestations of nineteenth-century mores and folkways. In short, they represent a hobby and not an escape mechanism. A long rifle, manufactured in Ohio for a Virginian en route to a new life in the trans-Mississippi West, itself possesses a history as an artifact. Its maker’s name is known, and the date of its making is established. It is an old gun and good gun, but no matter how carefully one examines it, one cannot find in the piece itself the history of an expanding frontier from the Old Northwest into the territories of Wisconsin and Iowa. To attempt to imagine the sweep and force of the frontier as based upon a single long rifle is about as inane as purchasing paper dolls dressed in the fashionable mode of Elizabeth I and to believe the publisher’s blurb that scissoring out paper dolls is “a much better way to learn history than going to the movies, and it’s cheaper.” Both the movies and television have drawn viewers away from serious study of the past to a “wild West” conception of history that never was.

It is little wonder that interest in history in schools declines, that fewer and fewer study courses are offered

in the American way, and that what once was history has degenerated into a hodgepodge called social studies or social science. There are secondary schools throughout the land where every social science teacher holds a major in physical education and split minors in history, geography, guidance, or political science. It is true also that college retrenchments have eliminated courses in American history.

When people are afraid and apprehensive, they are more apt to retreat than to attack. Psychologically, they rationalize and follow the least painful path. They seek assurances in mystic cults of the occult and spirit worlds, in scrambling frantically for self-protection by repeating over and again “everything is going to be all right,” and by putting out of mind much that is all wrong. They play at real life, but do not live it. There is some justification in such a psychosis, such a state of consciousness, for the world, as everyone realizes, grows ever smaller and its problems ever more intricate and complicated. The minds of men are manipulated more than ever before. The concepts of history change as much as do the value scales of ethics and personal and public conduct.

A Betty lamp, no matter how highly polished, is not a crystal ball for peering into the past or looking into the future. But a knowledge of history, frail and changeable as history may be, not only offers those who labor to understand and use it a perspective and perhaps a foundation more stable and secure than generally believed, but also gives a contributing insight into root political philosophies upon which gentlemen of rare distinction constructed a unique nation in the New World. The doctrine of the rights of man is, indeed, old, but it is not an antique. It cannot stand on a shelf next to a pitcher of Westward Ho glass, but it can — and should — be displayed prominently as both an emotional and intellectual symbol of self-discipline, self-determination, and personal liberty. The concept will shatter only if men themselves destroy it. It is a healthy, not neurotic, way of existence not only of yesterday but also of today. It is well worth collecting and preserving.

More than two centuries ago, Samuel Adams put it this way during a speech in Boston: “The necessity of the times more than ever calls for our utmost circumspection, deliberation, fortitude and perseverance. Let us remember that, if we suffer tamely a lawless attack upon our liberty, we encourage it and involve others in our doom.”

Who needs to surrender to nostalgia with such a challenge facing him?

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