There are more than a thousand photographs of my hometown in the Minnesota Historical Society archives, but the one I go back to again and again is a postcard that was tacked to the wall in my childhood bedroom. I have a vivid memory of discovering it at the Woolworth's downtown, and my adolescent self found the photo both ironic and hilarious.

The postcard depicts nothing, really: Four lanes of Interstate 90 that were carved through the countryside outside of town and that ultimately isolated and starved off local businesses, long nourished by the traffic that had gone right through the heart of town. This sort of thing happened all over America, of course, but Austin is where I experienced the effects firsthand.

The picture means something entirely different to me now than it did in 1975. Then, I was itching to get out (that was, after all, the year that Bruce Springsteen’s “Born to Run” was released), and I regarded that highway as both a symbol as well as an escape route. I didn’t yet see it as a sort of fault line.

It’s odd, really, to look at your hometown through the selective lens of history—in this instance, a collection of online thumbnail photographs that is heavy on “acts of God.” Austin’s survival seems miraculous given the number of floods (14 since 1908) and tornadoes (6 since 1928) that have bedeviled the town. I remember some of those, and I also remember—fondly, it turns out, and with surprising nostalgia and tenderness—many of the people and places that live on in the MNHS collection.

There’s Main Street, exactly as I remember it, and there’s the long-gone fire station that had a breakneck roller rink on its top floor (the first place I heard James Brown and was whipsawed by the power of music from a world outside my own). And there’s Shaw’s Gym for Boys, where I boxed and played basketball and horsed around with my pals. I’ve always believed that the day they tore down Shaw’s was the day I started to think of my hometown as a repository of memories I would one day soon look back on from a great (and safe) distance.

One hundred miles is the buffer I eventually settled on. These days, thanks to those interstate highways, that feels like nothing at all. And making that drive still feels like going home.

—Brad Zellar

Postcard, about 1975. (MNHS COLLECTIONS. PHOTO © NMN, INC. USED WITH PERMISSION.)
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