

The Heartland's Role in US Culture: It's "Main Street"

By James R. Shortridge

Even in this age of instantaneous communication and a global economy, the cultural distinctiveness of most major American subregions remains easy to describe. The South comes to mind first, perhaps, with its rich mixture of blues rhythms, okra simmerings, and Baptist invective. But equally clear mannerisms and character traits can be visualized for places as varied as Southern California, Seattle and the surrounding Pacific Northwest, and northern New England. Things are not so simple for the Midwest, however. Everyone recognizes this area's economic importance, but its people are poorly defined. Is there such a thing as a Midwestern accent, for example? Can anybody identify a regionally specific music? The enigma persists at more abstract levels, as well. While some people assert that Midwesterners virtually define the concepts of idealism and democratic temperament, others deride these same people as bland, materialistic, and conservative.

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How can we get to the bottom of this quandary? The cultural distinctiveness of most places derives from rather obvious historical roots. New England owes much of its personality even today to its Puritan past, for example; the Southwest to its Spanish-Catholic and Indian traditions; and the South to its ruralism and period of independence. Again, though, the Midwest is more complex. Its early settlers came from Yankee, Middle Atlantic, and Southern cultural traditions on the eastern seaboard, as well as from Germany, Scandinavia, Ireland, and Eastern Europe. Its agriculture is divided among corn, wheat, and dairy farming, plus ranching and other traditions. Some sections are highly urbanized; others are quite rural.

The Roots of the Term "Middle West"

The more one thinks about the Midwest, in fact, the more muddled the regional identity seems to become. Most writers define the area as the 12 states extending westward from Ohio to Kansas and then northward to the Canadian border but, again, many exceptions exist. I have seen depictions in which the place lies entirely west of the Mississippi River and others where it is entirely east of that natural divide. Even the regional name, one of the vaguest words imaginable, seems to be of little help in narrowing down location or culture. After all, wouldn't the "middle of the West" be somewhere in Utah?!

When I decided to explore Midwestern culture in depth several years ago, I began with a search for the earliest usage of the word itself. Knowledge of this original application and meaning, I reasoned, would be a logical base from which to follow

shifting definitions over space and time. In my research most writers implied that the Midwest came into being because of confusion over the nation's tendency to define another regional term—the West—as an early stage in the settlement process as much as a fixed geographical location. The Ohio Valley would once have been considered the West, the argument went, but as time passed a new regional term was needed for what had become a mature society. The assumption was that people then subdivided the West into two components: "Far" and "Middle." The former would retain the traditional pioneer and wilderness traits, whereas the latter would refer to the second stage of settlement, a land of small towns and a stable, prosperous agricultural economy.

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mainstream American, rural society in Kansas and Nebraska.

The Midwest As "Main Street"

The initial cluster of cultural traits associated with the new Middle West in the central plains was remarkably consistent from writer to writer. People there were seen as self-reliant and independent, kind, open, and thrifty. They were pragmatic and industrious, and they took pride in their work; yet they were also idealistic, moral, and humble. Such a list reads today like an idealization of rural life, but contemporary observers regarded it as fact, not philosophy. The traits were direct products of experience, especially of a prolonged drought and economic depression that had gripped the region for the decade between 1888 and 1897. Drought had a humbling effect on local residents and the depression helped foster a sense of regional identity and independence from the East.

The second stage of Midwestern existence, between about 1902 and 1920, saw this regional label almost literally take wing. The euphoric descriptions of society in Kansas and Nebraska began to transcend local meanings and achievements and stand for a general blossoming of rural culture in the entire north-central sector of the United States. No more, people realized, was it appropriate to view the country as tripartite (East, South, West), as had been the fashion before 1900. Democratic and moral, the midsection of the nation was coming into its own, an agricultural society about to add significant industrial components and intellectual sophistication. All that was needed was a name, and, almost by chance, "Middle West" (soon to be clipped to one word) assumed that role.

The literature about the Midwest between 1912 and 1930 exudes an incredible sense of optimism and destiny about the region. The good feeling was so powerful, in fact, that the region rapidly became the standard by which to judge the rest of the nation. In addition to the familiar lines about rural virtue, the Midwest also fared well in comparisons that writers made with the human life cycle. The West was forever youthful in this popular depiction, and the East a region drained of its former energy by decades of out-migration. The Midwest, in contrast, was the land of the here and now, the true heart of the nation. Carl Sandburg captured the mood perfectly in a 1916 poem, when he called Chicago a "lusty, young giant among the world's cities."

Once established, it would be reasonable to expect the imagery of "the Midwest as America" to sustain itself for decades. Instead, it was remarkably short-lived. The problem was the alliance between agrarian and industrial ideals that constituted the essence of the identity. These two concepts, one a descendent and one an ascendent national culture value in the period after 1920, stood for irreconcilable things. After all, how could a place concurrently be a land of "traditional" farmers and "modern" industrialists? This basic contradiction

might have worked itself out in several ways, but the one that prevailed was a simplification of traits said to be Midwestern. Rural imagery continued while Americans transferred their urban and industrial symbols back to the East. It was a complicated and unself-conscious process that involved, among other things, the reconceptualization of Eastern cities as vital, glittering places instead of immigrant ghettos. For its part, the image of the Midwest suffered. With the loss of things urban went the associated cultural traits of liberal and sophisticated. Midwestern (that is rural) associations, by contrast, became increasingly moralistic, isolated, and petty. This new view of the Midwest, which gained ground from the late 1920s through the 1950s, was crystallized for everyone to discuss by Sinclair Lewis's famous novel, *Main Street*.

Hometown Nostalgia

The fading of the Midwest from the mental map of most Americans continued through the 1950s and 1960s as the country maintained its obsession with urban places and an associated constellation of materialism, new technology, and change for the sake of change. Then, gradually, a new perspective emerged. This was nostalgia. A vague sense of loss developed in many city dwellers in the mid-1960s, and this movement quickened in the years following. Instead of generating wholesale condemnation by writers, small-town culture began to be labeled quaint. From this perspective, the Midwest had become a museum of sorts—a nice place to visit occasionally and to reflect on one's own heritage. It was America's collective "hometown," a place with good air, picturesque farm buildings, and unpretentious "simple" people.

Portraying the Midwest as a museum perhaps could serve

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a useful psychological purpose for Americans, but in order to do so, the old pretext of seeing only the rural side of Ohio and Michigan had to be maintained. This pretext had become increasingly awkward after the late 1960s in any case, as racial conflict and industrial collapse in Detroit, Cleveland, and elsewhere became major national news stories. Surveys show that the public's response was to rework its collective cognitive

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map of Midwestern location. Ohio and Michigan now were partially excluded, and the regional core shifted to the Great Plains states. The region thus ironically returned to its birthplace and, in so doing, brought its continuing rural definition closer in line with reality.

Nostalgia continues as an important aspect of Midwestern imagery, but it has been joined since the late 1980s by an increased desire of Americans actually to move there. The long-standing associations with things rural and small town remain, but these things are now being viewed as increasingly positive. J. B. Jackson, one of the most acute observers of American values, has argued that a country such as the United States, which has slowly evolved with a firm attachment to place, celebrates its history not so much by honoring specific historical events as by creating for itself a golden age. This partially real, partially imagined age contains few dates or specific names; it aims instead to recapture "an innocence and a simplicity" that are now lost, a time when the country "was at one with its environment."

The preservation of wilderness areas is one obvious result of the process that Jackson describes; restored New England villages represent another. Respect for the Midwest may be emerging as a third. Consider, for example, the symbolic importance of the Victorian-era "Main Street." Restorations of houses and businesses from this period are celebrated regularly in the new, upscale magazine *Midwest Living*, and Walt Disney's five-eighths scale versions of Main Street in his two theme parks are phenomenally successful.

The driving force behind the recent resurgence in Midwestern popularity is

deeper than magazines or theme parks, however. Writers increasingly speak about the region as one of the few "genuine" places left in the country, and they see a growing esteem for it based on this idea. The West is one big tourist area, according to this argument. New England's genuineness has been overwhelmed by the resort business, while Florida, Arizona, and places in between have become winter havens. The rural South and the rural Midwest are among the few places that stand apart, and, of these two, the Midwest is perhaps easier

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to admire in that it lacks the stereotypes of racism and poverty still associated with parts of the lower South.

The concept of the Midwest as genuine America is multi-faceted. The most important linkage is to pastoralism, of course, but there is more. The geographer Cotton Mather has called the place

“‘standard American’—lacking the presumptions of the East, the traditions of the South, the flamboyance of Texas, and the lure of the Golden West.” The region is no longer the epitome of all things American, as it was in 1915. Instead, after enduring its time of neglect, the Midwest has reemerged to fill the role of keeper of the nation's values. John Gunther called it “America uncontaminated” in 1947, and that image has become increasingly prominent in recent years. The Midwest is seen today as a place where people can still leave their doors unlocked and in which governors will occasionally answer their own telephones. The journalist Joel Garreau found “social calm” to be the most identifiable regional feature, a calm that enabled this place to define America's cultural limits, to be “the ratifier of what constitutes a truly mainstream continental idea.”

Although real, one must be careful not to overemphasize the homage being accorded to the Midwest today, for older associations continue to create dilemmas and contradictions for thoughtful residents. The imagery of cowboys and yeoman farmers is flattering in some ways, for example, but hard to reconcile with the largely urban and commercial present realities of the region. The country-rube tag still contains truths about regional defensiveness and parochialism. Still, my reading and experience suggest that the region has gained respect in recent years, not only from outsiders, but from its own residents as well. People increasingly realize that the positive values that grow out of a rootedness in place are needed to give meaning to life. They also know that the Midwest can provide the nation with a needed touchstone for such values.



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