

Looking for America

When I was a boy my sisters and I were never put in the family car and hauled around America to see the great historic sites that were our heritage. As old New Yorkers we were tethered to the old world, and the tours we did get taken on were “grand tours” of Europe. Nor did I go to schools that organized class trips to historic places. Of course I would have hated those trips, being history-resistant. Instead I went through life being history-illiterate, loving my country in principle but wanting to be spared the boring details.

Then, one day, in the spring of 1990, I had a heretical thought: maybe those details weren't so boring. A new decade had turned, ending the materialistic 1980s, and American families began to hit the road, going in search of the founding ideals they felt the country had lost. I like the idea of pilgrimages, and I decided to make a pilgrimage of my own. I would write a book about 15 American places that are huge tourist icons, like Mount Rushmore and the Alamo and Yellowstone Park, or that represent a powerful idea about American dreams and aspirations, like Kitty Hawk, where the Wright Brothers invented flight, and Hannibal, Missouri, where Mark Twain invented the myth of the Mississippi River and an ideal childhood. My mind was perfectly prepared for the task: it was an empty receptacle.

Eighteen months later, looking back on my journey, I was struck by how many assumptions I took along that turned out not to be true. I assumed that Mount Rushmore was slightly hokey. I assumed that Mount Vernon was an elegant mansion and that George Washington was too lofty to care about the details of running a plantation. I assumed that Grant and Lee met in a courthouse and that the Civil War ended at Appomattox. I assumed that Wilbur and Orville Wright were technical nerds and that everyone in Hannibal loved Mark Twain. I assumed that the Alamo was out in the Texas countryside and that Walden Pond was a woodland jewel. I assumed that Yellowstone Park and Rockefeller Center were successful ideas from the start. I assumed that lynchings in America stopped in the 1940s. No piece of information so stunned me as the fact—learned at Maya Lin’s Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama—that a 19-year-old black man was hanged from a tree in Mobile in 1981.

With that one exception I was glad to be constantly surprised. I enjoyed my country and I enjoyed all the people I met who shaped the American idea and made it work. They were not only the famous presidents and generals, but the mavericks and dreamers who kept tugging at my sleeve for attention—men and women like Nathaniel P. Langford and Thomas Moran in Yellowstone Park, and Louisa May Alcott in Concord, and Gutzon Borglum at Mount Rushmore, and Joshua Chamberlain at Appomattox, and William B. Travis at the Alamo, and John Heyl Vincent in Chautauqua, and Morris Dees in Montgomery, and Louisa Dalton Bird Cunningham, a South Carolina lady who, strolling on the deck of a steamer on the Potomac on a moonlit night in 1853, saw a ghostly apparition—George Washington’s Mount Vernon, far gone in decay—and decided to do something about it.

Those distant figures came alive because I went to them and didn’t just read about them in a book. I made a point of traveling at the pertinent time of year. I went to Hannibal in summer because in my imagination it has no other season. It’s a place where school is always out and the Mississippi is always waiting to oblige a boy with a raft; it’s not a February place. Mark Twain described it as “a white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer morning,” and it was still drowsing—the temperature was exactly 100 degrees—when I got there. I went to Kitty Hawk in mid-December and walked along that

naked beach into winds that were of the same velocity as they were on December 17, 1903, when the Wright brothers made their flight: “22 to 27 miles out of the north and gusting.” Very gratifying. Today I still carry those places not only in my mind but in my metabolism: the stillness at Appomattox, the smallness of the Alamo, the prairie isolation of Abilene, the rumble of water at Niagara Falls. I saw that America is its own best classroom.

The most powerful theme I found running through my book was the need to make a connection with greatness: great natural wonders or great natural leaders. At Mount Vernon I was told that there is “a reaching out to connect with objects that George Washington used—people desperately want heroes and models.” At Kitty Hawk I was told that the staff needs to keep replacing the photographs of Wilbur and Orville Wright because “their faces get rubbed out—visitors want to touch them.” At Yellowstone Park, a geological work-in-progress, I was told that “people have an innate need to reconnect with the places from which they have evolved. One of the closest bonds here is between the very young and the very old. They’re nearer to their origins.”

Connecting also took the form of ownership. At iconic destinations as different as Yellowstone Park and the skating rink in Rockefeller Center—one covering 2.2 million acres, the other no bigger than a basketball court—tourists feel that it’s a personal possession. They were first brought there as children and are now back with children of their own, pilgrims to the memory of what they once did with their parents.

What all of us yearn to be connected with—old or young, native-born or newly-arrived—is the best of America. The voices I remember most vividly from my trip are the voices of American decency and compassion: the “fair play, understanding and forgiveness” that I heard invoked at Pearl Harbor; the clemency of Grant toward the defeated Confederate soldiers at Appomattox (“it will do much to conciliate our people”); the generosity of George Washington at Mount Vernon (“let no one go hungry away”); the kindness of Abilene (“you could always find a mentor in these small towns”). Even Maya Lin’s Civil Rights Memorial, an epitaph to victims of hate, is an act of grace. Just as her Vietnam Memorial in Washington broke the conventions of patriotic statuary and enabled Americans to heal through their

fingertips the scars of a war that had torn the nation apart, her round granite tabletop at Montgomery says to everyone who touches the names of the dead through a thin film of water: "This is not how we meant it to be. We can do better."

Much in America today is not how we meant it to be. Seldom has the nation been so divided at home and so reviled abroad. But with all its flaws it's still the country of choice for people in every part of the world. Our streets and schools and neighborhoods, more than ever before, are a museum exhibit of hospitality to all comers. No other nation exerts such a shining promise of freedom and opportunity.

How that national character was formed is what I wanted my 16 sites to tell me, and they did. Speaking across the centuries with stone and symbol, narrative and myth, America's iconic places remind us of our anchoring principles and best intentions. "This is where we started and what we believed and who we hoped to become," these places say. At least that's what they said to me.