site LINES

A Journal of Place

Volume XIV | Number 1 | Fall 2018

A Publication of the Foundation for Landscape Studies

Letter from the Editor

This issue of *Site-Lines*, "Places of the Heart: The Landscapes We Call Home," explores the potency of memory when it is attached to the landscapes of youth. It also revisits the legacy of historic homes, whether fictional or real, and the complex ways in which they bear witness to the past.

Readers of landscape architect Laurie Olin's previous essays in these pages know that he is an acute observer and inveterate sketcher of places both built and natural. In "Child of the North" he recalls the landscapes of his native Alaska. A rugged world of prospectors and Eskimos, mountains and fjords, it was there that Olin first learned how to see – and how to capture what he saw on paper.

My own childhood in the second largest state in the Union – and the one most distant from Olin's frozen northland – is the subject of "Home on the Range: A Texas Childhood." In it I describe a vacant lot and our family's Hill Country ranch as formative influences, leading to a lifelong love of the natural world.

No matter how sophisticated our palates become, nothing connects us to the past more potently than the smells and tastes we associate with the home cooking of our childhoods. In "A Recipe for Remembering," Mary Morris describes how a chance meal in a Moroccan restaurant transported her back to the North Side of Chicago, an experience that leads her to consider the culinary dimensions of the Jewish diaspora.

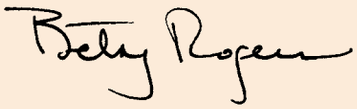
Like Morris, John Elder begins his essay "Returning to Mount Tamalpais" with a food memory. In his case it is a long-ago Sunday picnic with his mother, father, and older brother Lyn on a spread-out Army blanket beneath a California live oak on the side of Mount Tamalpais. There, facing San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and the Pacific Ocean beyond, the family feasted on the fried chicken, potato salad, buttermilk biscuits, coleslaw, and molasses cookies of their native South, washed down with lemonade and iced tea. From this recollection a coming-of-age story unfolds in which Tamalpais plays a significant role in Elder's youth. A short bike-ride from his Mill Valley home, it became for him a place of both idyllic adventure and Zen-inspired spiritual awareness. Elder and his wife Rita have lived for the past half-century a continent away near Middlebury, Vermont, within view of Mount Abraham. But Mount Abe for him is more than a nostalgic counterpart of Mount Tamalpais. Although it is surely that, it is also a mirror in which he gazes at the very meaning of home.

In "The Homestead Lot: The Historic Landscape Surrounding the Morris-Jumel Mansion," Margaret Oppenheimer, biographer of Eliza Jumel, describes how the grounds of one of New York City's most remarkable historic houses were transformed over a four-hundred-year period. Located on a high ridge overlooking the Harlem River, the original thirty-six-acre property is a palimpsest of changing uses – from stone-tool-making site to Revolutionary War encampment to elegant nineteenth-century home to present-day park. The author explains how this particular landscape has survived and morphed over the centuries as the bustling city has expanded north to surround it completely. Focusing on its glory days, Oppenheimer narrates how in 1765 a fine mansion was erected on the site by Mary Philipse Morris and her husband Roger Morris, a colonel in the British Army. Eliza and Stephen Jumel's acquisition of the estate in 1810 brought about its conversion into a showcase for novel agricultural improvements and noteworthy garden features.

If Oppenheimer's essay reveals several layers of New York City's urban development on a single homestead lot, Joy Kasson's book review of *Prairie Fires*, Caroline Fraser's recent biography of Laura Ingalls Wilder, evokes the succession of homesteads lived in by a single family – in Wisconsin, Kansas, Minnesota, and South Dakota – that made up the "little houses" in her best-selling children's series. Fraser explains how Wilder managed to transform her pioneer family's frequent economic failures and relocations into the stuff of American myth. Although many former readers remember these depictions of homestead domesticity with unmitigated nostalgia, Kasson reminds us of the suppressed narrative of displacement, hardship, and violence undergirding the white settlement of the American West.

As always, I wish to remind our readers that *Site/Lines* is a journal of place, a literary home for the exploration of landscape in its many manifestations. We hope that you will express your appreciation of this donor-supported publication by sending a tax-deductible contribution by mail or online.

With good green wishes,



Elizabeth Barlow Rogers
President

On the Cover:
Betsy and friend heading for the creek to go fishing.

Home on the Range: A Texas Childhood

Even today when I see an address with the street number "414," I feel a momentary proprietary glow as I imagine myself again sitting on a brick step before those brass numbers on the doorway of a pleasant Monterey colonial-style house in the suburbs of San Antonio, Texas. In front of me is a lawn of wide-blade St. Augustine grass, or "carpet grass," as everyone called it, stretching out beyond a pretty white fence to meet the as-yet unpaved street. I remember my pleasure in examining the insect universe that existed amidst the roots of that fat green grass, and my particular delight in watching captured "doodle-bugs," as I called antlion larvae, curl up like tiny grey pellets in my hand. Shading the lawn is a tangle of live-oak trees, perfectly scaled for a child to climb; I still recall the sensation of rough bark against the tender skin of my bare stomach as I scrambled up and down their trunks and branches. Although these oaks were somewhat more stunted than those found in the moister states of the Deep South, their evergreen canopy made them a much-appreciated asset on house lots in our Alamo Heights neighborhood.

"Four-one-four Castano," I would answer when grown-ups would ask me where I lived – a question for which I had a ready reply in contrast to "Where did you get those big blue eyes?" With its pair of "four's" bracketing the single "one," it seemed to me the most perfect address imaginable. But the delight I took in this numerical symmetry was simply a representation of the profound satisfaction that any child takes in the magic kingdom of home during the first years of life. In my young world there was a sense of infinite rightness that could as easily have been conferred upon another place as this.

One reason for my partiality for my address was my knowledge that our house – with its second-story balcony, screened sleeping porch upstairs (a boon in the stifling Texas summers before air-conditioning), and downstairs porch with a sofa-swing – had been built by my parents for me. In the eight years of their marriage preceding my birth, my father, encouraged by my mother's ambition for the material advantages of life, had given up school teaching and started a construction business. As this happened on the eve of the Great Depression, they had been required to make many personal sacrifices, including the postponement of the start of a family. My arrival in 1936 on my father's birthday, February 6, precipitated the building of their first real home.

One of the best things about residence at 414 Castano from my young point of view was its situation on a slope leading down to a little drainage gulley banked with a wide grassy median in which live oaks as well as a few mesquite and fragrant laurels grew. Because of this pleasant median, the street embracing it was called LaJara "Boulevard," and if you follow it today you will see that it forms, in effect, a tiny greenbelt leading to Olmos Park. Solo excursions to the park with its shady grounds studded with picnic tables were for most of my childhood years beyond my level of tolerance for spatial separation from home, but as I grew and was granted increasing opportunity for unsupervised play, LaJara was one of the principal domains of my imagination and adventures. With neighborhood children, I scrambled through the pretend-cave culverts that punctuated the green median at various street crossings or discovered beside the trickle of water that sometimes ran through it a streak of gritty clay firm enough for modeling crude figurines. I probably experienced my first distinctly memorable sensation of the coming of spring sitting one day with my chum Sarah Joe Robertson in the middle of LaJara, sniffing the laurel-scented air as, with Wordsworthian wonder, we admired a patch of wildflowers. "It's spring," she said reverently, and I remember feeling a little thrill of agreement as genetic awareness of seasonality was transferred into the conscious part of my brain. We were about nine years old.

If LaJara was my green valley, the vacant lot on the other side of Castano was my fairy-tale forest. Heavily treed with live oaks, it was possible for a child to enter this half-acre and lose sight of the street and surrounding houses. I always referred to this spot in fairy-tale language as "the deep, deep woods." The invisibility of local landmarks was important: a young child could imagine a distant journey and even experience mild fear at the prospect of being lost while knowing that home was in fact only a few twists and turns away. I sometimes wonder with a twinge of guilt how I could have raised two children in New York City without a deep, deep woods of their own to play in.

I was a child reared in the bosom of the First Presbyterian Church, and for me the deep, deep woods was a place of epiphanies, both divine and mundane. Even now, if I read the story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel, I envision the ladder to heaven rising up through the live oak branches of the deep, deep woods because in my mind's eye that is where I first pictured this Biblical action taking place. It was in the deep, deep woods that I found the orphaned baby owl which became a ferocious short-term pet, and there too that I discovered – with a child's capacity for awe proportionate to Carter's thrill on finding King Tutankhamen's tomb at Thebes – a gravesite marked with a circle of stones and a whitewashed rock bearing the legend, "Here Lies Spot."

Soon I had another universe for exploration. With San Antonio's Second World War-induced military building boom, my father had in hand his first ready capital; in 1942, a year after the birth of his first son, my brother Robert, he decided to buy a ranch. Then, as now, cattle raising in the beautiful but arid Hill Country was not as profitable an enterprise as in those parts of Texas where rainfall is more abundant and grassland more expansive. But for the first generation of recreational ranchers like my father, the so-called agricultural exemption – a tax reduction on land in active production – made raising a modest herd of cattle an economically viable proposition. For thirteen dollars an acre he purchased a thousand acres four miles east of Johnson City, close to the banks of the Pedernales River.

A young Congressman named Lyndon Johnson had recently been responsible for securing federal funds for a series of hydroelectric dams on Texas's Colorado River; these made Johnson City, with its population of nine hundred, "The Home of the World's Largest Rural Electrification Cooperative," as the red metal letters fastened to a huge, wire-mesh billboard on the outskirts of the town proclaimed.

Of course it was good to have electricity in the pleasant ranch house my parents built as a weekend and summer retreat, but what made Johnson City fascinating to me was its absence of urban progress. I loved the big, red-checkered, Purina Ralston silo; the little limestone jail with its single barred window; the waxy, sharp-scented sawdust on the floor of Fawcett's drug store where I was allowed to have ice cream sodas and buy comic books.

The ranch itself was, quite simply, a child's paradise. In those days you reached it on an unpaved road, a plume of white caliche dust rising in the car's wake as Robert and I felt a sense of mounting excitement with each passing landmark: the pecan trees lining a dry stream bed, old Tom Johnson's house and cluttered yard in a shady hollow with live oak trees, and the occasional windmill that pumped water into an adjacent cattle trough. At last, where the road made a big bend, you spotted the familiar oat field and then the cattle guard where you turned into the property. A metal cutout of a large C with an even larger L running through it – my father's new cattle brand, incorporating the initials that served as his first name – was fastened to the barbwire fence.[1]

Some Hereford cows and calves would moo their greetings as the car clanked over the tubular metal bars of the cattle guard. Ahead to the right was the big, corrugated-steel barn with its fine manure-and-hay-and-oats smell; its stalls for Cricket, Dolly, and Peewee, workhorses sufficiently good-tempered to be ridden by a child; and its musty, leather-scented tack room. Straight ahead stood a simple, limestone, Hill Country house, which at that time lacked hot running water. There lived Anton and Nell Naumann with their four blue-eyed daughters: Merle Ann, Amy Ruth, Joy Lynn and Mary Jane. Anton looked after the ranch for my father, and the girls – particularly Joy Lynn, who was my age – were my daily companions whenever we came to the ranch. I spent many happy days with them riding Peewee, hiding between the bales of hay in the hayloft, and eating sweet, ripe figs from the fig tree that grew beside the rope swing in their yard as we watched Mrs. Naumann heat over an open fire the big, black, witchlike caldron in which she did her family's laundry, or run after the headless chickens that would careen all over the place after she had wrung their necks. Food is the imperishable stuff of memory, and I cannot forget the taste of her fried chicken, served with fluffy biscuits baked in a wood stove, and pickled peaches, brought up from the cool, dirt-floored cellar beneath the house; these set for me a standard of gastronomic pleasure that has yet to be surpassed.

Upon first arriving at the ranch, however, instead of going straight toward the Naumann house we would take a left turn through another cattle guard into a pretty meadow in which our house sat. The L-shaped screened porch wrapping around two sides served as a children's bunkhouse on one end and a dining area on the other. In between there was a wide space for lounging, reading, and napping during the hot, still, Texas summer afternoons. My mother had engaged a husband-and-wife team of artists to decorate the interior with aphorisms garlanded with Pennsylvania Dutch-style hearts and flowers. Thus "Hunger is the Best Seasoning" adorned the wall over the stove and "Cleanliness is Next to Godliness" spanned the doors of the linen cupboard. In the living room, "Deep in the Heart of Texas," with a treble clef, black notes, and a garland of leaves framing a red heart, conspicuously emblazoned the white-painted upright piano. A large map of the state of Texas, painted in oils by the same artists, provided vignettes of both family and local history – the Chisholm Trail, my parents on their trip to Mexico, Buffalo Bill Cody's birthplace, my minister grandfather's first church in East Texas,

Betty Browning, Betsy's mother, and Betsy at the creek on a fishing expedition.

[1]My father was christened Caleb Leonidas Browning, Jr., being a grandson of Caleb Browning and the son of another Caleb who had somehow acquired the middle name of the Greek general Leonidas, an anomaly in the genealogical roll call of our family tree. A Methodist minister, my grandfather preferred to be called "Lee"; my father was always known as C. L.

the capitol in Austin. This folkloric map, so fascinating to a young child, had an emblematic heart in the center with the CL brand painted on it to show that the ranch was precisely in the heart of Texas, a fact to me of cosmological significance.

Outdoors especially, the ranch contained places that assumed mythic proportions in my child's mind. If it is true that childhood in its various stages repeats the history of the race, it was at the ranch more than anywhere else that I was a happy hunter-gatherer, a pastoralist in an idyllic Arcadia, a worshipper in my own sacred groves. Almost every day I set off on the familiar caliche ranch road that ran from the house to Hunnicutt Creek, a small tributary of the Pedernales River. In recent years archaeologists from the University of Texas have searched the area for Indian artifacts, for the hills around the Pedernales were once buffalo hunting grounds. One day, when I was about nine, I myself found a dark flint arrowhead lying in my path as I was coming home from Hunnicutt Creek – a long-treasured artifact that I still regret losing.

Often, as the hot breezes of summer would sigh in the live oaks, the Naumann girls and I would explore the old foundations of the original Hunnicutt homestead and the remnant walls of former cattle pens, searching for rusty treasures to collect and then discard. Armadillo chases were our favorite sport, and I can still feel the hard, platy tail of the only one I ever managed to catch, but its clawed feet gripped the earth at the entrance to its hole so fiercely that I was finally forced to let it go.

Hunnicutt Creek is a languid trickle, its upper reaches mostly dry unless there has been an especially heavy rainfall. But in one spot beneath the shelving limestone there is a small spring; the moist little grotto enfolding it is sometimes covered with maidenhair fern, and the water from this spring, which nourishes the part of the creek that doesn't go dry, has worn a channel in the rock. No majestic waterfall seen in adulthood has resonated more fully in my soul than this precious trickle of pure spring water. Here I would drink or simply sit, watching the iridescent blue dragonflies dance on the surface of the pool that formed a basin by the spring. Beneath its limpid surface you could glimpse minnows and tadpoles or, with a thrill of horror, an occasional water moccasin. Some of the tadpoles became tiny frogs, fun to catch and hold in your carefully cupped hand.

Hunnicutt was too shallow a creek to do more than splash about in; however, as the distant war continued and my father won several jobs from the government to build barracks and officers' quarters at the big air-force bases on the outskirts of San Antonio, he was able to purchase an adjacent ranch that added another thousand acres to our property. This ranch included beautiful Miller Creek, with its first-class swimming hole, which was too distant to reach by foot. Trips to Miller Creek, therefore, soon became regular family outings, sometimes with a picnic hamper stowed in the trunk of the car as it bumped over the pipe bars of the cattle guards punctuating the rough road that ran along the top of an eastern ridge of the ranch. From this elevation we caught glimpses of the Pedernales River and beyond it ridge upon ridge of the broad-ranging hill country. Robert and I soon gained familiarity with a new set of landmarks: galvanized steel windmills rotating above cattle-watering tanks and, most fascinating of all, the tumbledown remains of an unpainted, ramshackle, wooden house, once the home of a German family named Fuchs. Its interior was composed of three rooms of bare boards, evidence that raising a few cattle on the sparse grass of the creek-incised ridges of limestone known as the Edwards Plateau – a karst formation composed of porous, eroded limestone creating a subsurface aquifer – was a hardscrabble existence. Like Native Americans before them, oldtime Hill Country Texans of German origin such as the Fuchs were already in my childhood a vanishing breed. My mother, who was riding the escalator of success as the family construction business prospered, invariably exclaimed as we drove by, "Imagine nine children growing up in that house!"

Beyond the Fuchs house the road became a grassy track, and the car bounced down a sloping meadow to a brushy stand of pecan trees lining Miller Creek. With the motor shut off, you felt the lonesome sun-baked stillness of the place. There were cicadas endlessly whining and the resinous odor of scrub cedars as we skirted the bull nettles and made for the banks of the creek. There, beneath a thirty-foot-high limestone bluff, the water pooled to a depth of around five feet. We would creep tentatively across the slick, algae-coated rocks, feeling the soft tickle of the disturbed bottom sediment clouding around our legs as we laughed and splashed our way to deeper water. Climbing up onto a rock ledge beneath the tall, sheltering bluff, wondering if they – the vanished Indians – might yet be lurking in the exciting remoteness of this place, I, the fortunate daughter of a newly prosperous general contractor, felt myself heir to all the world's grace and glory.
– Elizabeth Barlow Rogers

Child of the North: Growing up in Alaska

"The Past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."
– L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*

Twenty years ago I was flying into Fairbanks in early March. Looking out the window I felt compelled to make a drawing of the scene below in a sketchbook with a note: "Near midnight – full moon, one could see a vast distance, very bright, the Tanana Valley spread out, astonishing what a vast watery world it is, albeit frozen – way off in the distance one light somewhere on the river, a village forty miles or so away to the west."

Both sketch and statement remark on the sense of space and distance, darkness and light, the grip of winter and its approaching opposite, the melting and near drowning of the world that the spring thaw brings. Looking at the receding ribbons of moonlit ice below, I was excited: I was coming home from Outside (meaning the rest of the world). Although I was not born in Alaska, it is where I grew up, lived, and worked until graduation from college.

Alaska is an enormous territory with significant diversity – in some ways similar to Texas, that other gigantic chunk of America. The ecology, topography, and climate of southeastern Alaska is considerably different from that of the Interior, or from that of the Arctic slope to the north and west, much as the gulf coast of Texas is different from the hill country of central Texas or the desert west of the Pecos or the Cross Timbers region of east Texas. After Alaska became a state in 1959, we'd joke with Texan military personnel who seemed a bit too cocky that they had better watch out or we'd divide Alaska in thirds and make Texas the fourth largest state. It is a big place – really big – and hard to envision if one hasn't experienced it. There is a generosity of scale that leads to a numbing quantity of just about everything in the natural world – trees, animals, mountains, weather systems – all seemingly without end. But while there is a superabundance of natural resources, conversely, even today, there are very few people.

Ever since the word "landskip" was introduced into English from the Dutch, it has implied terrain that is occupied or modified in some way; land perceived and conceptually engaged by humans. One can add buildings to a landscape, but not the other way around. In cities there are often so

The Bering Sea town of Naknek on Bristol Bay, which still has the largest salmon fishery in America. Watercolor by Laurie Olin.

many buildings that one is aware of little else, including the underlying topography and geology. But in Alaska when I was young, it was easy to remember that we are creatures of nature and that we are in it all the time, because the attributes of civilization and community – buildings, streets, roads, and bridges – were scattered so thinly across this immense territory. The wilderness was there at the end of nearly every street.

While I was in high school I began taking note of these attributes in the form of sketches and paintings: docks and canneries, cabins and churches, airplane hangars and control towers, riverboats and airplanes. Albeit unconsciously and unsystematically, I was documenting a particular cultural landscape that was about to disappear.

Life for me in Alaska began in 1946 when my father accepted a job there. That June he and about fifty other men and women took a boat north from Seattle, where we were living at the time, to set up a new district for the Corps of Engineers to build military facilities for the war that President Truman and his advisors believed we might be fighting soon with Russia. Most of these new arrivals stayed in Anchorage, but ten went on to Fairbanks, a town of about 3,500 located in the center of the Interior on the Chena River, a tributary of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. Fairbanks had been founded when gold was discovered in the nearby hills, four years after the Klondike Gold Rush of 1898.

My mother's father was born in Canada of Scottish immigrants and had worked in Dawson and Whitehorse for a bank during the gold rush; as a girl she had heard tales of the Yukon and was excited to go. So was I, and the following December, two months after my eighth birthday, the two of us set off to join my father. We flew from Seattle to Anchorage in a four-engine, Pan American Airlines plane, arriving in what seemed the middle of the night; I slept on a couple of folding chairs in a hangar until morning. It was December 24, Christmas Eve, and pitch-dark until nearly midday. Next a military C47 flew us to Ladd Field, a small, World War II airbase on the outskirts of Fairbanks.

It was a boy's dream. My father met us in the fog and snow on the frozen runway, wearing a long parka with a ruff of wolf fur on the hood; a big, blobby hat with fur flaps; and a tall pair of mukluks. He was driving a jeep! We drove through the dark of mid-morning between high banks of snow in dense ice fog. Along the way lights would appear, sparkling with halos in the crystalline gloom, and then vanish again. Our destination was a narrow street, two blocks of which were ablaze with neon signs: this was the commercial heart of the town.

We stepped into the bright lights of a rambling establishment with a long wooden bar and a collection of tall booths, which I learned later was the historic Model Café. My heart leapt to see Eskimos for the first time, in fur parkas and mukluks, along with old men with Stetson hats, white beards, and chains of gold nuggets across their bib overalls, seated at the counter as we entered. After a sumptuous breakfast of sourdough pancakes, we checked into another pioneer establishment further down the street, the Nordale Hotel. More Eskimos; more serious, rough-looking men in from the bush for the holidays; Air Force pilots and crew from a search-and-rescue squadron wearing flight jackets with interesting World War II patches, who were pals of my Dad – all talking, laughing, and milling about. The hotel's large, low-ceilinged lobby was decorated with stuffed animal heads, hides, and large oil paintings of Eskimos hunting whales in umiaks (walrus hide-covered boats), Aleuts in kayaks, and polar bears going after seals on the Arctic ice pack. I later learned these paintings were by Rusty Heurline, a prominent regional artist. There were also a number of landscape paintings of snow-clad peaks and tall, spindly spruce trees by the pioneer painter Sydney Laurence. What a feast! It was like going to heaven.

That night, while I slept soundly, an entire city block burned down two blocks away, destroying the town telephone exchange, the municipal automotive garage, and a number of apartments. It was a giant conflagration that was to paralyze the town for weeks to come. The entire population apparently turned out to watch. When I awoke, rested, on Christmas morning, my parents and just about everyone else were sleeping it off. I got up around 11:00 a.m., quietly dressed myself, and went out to explore my new world, walking about in minus twenty degrees and bright, midday sunshine. I immediately discovered vast mountains of ice blocking the streets, evidence of the futile attempt to put out the blaze. The buildings had been reduced to a charred phantasmagoric hulk and collapsed remnants. Frozen skeins of hoses still littered the street, and huge crystal shapes engulfed the fire hydrants, blazing in the low-angled light. It was my introduction to one of the perennial hazards of the north. Every winter there would be fires – sometimes a minor chimney fire, or maybe a stove explosion in someone's cabin, while on other occasions whole buildings would go up in flames. Eventually, the

Restored Tlingit totem pole, at Saxman on Tongass Narrows, by Laurie Olin.

Nordale Hotel, too, would be lost to fire.

On my second day in Fairbanks I received a remarkable gift. I was introduced to another guest in the hotel, George Ahgapuk, a middle-aged Eskimo from Shishmaref.[1] Shishmaref was a village on an island five miles off the coast of the mainland, northeast of the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska.[2] Ahgapuk, who had been flown to Fairbanks for medical treatment, was also staying in our hotel for the first few weeks after my arrival. He didn't have much to do, so we spent hours together, sitting on a large, leather couch as he made drawings for me of life on the Bering Sea: fishing out on the ice pack, hunting, herding reindeer. I was enchanted. I still have a battered copy of *Igloo Tales* that my parents gave me soon thereafter, which Ahgapuk had illustrated with pen-and-ink drawings. Although often tiny – as if he were still carving walrus ivory, a common activity in his village – these were highly precise depictions of walruses and polar bears, people and monsters, ice floes, igloos, sweat houses, dogs, sleds, kayaks, and umiaks. This book was a compilation of ancient folktales and ghost stories handed down by isolated villagers from along the Arctic coastline stretching from the furthest reaches of the north near Point Barrow and Icy Cape to Cape Prince of Wales and the Bering Strait, out to St. Lawrence Island, and south to Norton Sound. *Igloo Tales* was full of evil spirits, animal demons, magical transformations, hair-raising misfortunes, helpful spirits, human avarice, loyalty, and bravery. I adored the book and spent many hours scrutinizing the drawings of the austere and frozen world to the west and north of me. I was overjoyed later that year to be given a fur parka and mukluks just like those in Ahgapuk's drawings.

A few years later, I found a book on totem poles that chronicled the folktales and legends of the southeastern Alaskan Native tribes. This volume included a narrative about each of the creatures depicted – Bear, Raven, Blackfish (a killer whale), Frog, Eagle, Beaver – their adventures, tricks, gifts, feuds, feasts, and transformations. Just as *Igloo Tales* had introduced me to the Eskimos to the north, this book gave me the world of southeastern Alaska – of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian, and their landscape of mountains, forests, and fjords. I found these stories enormously stimulating, and the myths they embodied at once logical and transcendent.

I joined the third-grade class of the public school in Fairbanks in January 1947. Stepping outside in the dark at the end of each day my first week, I was subjected to obligatory and somewhat ritualistic fights with my classmates while the entire class watched – struggles that ended with my adversary and me rolling about in a snowdrift, pummeling each other while snow went up our sleeves and down our collars as our peers shouted "Give? Give?" – until, after a week, it was discerned where I fit into the pecking order of frontier manliness. The school yard was regularly flooded with a fire hose to provide for ice-skating when it wasn't too cold. One of the most delightful aspects of Fairbanks was that the Chena River, which divided the community in the summer – there was only one bridge at the time – froze solid for the duration of the winter, thereby uniting the community and becoming its heart. Many of the streets that ended at its banks in summer continued across the river and back up the other side in winter. The river then became a civic place, not just for driving but also for ice-skating, holiday events, and festivals.

Every March the North American Championship Sled Dog Races were held in Fairbanks. This was a joyful time when natives and trappers from around the Interior and Arctic coast would descend on the town for the festivities. The pelts from the winter's fur trapping would be brought in for sale and barter, as they had been to the legendary rendezvous at forts and trading posts in the West during the previous century, and supplies for summer would be ordered or picked up. The streets were filled with groups of Eskimo women and girls, their laughing and smiling faces deep inside giant fur ruffs, and their small feet, in mukluks made of spotted seal or reindeer, peeping out beneath ankle-length fur parkas, many of which were covered by an outer shell of colorful calico.

A number of the men from the Arctic villages who'd brought teams of dogs to compete in the weeklong celebration and grueling, multistage races wore shorter, waist-length parkas that were similar to flight jackets but made of sealskin, caribou, reindeer, or Arctic ground squirrel. Many of these parkas were decorated with embroidered, woven, or beadwork waistbands, or trimmed with strips of contrasting fur. The mushers had fur hats – usually with their earflaps tied up when in town – and large reflective sunglasses, a common defense against the glare. Although they were often small in stature, to my eye they had a dashing appearance, rather like fighter pilots.

The biggest delight of all was their dogs: dozens of teams of these beautiful and excited animals staked out on the ice of the

Sled dogs out of work in the summer at Dillingham on Bristol Bay, by Laurie Olin.

[1]George Twok Aden Ahgapuk (1911–2001). The use of the word "Inuit" is generally appropriate in Canada, but not in Alaska, where the indigenous people still refer to themselves as Eskimo. The terms Inuit and Inupiat do not exist in Yupik, the language of the north and west of Alaska and Siberia.

[2]In 2016 the six hundred residents of Shishmaref voted to abandon their ancestral home because rising seas and erosion caused by global climate change were destroying the village. Not only was the polar ice pack that they had hunted on for millennia beginning to melt, becoming more dangerous while receding further from shore, but also the Chukchi Sea was rising and eating away at the village, and houses were starting to fall into the water. The *New York Times* reported on May 16, 2018, that at least thirty-one coastal towns in Alaska may have to be relocated soon due to the cumulative effects of global warming.

river. Harnessed together in their familiar working positions, they would be lying, standing, and shifting about in the snow as their owners were meeting up and gossiping with friends, family, and rivals from other villages at this yearly gathering.

On the bank along Front Street above this scene, a temporary gambling shack was set up, where spectators bet heavily on the various teams and personalities. Later there would be music, dancing, feasting, and partying. The entire territory, not just Fairbanks, was oddly more connected in winter than in summer, a phenomenon reinforced by the amount of time everyone spent together indoors for months on end. In summer people scattered to places and activities elsewhere, and so did we.

The school year ended early in the north in those days, partly because summer comes on in a rush after the ice recedes in the rivers and the lakes melt, and there is a lot to do before snow flies again in the fall. It's suddenly warmer, and the sound of dripping and trickling water is incessant as the ice melts and flowers push up through the rotted, soot-blackened snow. Puddles and mud are everywhere, and floods are not uncommon. Life moves outdoors. Kids run around in T-shirts, even when the temperature is only in the forties. It's a time of great optimism and laughter.

That May, after I finished third grade, my parents and I moved to a place called 26 Mile. It was a construction project in the woods twenty-six miles south of Fairbanks on the Alcan (now Alaska) Highway, which until that spring had been a military road closed to civilian traffic. For two years we lived in one of the first buildings erected there. The workers lived nearby in tents, dined in a mess hall, and participated in shifts round the clock, building an air base in the wilderness. My father and three colleagues were in charge for the Corps of Engineers, directing the numerous construction companies doing the work.

My parents adapted well to their new home. My mother had married someone her family disapproved of, from a lower economic class, and she and my father had moved west in a succession of steps, carrying their insecurities and financial stress with them. Like millions of others, their lives had been disrupted by the Great Depression and World War II; they'd come to Alaska on a chance, hoping for opportunity. Here they found a land that could be as harsh and dangerous as it could be fecund and sustaining. Possibly as a result, many of the people who lived there were exceedingly hospitable, eager to help a stranger or talk with a child about pretty much anything. The latchstring was always out, especially to anyone in trouble who needed shelter or supplies.

At 26 Mile the remarkable can-do attitude and sense of camaraderie was infectious. People entertained themselves and one another by reading, telling stories, making music, playing games, hunting, and fishing. By the fall of my first year in the bush there were four other children in the community, and we had the run of the entire place: the sprawling construction site, the woods, the whole out-of-doors. It was fabulous. I was given a rifle and shown how to use it. We got a dog, a springer spaniel named Pat, along with a couple of fishing rods. Facing our house was a gravel road and ditch and a cleared field that gave way to woods, streams, and hills that went on for several hundreds of miles. The contractors had opened several gravel pits and a rock quarry, all of which we played in, building rafts and climbing about, despite the workers and heavy equipment.

At first, there were only a few structures. One was a birchwood hangar that had been used during the war by a fighter squadron; as it happened, the squadron left the week we arrived. The pilots had taken off in their P-51s and climbed high over the valley. Then we had watched in amazement as each one in turn dove back down and flew straight through the hangar, a few yards from the ground, before climbing up once more, waggling its wings at us, and flying away.

There were building projects everywhere, which included the completion of a railroad connection to bring supplies from Fairbanks; a three-mile-long runway for B-36 bombers capable of carrying nuclear bombs as far as Moscow; and numerous warehouses, shops, and barracks. There was also a tremendous amount of construction equipment – caterpillars, earth scrapers, dump trucks, haulers, lifts, and drills – and an army of drivers, machinists, carpenters, electricians, laborers, and other construction workers. For me, those summers were paradise! If I wanted scrap material to build anything such as a fort or a raft to navigate one of the gravel pits, utilizing a borrowed shovel for propulsion, it was all over the place for the taking.

But mostly we were in the woods: fishing, exploring, looking for animals. There were moose we saw frequently, a few bears (mostly at or near a garbage dump), foxes, weasels, and field mice, one of which bit me when I picked it up by its too-short tail to examine it. There were lots of birds, too, especially western meadowlarks, swallows, hawks, eagles, and spruce hens (willow grouse). In spring and fall enormous flocks of cranes, swans,

Talking with my mother while standing on the running board of father's government-issue (Army Corps of Engineers) pickup truck, near 26 Mile on the Alaska Highway in 1947.

geese, and ducks passed overhead, making a lot of noise. The streams were full of grayling (a tasty fish with striking markings and a central dorsal fin), which could always be landed using salmon eggs if one was not an expert with a fly rod. My pals and I ran about doing all sorts of things that would have curled our parents' hair if they'd known, such as playing hide-and-seek in lumber piles, even as the workers and equipment were moving about around us. We did as we pleased, day and night, until we dropped.

In the years that we lived at 26 Mile, I attended a two-room school at Ladd Field outside Fairbanks. The first three grades were in one room; fourth, fifth, and sixth were in the other. Like many Americans in small towns and earlier frontier settlements, I enjoyed this arrangement since we had a great deal of time to ourselves while the teacher grappled with other classes.

On the ice of the little Salcha River in 1948 when I was 9 with a friend's dog Butch, a mixed breed.

If there is a particularly strong memory of my first summers in Alaska, it is of walking back and forth across an open meadow between our house and the woods in the warm sun, listening to the meadowlarks. Theirs is a glorious long and melodic song, ending with a trill. Unlike European larks, which deliver their notes in the air as they rise, these larks sing while sitting on the ground in the tall grasses where they feed and nest. Their chirrs and melodies spring up in various spots across a field as they assert themselves and contest with each other. It is a joyful sound like no other, and spreads delight across the open fields. I was eight years old, bathed in birdsong, and free as a bird in the light summer breeze.

Perhaps astonishingly, given all my adventures out of doors, I only got lost in the woods once, and it happened the following year. It was at the end of a long day with another boy, fishing in a creek a couple of miles from our house. We had gotten there by following a portion of a survey line that had been put through a marsh, in part with a narrow boardwalk only one plank wide. It began just past a clearing near our house, led into the marsh, and terminated in the woods on what amounted to a game trail, which then went off at an angle and bifurcated among the trees, each portion eventually reaching the stream. Coming back through the dim woods before dinnertime, we reached a fork and fell into disagreement over which way to turn. Cross with me and being only ten – I was nine – my friend stomped off and left me there.

Quite rapidly, the path I'd chosen came to a dead end at open water in the swamp instead of the boardwalk. I tried to retrace my steps but couldn't find where we'd parted. For the next hour I wandered about, each time ending back at an impassable portion of the swamp. I could almost see my house across the clearing, but couldn't for the life of me figure out how to reach it. Eventually my father came out to find me. He took the boardwalk to the end and then shouted my name. Sound carries in the wilderness, and in only a matter of minutes I found my way to him. It was a classic case of wandering in circles, a common experience that has led to numerous tragedies through history, especially in the north.

In summer in the Interior of Alaska the sun shone constantly, heat bore down, dust flew, and the season progressed quickly. The warm, bright light combined with dust from the gravel streets and roads; with pollen from hundreds of millions of plants; and with smoke from scattered, lightning-sparked forest fires. The result created a particular golden haze unique to the north in which I wandered and lazed about with my pals, picking berries from midsummer on or poking about in the woods and along streams and ponds, halfheartedly fishing.

In the fall my father and I would hunt spruce hens about a mile from the house, or we went after ptarmigan with friends up on Twelve Mile Summit or Eagle Summit. There weren't many shotguns or pistols around in those days, but instead a variety of rifles. Most people were pretty good with them. For bears, moose, sheep, and caribou, everyone used heavier rifles, most commonly a 30-06. Foxes, martens, beaver, lynx, ermine, and rabbits, however, were still trapped by traditional methods not very different from those used by the mountain men of the early nineteenth century.

Two animals that didn't figure in tales of the Eskimos, Aleuts, or southeastern coastal tribes but populated the Interior valleys in considerable numbers were moose and beaver. Athabascans, the Indians from the Interior, knew them, of course, and had successfully hunted and trapped them for many hundreds of years. Historically Athabascans didn't commonly live in permanent settlements but rather in family groups, camping in different places as they followed the game. I never heard any of their tales, but I was familiar with a number of things that they did and made. One example of their craftsmanship, purchased at a trading post in the Yukon Territory, was an extremely comfortable pair of soft moose-hide moccasins that smelled of wood smoke; I wore them until they gave out in my second year of college. Another Athabascan item found in our household was a beautiful pair of moose-hide mittens that were made for my mother by a woman whose family came from near Fort Yukon. Their decorative beadwork, similar in some ways to that of the Woodland Indians of the eastern United States, was greatly admired and collected by natives, tourists, and social scientists alike.

The moose is a peculiar animal, a cross between a dairy cow and a buffalo on stilts, with a great bulbous nose and ears. Tall animals of great size and weight, they can be formidable to encounter – a cow with a calf was considered as dangerous and unpredictable as a bear. Curious by nature, they would invariably come to see what was going on when any of us were making a lot of noise in the woods. In winter they struggled in the deep snow but found it easy to get around on roads and railroad tracks, leading to a constant sequence of accidents. Beavers, which much amused me, were also the source of great irritation to the highway department because of several impressive dams they kept rebuilding no matter how often they were dynamited, thereby flooding the Alcan Highway and a road near our home.

In these years my free time was pretty much my own, and I spent much of it in the woods and on the fringes of settlement, engaged in a semi-real, semi-imaginary world informed partly by boyhood adventures and partly by native art and stories that animated the land. As I lived and moved about in a vast Interior valley, I felt nevertheless connected to and bounded by other portions of the territory: the bays, islands, and mountains of the south; and the broad frozen desert along the Bering Sea and Arctic Slope north of the Brooks Range. These were the defining edges of my mental space, the home of magical talking bears and malevolent flaming heads that chased lonely hunters to their deaths, of shamans and witch doctors, of the worm that ate a village, the fecund sea spirits, and the trickster Raven; all were my companions. For a young boy in the bush they were always potentially present, reminding me to be careful, to pay attention to my surroundings, and to treat animals of all kinds with great care and respect. The world was very much alive, and it was observing you. It could be generous or dangerous. It was neither good nor bad. It just was.

In the fall of 1950 we moved back to town, albeit to Ladd Field (now renamed Fort Wainwright), a small air base located in a bend of the Chena River a mile outside of Fairbanks. Originally developed during World War II, it had been our northernmost military base, used to deliver aircraft to Russia for the fight against Germany on the Eastern Front. The woods around Ladd Field contained a number of plane wrecks resulting from mistakes made by fledgling Russian combat pilots.

Both the town and air base were growing rapidly, becoming contiguous as military personnel and their families flooded into the Territory. Now I was living in another building project, with my father's outfit overseeing the construction of a large number of structures. There was a small, new, freestanding schoolhouse, nostalgically and symbolically painted red, now located across a large, open field from our new home. Our principal, Elizabeth Morrow – who was large, loud, superb with children, and an effective teacher – swiftly became a family friend. Smoking, swearing, drinking copiously, and complaining about a sequence of disappointing boyfriends, Miss Morrow brought a lot to our world. When I entered high school, she gave me a copy of Rilke's essay on Rodin with reproductions of a number of his drawings and bronzes. The openly erotic nudes were a marvelous tonic for a twelve-year-old boy in my particular setting.

The Art Deco Lacey Street movie theater in Fairbanks, Alaska, by Laurie Olin.

Since it was only a few miles' walk, I could easily get into town by now, which proved a rich place to prowl about. Charley Main's Trading Post was like a treasure-house to me and a frequent stop on my ramblings. Beaver hides and furs were piled high and hanging from the ceiling; there were stacks of work clothes and boots, mining tools and traps. Nowhere else I've ever been has smelled as rich or looked anything like it.

Founded as a mining camp, Fairbanks still had many of the hallmarks of a frontier town, including numerous bars and whorehouses. And yet something about its mixture of log cabins, wood-frame houses, pioneer storefronts, concrete and wooden sidewalks, theaters and government buildings, neon signs and gravel streets made it a great place to be a child on the loose. There was a nice town library, a municipal swimming pool, and a baseball field. There were three noteworthy pieces of Art Deco-inspired architecture in the heart of town: the Empress and Lacey Street Theaters and the Lathrop Building, all built by Austin E. "Cap" Lathrop, a major figure in Fairbanks and Alaska history. Early fireproof buildings, they are now on the National Register of Historic Buildings. Alaska may have been a long way from the lower 48, but Fairbanks was quintessentially an American small town, albeit constituted of local materials.

There were handsome clipped hedges, but instead of boxwood, laurel, or yew, they were Siberian pea, a subarctic shrub. The DNA of nineteenth-century settlements across America included tree-lined streets, the only exception being Main Street with its shops, and Fairbanks was the same. Instead of elms, maples, walnuts, or oaks, however, in Fairbanks they were birches or occasionally local cottonwood or black spruce. The flowers and vegetables, while familiar to someone from the States, were dramatically larger. Zinnias were three feet tall; delphiniums easily reached five or six or seven feet in height, and cabbages were the size of washtubs. Everything grew day and night.

Dust was everywhere in summer, and to keep it down the city regularly sprayed oil on the gravel streets and roads. Additionally, in a somewhat crazy battle to reduce the overwhelming clouds of mosquitos, the air force sprayed the local lakes, bogs, marshes, and swamps with oil as well. Such ubiquitous application of a pollutant is unthinkable today, but in the 1940s few people thought or knew about its ecologically damaging effects.

North of the river were a railroad station and St. Joseph's Hospital, where many townspeople were taken care of at some point by nursing nuns – whether being born, having an operation, or recovering from pneumonia. These two facilities formed a gateway of sorts for the Steese Highway, which led northwards out of town past the headquarters of a gold-mining operation to an area with several Depression-era experimental farms and, nearby, the University of Alaska. From there the highway continued onwards to various mining sites and eventually the Arctic Circle. Here the road ended at a trading post and lodge, which functioned equally as a jumping-off point for hunting and fishing and a spa offering hot baths from mineral springs.

On the far bank of the river were a number of cabins and shacks inhabited by Alaskan Natives and a handful of impoverished old timers: trappers, prospectors, and pioneers. As a child I was mostly oblivious to the social inequities, hardship, and prejudice experienced by Eskimos and Indians living there, conditions which were perpetuated by new arrivals from the States. By the time I was in high school, however, they had become obvious and disturbing to me.

Also on the far side of the river, immediately north of town, was the aptly named Birch Hill, where the municipal cemetery was located. This hill was not very tall, but it was high enough that in late June and early July the sun would swing behind it for an hour or so, a little after midnight, before rising again. This is a time of the lingering golden light that I experienced again later in northern Europe, especially Scotland. I was always struck by its magic when I emerged from a movie theater at 11:00 p.m. or later to find the sky still bright and sunny.

The year I turned twelve was important to me for two particular events: it was discovered that I was nearsighted and needed glasses, and I joined one of the two Boy Scout troops in town. At weekly scout meetings I was able to rekindle my friendships with the kids I'd known in third grade before we moved to 26 Mile. And with a shiny, new pair of round, gold-rimmed glasses, I could suddenly see so much more of the world about me! The amount of detail and color at all distances was fantastic. The only drawback, I learned, was that when the temperature dropped below minus twenty degrees, the frames of my glasses could get exceedingly chilly, especially as I stood in the dark waiting for a bus to go into town.

Being in the Boy Scouts in Alaska in the late 1940s and early '50s was definitely not the way it was Outside, in the States. The classes we received from the military instructors about survival in the wilderness were in retrospect very good, deriving a significant portion of their material from Native practices. My first overnight hike as a new scout took place just before the winter solstice. We slept in sleeping bags without tents. The temperature was only about ten below zero, which in Alaska in winter is quite warm, and after lights-out, when everyone was supposed to be in bed and asleep, there was a riotous snowball fight, with shrieks in the darkness and skinny little figures in their underwear and socks dashing about and hiding behind the spruce trees. The next morning a groggy and stiff bunch of kids pushed their feet into frozen boots and built fires to make breakfast. The frozen eggs from our packs drooped but wouldn't fall out of their shells into the frying pan.

My first summer camp was at Mount McKinley Park (now Denali National Park) in 1951. We stayed at Camp Eielson, a former construction workers' camp. It was named for a pioneer Alaskan aviator, Carl Ben Eielson, who was a local hero – one of those who helped develop aviation technology in the north, institute year-round air mail, and connect the far-flung communities of Alaska by air. Those two weeks were particularly thrilling. We hiked, climbed mountains, forded rivers and streams fed by glacial run-off, told stories, sang, and played wild and rough games in the midnight sun, amid the visual feasts of one of the great landscapes of the world. Arctic ground squirrels with their golden pelts were everywhere, as were caribou, hoary marmots, and Toklat grizzlies.

Drawing beside the Yukon River in Whitehorse with my little sister in 1953. I'm sketching a group of sternwheeler riverboats; it turned out to be the last year they ran commercially.

We picnicked on the western edge of the park, staring at the spectacular, snow-covered mass of Mount McKinley reflected in the deep blue waters of Wonder Lake just beyond a mass of water lilies. There were no tourist buses and no one landing on the mountain as part of a day trip or package adventure. There was only us, a small bunch of boys and three adults who were scrutinized carefully by golden eagles overhead and foxes in the grass on the slopes leading up to the peaks.

A massive upland lies immediately north of Fairbanks. This was where my family and friends spent weekends and holidays exploring, camping, hunting, and fishing. It also contained a handful of gold-mining camps, some active and others abandoned. Willows, birch, and spruce occupied the valley bottoms, while heath, heather, berry bushes, flowers, moss, and lichen covered the slopes and ridges. It was a territory full of birds, animals, and fish, encouraging numerous expeditions. South of the Salcha flats was a settlement where a prewar road headed through the mountains to the next city, Anchorage, three hundred miles away – important to us only because the city possessed the nearest competing high-school basketball team. Standing on a bluff overlooking the raveled water and gravel bars marching off into the apparent infinity, one had the sense of having an entire planet and all of its creatures to oneself – not of possessing it, of course, but of being companion to it; of being infinitesimal, yet wonderfully free and alive.

One of the earliest sketches I have managed to retain, made during my senior year in high school, is of a bare tree standing in the snow. It's a classic example of the paper birch, *Betula papyrifera*, found growing across the Interior of Alaska and on much of the taiga that covers northern Canada, Siberia, and portions of Scandinavia. It is difficult to fully express my aesthetic fondness for such trees or describe their tough and resilient nature. First there is their graphic character, the creamy white bark and black scars where former branches have been shed. Then there are their delicate branches and fine dark twigs, which in spring produce fuzzy, dangling, pale yellowish green catkins that sway in the breeze, followed by myriad small, light green

Fish and Wildlife Service research station, Camp Island, Karluk Lake, Kodiak Island, Alaska, watercolor by Laurie Olin.

leaves that are beautifully shaped, with a refined pattern of veins and delicately serrated edges, shimmering and rustling gently in the summer winds. Adapted to poor, thin soils and harsh cold – able to remain frozen solid for months on end and tolerate a short summer growing season – they can also withstand drought and flooding.

The forests of the valleys and flood plains of the Interior were largely composed of these trees, along with another tough customer, the black spruce, *Picea mariana*, that grows throughout the circumpolar world, seemingly as the paper birch's companion. Scrawny, thin, and spikey, it grows slowly and is hard to cut down. These two species are a striking sight in the fall when the birch leaves turn to masses of gold, juxtaposed against the conifers, often under pure, deep blue skies or dark, glowering clouds signaling impending snow. As the sunlight slants under the clouds, vast ranks of birch glow like lampshades across the valleys and hills against a background of mountains with their first coat of white. Wherever one goes, there is a sharply etched tapestry of detail in the foreground against the most distant background imaginable.

The summer of 1954 began with me flopping listlessly around. To get me out of the house, my parents conspired with Miss Morrow to have me help out at her family's cabin in Manley Hot Springs for the month of July. At the time, Manley Hot Springs was a tiny hamlet a thirty-minute flight west of Fairbanks, consisting of a two-story wooden hotel, a log post office, a general store clad in corrugated metal that doubled as a trading post, a dozen or so cabins scattered about, and a small grass airstrip on a tributary of the Tanana River. There was a one-lane, timber bridge across the river, leading to a hot spring with a large, steamy and scummy, sulfur-smelling concrete tank covered by a tin shed. The only ways to get to Manley Hot Springs in summer were to fly or take a circuitous riverboat – one could go overland only in the winter, and then only by foot and sled.

With no set program, and my hosts happy to mostly read, fix meals, and socialize at the hotel with the few other residents and summer workers, I was left to my own devices. I poked around the store, lazed for hours in the hot-water bath of the spring that no one else ever seemed to visit – at least, not in summer in the daytime – and read in my hammock beside the creek (where I also slept when it didn't rain, swatting mosquitos that managed to get through the netting). For some reason that summer I also decided to document what was around me, drawing with pen and sepia wash several of the principal structures that made up the settlement. By the month's end I'd made sketches of the whole village – trading post, airstrip, bridge and river, hotel, and cabins – as I studied the convivial and at times promiscuous behavior of the adults around me. When I returned to Fairbanks, I discovered that I could make a little money by washing ceilings for people and selling the occasional watercolor. Little did I know that my lifelong fascination with the study and engagement of cultural landscapes had begun.

A few years ago, a colleague asked me, "Laurie, is any of Alaska still in you?" I was astonished by his question. There is rarely a week in my life when I don't draw upon some experience, memory, insight, or skill acquired in my days there, whether consciously or not. One indelible memory is of leading my mom and dad down from the pass at Sheep Mountain in the dark, through a dense fog, by walking for miles along the edge of the road in front of their car holding a flashlight. Nor can I forget being on the broad, flat terrace adjacent to the Susitna River and wading into an enormous sea of iris almost as tall as my four-year-old sister that extended, uninterrupted, for a half mile or so around us; or standing on the banks of the Yukon in Whitehorse drawing a group of elegant sternwheelers in the river (it turned out to be the last year these historic river boats were in use); or the awe-inspiring sight at day's end one September of the entire sky from horizon to horizon black with migrating ducks and geese.

I greatly savor my memories of the territory I grew up in, and the reason to remember its settlements, towns, and stories is that Alaska is not simply wilderness. It is a cultural landscape, inhabited for thousands of years by people and their imaginations, even as it also lives within them. No matter how remote or seemingly absent the trappings of civilization, there is a compact between the people and the place. Each bird in the sky and bend in the river, every stand of trees and mountain, has its meaning.

In looking back through the drawings I made as a teenager, I see that I wasn't just drawing an object. If I drew a floatplane, it was on a lake, and the lake was in a particular place, a specific region. If I drew a cabin it was in a clearing, the clearing was on the side of a particular hill in a valley, one with its own characteristics, and so on. The buildings, boats, hills, and forests I'd begun to record were elements of an intricate cultural landscape. So in answer to my colleague's question, the Interior abides in me. I was pickled in it.
– Laurie Olin

Returning to Tamalpais

We learn a place and how to visualize spatial relationships, as children, on foot and with imagination. Place and the scale of space must be measured against our bodies and their capabilities.
– Gary Snyder, "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking,"
The Practice of the Wild

My first taste of Mount Tamalpais came when our family began driving up there for picnics after church. Mom and Dad, my older brother Lyn, and I would stop briefly at our Cape Cod cottage on Mill Valley's Sycamore Avenue so that we could change into more comfortable clothes. Then we would pile back into our white Rambler American with a hamper of provisions in the trunk and drive six miles up a steep, winding road that brought us to a bluff crowned by a California live oak. Beneath it Lyn and I would spread out the old striped bedspread and the two ratty Army blankets that served as our picnic cloths while Mom and Dad cheerfully unpacked the fried chicken, potato salad, buttermilk biscuits, coleslaw, and molasses cookies of their native South, along with a battered metal jug of lemonade and a tall Mason jar of iced tea. From this spot, as we lounged and ate our lunch in the shade of that magnificent oak, we could gaze south to the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco and west out over the Pacific Ocean.

My parents grew up in modest circumstances (a farm in northern Louisiana for my mother Lois and a sleepy, Gulf Coast town in Mississippi for my father Lyn). They had little inclination to go hiking or camping now that they owned a comfortable house and drove a reliable car. Dad had also spent several formative years tenting as a member of the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II. Additional nights out-of-doors were no more inviting to him than cans of K-rations would have been in the picnic basket. For Mom and him, as for so many Americans, the fifties and early sixties felt like a chance to put an era of dislocation, privation, and danger behind them.

If the food for our Mount Tam picnics and my parents' accents recalled their own childhood worlds, our view from Tamalpais definitely did not. We were living in New Orleans, where my father was minister of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, when he was invited to teach at a new Baptist seminary just north of San Francisco. I remember our drive west in the two-tone green Pontiac station wagon we then owned. Louisiana's lushness, with its heavy air and saturated soil, gave way to the gritty winds of Highway 66 and the monumental red and tan rock formations of Arizona, after which we finally reached the brown, apparently treeless hills of southern California. To my mother, it appeared a dead landscape, and tears rolled down her cheeks in the face of such desolation.

After living in California for several years, however, all of us had come to love the ever-changing colors of these ridges, rolling across the state like the gently rising and falling water of a calm day by the Pacific. The hills were brilliant green in spring; a golden hue spangled with poppies in early summer. Then the rattlesnake grass and wild oats bleached and stiffened in anticipation of winter and its weeks of thunderous rain. We became steadily more attuned to Mount Tam's flowers – like the poppies, lupine, and Scotch broom – and more oriented to her remarkable trees. Amid those rolling hills of dry grasses bending under the autumn wind were groves of redwoods and copses of bay laurel, live oak, and cedar. Shaggy eucalyptus, planted in the late-nineteenth century, lined the main roads crossing the mountain. Though we followed the highway back to Louisiana for family visits many summers, California now felt like home.

Several hundred yards to the north of our family's favorite picnic spot, on a knoll of its own, stands a beautiful circle of smaller oaks interspersed with laurels, with a moss- and lichen-covered boulder at its center. This is where Lyn, my wife Rita, and I scattered Mom and Dad's ashes after their deaths in 1994 and 1995. Whenever Rita and I return to Mill Valley for a visit – less often now that Lyn has come out to Vermont to live near us – we walk across the ridge to this little grove with an armful of iris, my mother's favorite flower, to strew around the boulder's base.

All of us in the family were exhilarated by the cultural richness of the Bay Area. We were also delighted by the many high-spirited eccentrics living right around us in Mill Valley. One man regularly biked down our street with old wooden toilet seats over his handlebars. He had made a business of adding a fretted neck to these items and converting them into electric guitars for the rock bands practicing in garages along Miller Avenue. His main model was called the Royal Flush, though he also made a bass version called the Four Flusher.

For me, though, more than for my parents or my brother, Mount Tamalpais itself soon became my primary frame of reference for what I cared about and the gauge for who I wanted to become. Perhaps those early picnics on the mountain imprinted more indelibly on me than on Lyn because I was four years younger. At any rate, starting at about age twelve, I began to make my way up to our family picnic spot on my own by a much more direct approach. After the end of the school day at Edna Maguire Junior High in Mill Valley, I would hike and jog there, using the flights of wooden and stone stairs rising above Old Mill Park. Such solitary returns under my own muscle power to places we'd driven together expressed both my feeling of a loving connection with my family and the fact that I was now tugging away from them in search of

Gazing down at the Pacific from Mount Tamalpais. Photograph by Joshua Sortino on Unsplash.

a more personal and separate sense of identity. As Lyn went off to college and I started high school, readings from the Bible at dinner and picnics after church were less frequent. Mount Tam became my playground, my gymnasium, and my library.

At fifteen, with the savings from a paper route, I was able to buy a pearl gray Vespa, symbolizing for me both freedom and sophistication. With my friend Cliff, who owned another make of Italian scooter called a Lambretta, I would bomb over Mount Tam on warm Saturdays from spring through fall. We blasted through flickers of sunshine and shade and through passing pockets of fragrance from the laurels, eucalyptus, and wild oats beside the road. After the Pan Toll Ranger Station, where the road forked right and continued toward the summit, we would bear left instead, down and down to Stinson Beach.

Arriving at the beach's parking lot, we would lean our scooters against a section of split-rail fence and, with barely a pause, charge on past the beach plum and grasses of the skirting dunes. We dropped our shoes and towels where the sand was still dry and hot; then sprinted down the shining brown intertidal zone toward the surf. Sprinted, because Stinson Beach's water is really cold, often in the mid-fifties Fahrenheit. If we had stopped to dip our toes in, we might well have backed right out. We dove through the first waves that were just too big to jump over, slid under that crashing water, and came up gasping and furiously swimming out to higher, surfable lines of breakers rising farther from the beach. Over and over we rode in on waves that seized and carried us after we had turned to swim in the same direction they were heading, propelling us with a velocity that was entirely beyond our control. As soon as they slid us onto the hissing sand, we splashed back out to the swells where we would tread water and peer around for the next waves to catapult us to the shore of Mount Tam.

The rides over the mountain and back and the bodysurfing in that turbulent sea felt like the most exhilarating part of my life. What a contrast to the gentle, customary rhythms of our quiet home and the undemanding satisfactions of school. These were the adventures through which I negotiated the transition between boyhood and young manhood.

There were sometimes as many as a dozen other guys from Tam High joining Cliff and me as we alternated between chilly bouts of wild swimming and scooping warm sand up against our chests as we flopped down on our bellies and waited for the shivering to stop. I was never much drawn to team sports as a teenager, preferring to run and hike on my own rather than chase a ball. But when our little band of bodysurfers spotted a promising new sequence of waves, we would all jump up and race toward the ocean together. As a really big wave was arising, Don Kaufman, who played clarinet in the band with Cliff (trumpet) and me (French horn), would shout something that sounded like "Ah Keró!" Though I never had any idea what those words meant, and never thought of asking Don, I would always join in shouting them as we first ran and then swam toward the action like a barking cohort of adolescent seals.

Such weekend outings complemented our family's usual life in the cottage on Sycamore Avenue. I would glide back into our driveway glowing from sun, wind, speed, and exertion; take a quick shower; and join Mom and Dad at the table. They would have spent the day reading, writing letters, puttering in the garden, and preparing to teach their Sunday school classes the next morning. My mother was a wonderful cook. Sometimes our Saturday evening fare would be chicken and dumplings from her girlhood on the farm, sometimes a dish like red beans and rice or gumbo she learned from Dad's Cajun mother. But since our move to northern California she had also dedicated herself to learning how to prepare authentic Mexican and Chinese food with the help of friends raised in those traditions. So the meal might just as well feature chiles rellenos or wonton soup with homemade wontons. Following dinner, and after Dad and I did the dishes in the tiny kitchen, we'd all watch a couple of shows like *Have Gun Will Travel* or *Bonanza* before turning in for some rest before church the next morning. Cliff's and my boisterous excursions across Mount Tamalpais aerated my life in the same way the mountain vitalized the villages surrounding it. Into the worlds of home, church, and school it conveyed possibilities for wildness, like gusts borne into our neighborhood over the mountain's windswept, never-mown grass.

During summers following my last two years of high school and my first two at Pomona College, I was able to spend entire days exploring the mountain. With Brock, another high school chum, I liked to run the Dipsea Trail. It began at a Greyhound bus depot in downtown Mill Valley, turned down Throckmorton Avenue to Old Mill Park, and then required the pounding ascent of those old stairs I had discovered earlier on my own. Steep Ravine was the Dipsea Trail's culminating descent to the Pacific. Throughout the entire run I was thinking about this final challenge, which felt both as intimidating and as exciting as a precipitous wave breaking at Stinson Beach.

The trail tumbled down a gorge carved deeply into the mountain by a seasonally tumultuous creek, and was made more treacherous by shiny, protruding roots snaking across it and wet boulders impinging from either side. Though I had joined the cross-country team in my first year at Tam High, this stretch of the Dipsea Trail was where I most starkly encountered my physical limits. But the elevated pulse and exhaustion from this run also deepened my receptivity to the mountain's power and beauty – opening my pores, widening my eyes, sharpening my senses.

Before arriving at the drama of Steep Ravine the Dipsea Trail passes by Muir Woods. This grand redwood forest, even more than the summit vistas from our family's picnic spot or Stinson's elemental world of sand and surf, was the heart of Mount Tamalpais for me. One of the most visited of the redwood groves because of its proximity to San Francisco, Muir Woods has long been a favorite stop for tourist buses as well as a site particularly beloved by Japanese visitors. Some of the trees close to the visitor center rise for 250 feet and are over 1,200 years old. Throngs of visitors often linger in this astonishing portion of the park. With just half an hour of climbing on one of the trails that leads into the forest, though, one enters a breezy solitude where there is an opportunity to gaze down into the tops of trees whose mighty trunks one just walked past.

When not charging along the Dipsea Trail with Brock, as we tried to beat our previous times, I enjoyed ambling up into these more remote portions of Muir Woods with Sparky, my scruffy, up-for-anything, mixed-breed terrier. One of Sparky's proudest moments came when, ranging ahead of me as I strolled leisurely back down an unfrequented trail to the visitor center, he encountered a group of more venturesome tourists, one of whom shouted in alarm, "A wild boar!"

Just as Mount Tamalpais was becoming such an important setting for adventure in the company of friends, the novels of Tolkien were entering my life. Reading and rereading those books was in its own way as emotionally and imaginatively galvanizing as exploring the mountain. So many of my friends in high school were reading Tolkien simultaneously that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* felt like an impromptu generational turning, a pre-digital flash mob akin to those random gatherings of bodysurfers. Few of our parents shared either enthusiasm, which was another plus. Phantasmagorical scenes and designs inspired by Middle Earth became increasingly prominent in posters for concerts and other events that were taped up in the windows of the Redwood Book Store in Mill Valley and the Tides Book Store in nearby Sausalito. When I stretched out to read Tolkien on

Muir Woods, the heart of Mount Tamalpais. Photography by Josh Felise on Unsplash.

our Sycamore Avenue sofa during foggy evenings in August, I felt like Bilbo – moored snugly in Rivendell, "the last homely house," as he recalled more turbulent days. When I forged up tree-lined paths with Brock, I felt like Frodo pursuing a quest with stalwart comrades. When wandering more reflectively amid the redwoods with Sparky, I remembered Fangorn and the Ents.

Mount Tam was large enough, beautiful enough, and at the same time close enough to more settled parts of the Bay Area that it could inspire and support such a mythical overlay. Ever since the nineteenth century nearby residents have been inclined to weave grand narratives around this mountain that presides over the northern end of the Golden Gate. For German-American hiking clubs, it was a landscape expressing socialist ideals through the healthy, outdoor fellowship of workers who embarked for Marin on weekend excursions from the Ferry Building. For early associations of Bay Area poets and conservationists, it represented beauty unimpaired by materialism and social conformity.

Tom Killion explains that the name Tamalpais comes from two words in the Miwok language: "tamal," for "coast," "west," or "bay" and "pais" for "mountain" or "hill." A fable of "Tamalpa, the Sleeping Princess" arose much later in response to Mount Tam's silhouette. When viewed from the Mill Valley side, it could be imagined as the outline of a woman sleeping on her back with long hair rippling out behind her head. There are no apparent connections between this fable and the beliefs of Marin County's Native people. As Killion writes, "What we do know for certain is that the myth of Tamalpais as a sleeping Indian maiden was an invention of Bay Area writers in the early decades of the twentieth century, a poetic project of the Anglo-Californians in the sunset afterglow of the romantic age." Still, I sometimes can't help glimpsing Tamalpa reclining against the sky when driving north across the Golden Gate Bridge – while always regretting that the radar station subsequently installed there by the Air Force now makes her appear to be holding a cigar stub between her teeth.

In his essay about the Japanese Zen priest and writer Dōgen, "Blue Mountains Constantly Walking," Gary Snyder writes that "Narratives are one sort of trace that we leave in the world. All our literatures are leavings – of the same order as the myths of wilderness peoples." Barry Lopez, in his own essay "Landscape and Narrative," stipulates, however, that some stories are merely projections or attempts to sell a version of reality that doesn't finally add up. Those that truly help us to lead more rooted lives as individuals and communities are the narratives Lopez describes as "authentic." In my junior year in college I was introduced to Snyder's writing through poems in the *Myths and Texts*. Along with his subsequent books of poetry – *Turtle Island*, for instance – and the essays collected in *Practice of the Wild*, it provided what felt like an authentic and compelling new context within which to experience Mount Tamalpais. The vigor with which Snyder connected Zen, geology, evolution, ecology, and the earth-based wisdom of Native American cultures was inspiring for me. His bold perspective outshone the separate disciplines of academia, just as reading the King James Bible's powerful language and stories with my family had been so much more engaging than studying the staid primers offered in elementary school.

I also loved the authors I was introduced to through the study of literature in college and grad school – especially Milton, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Frost, and the Thoreauvian lineage of nature writing. But from Snyder I developed a lifelong interest in meditation and an understanding that there were far deeper insights in Native American culture than reflected in a fabrication like that of Tamalpais's Sleeping Princess. The fact that Snyder had himself lived in Mill Valley and extensively explored the trails on Mount Tam during a formative period in his life and writing reinforced my sense that his comprehensive vision of "the Main Flow" spoke in a compelling way to my own coming of age on the mountain. It meant that, even as I pursued my Ph.D. in English at Yale and then began to teach English and Environmental Studies at Middlebury College and the Bread Loaf School of English, camping trips with my students in the Green Mountains and the Adirondacks often framed or followed up on our reading and writing on campus.

In 2010 I retired after teaching for thirty-seven years at Middlebury – a college to which I felt very well suited and with students I greatly enjoyed and admired. Almost immediately after this change, I developed a condition called polymyalgia rheumatica that made my shoulders, knees, and, especially, hips so sore I could scarcely walk. This was quite a blow, especially since long-distance walking had become a favorite activity of Rita's and mine, which we'd planned to do much more of in retirement. The neurologist who diagnosed my polymyalgia prescribed substantial daily doses of Prednisone and ibuprofen and confidently predicted that it would clear up within just about two years.

For a Christmas gift in 2011, at the midpoint in my excursion through the Valley of Prednisone, I received a book by Tom Killion and Gary Snyder called *Tamalpais Walking*. It contained a generous selection of Killion's woodcuts of Tamalpais, in the style of Hokusai's *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, along with his survey of the mountain's cultural history and its conservation as a state park. In addition, there was

a selection of Snyder's poems – as well as his description of a 1965 circumambulation of Mount Tamalpais with friends and fellow poets Allen Ginsberg and Phillip Whalen. Inspired by their experiences of ritual circumambulations of sacred mountains in Japan and India, they paused at ten stations in their circling of Tam to offer chants from various Asian traditions. "Allen, Phillip, and I basically made that ceremony, that ritual, that whole walk, up," Snyder wrote, "based on some Japanese yamabushi background, a lot of mantra-singing in India, and a long experience of the crisscross of the Tamalpais trails with their many names, testament to volunteers and the admirable fanatics of years gone by."

Rarely has a book excited me as much as this beautiful volume. Its many images of the mountain that has been so formative in my life, along with the narrative of an important episode in the career of a writer who'd so influenced me as a reader, teacher, and writer, made me want to undertake Snyder's circumambulation for myself. Rita was immediately up for this adventure too. So in the fall of 2012, after I had begun to feel more comfortable walking again, if not entirely recovered, we flew west for our own version of Snyder's circuit.

After a night in Mill Valley and a stroll over to see my parents' old house, we moved on to Green Gulch, a meditation center and retreat associated with the San Francisco Zen Center. The complex offered a connection between Snyder's Zen practice and Mount Tamalpais, on whose skirts Green Gulch is located. It was also a short walk from the shack where Snyder lived for parts of two years and which he called Marin An as an echo of the Bashō-an – one of the forest huts where the great Japanese haiku poet had dwelled. We had arranged to stay in the Wainwright House, atop a ridge just south of the main monastery complex. This meant parking down below, before walking up a steep path to our accommodations.

The next day, we rose at dawn and drove to Muir Woods, where we left our rental car and set off to complete Snyder's circumambulation route within a single day, as he and his comrades Ginsberg and Whalen had done forty-seven years before – the same year I graduated from Tamalpais Union High School. The arduous circuit, which in effect climbed and descended from Mount Tam twice, felt like a grand adventure for this sunny fall day, with the mountain at its most fragrant, yellow and blue wildflowers threading through the tall grass, and chattering jays in the treetops.

Two impressions remain especially vivid from that outing. One came soon after we had found the trail leading uphill, just south of the Muir Woods entrance. As we approached the low wooden bridge crossing Redwood Creek, a startled heron that had been feeding in the nearby water flapped up the trail just ahead of us, after pushing off powerfully from the bridge with one of its feet. The bird's enormous footprint, pointing in the direction we needed to go, looked black against an unfinished wooden surface that appeared white in the dim morning light. It was our first map of the day. Another enduring memory is of pausing at station four of Snyder's circumambulation, where an outcropping of beautiful green serpentine briefly runs along the trail before diving back into the earth. On reaching it, Snyder saw a manifestation of the earth's dragon energy, midway in his day's walk, and paused with his comrades to chant the Om Shri Maitreya and the Dhārani for Removing Disasters.

Rita's and my rituals were flavored less by the realm of ancient mantras than by our unfolding marital conversation. We'd been playing a lot of Irish music over the previous year, she on her concertina and I on a wooden flute. So when we paused in the fog at the first gate on the upward trail, I played "A Fig for a Kiss" on my pennywhistle, rechristened for this occasion "A Fog for a Kiss." When we were stopped by birdsong from woods to our left, she recited Frost's "Come In." Despite the many pleasures of the day, however, as sunset approached and we were circling the summit on a disorienting northerly trail, I felt utterly spent. My knees and hips were swollen and stiff from attempting this challenging hike before I had fully recovered from polymyalgia. I was limping woodenly now and leaning heavily on my walking staff. Rita, who remained in much better shape, offered me calm and kindly encouragement, even though our progress had become so slow that we were in danger of not reaching the car before dark. We did eventually make our way back into Muir Woods on what turned out to be Sparky's wild-boar trail, drove back to Green Gulch, and accomplished the last ascent to our isolated shelter amid the heavy fog. It had taken us fourteen hours to complete Snyder's circuit.

The next day I could barely climb down from our bed platform and make my way to the car below. Our planned rambles around Point Reyes over the next several days necessarily morphed into a more sedate driving trip. It was official: I was sixty-five now, not fifteen. We both acknowledged that I had pushed too hard, but we also agreed that it had been worth it – indeed, a lifetime experience. And this struggle around Snyder's circumambulation did in one important way resemble all those careening Vespa round-trips, all those teenage walks up the trails of Muir Woods until I could see down into the tops of a thousand redwoods. It had opened my inner eye for one more panoramic exposure to the mountain.

A dyptich called "Bolinas Ridge to Duxbury Point, 2004" is included in Tom Killion's portfolio of prints in *Tamalpais Walking*. This composite image of the mountain looks down over poppies growing on a grassy ridge. Rolling terrain, falling away beyond the foreground, enfolds communities of live oaks. Even further in the distance, what may be the tops of redwoods are visible just before the land drops down to the blue Pacific – blue like the waves Cliff and I rocketed to shore on so many years ago. Those ventures beyond my parents' home with buddies like him gave way, in the woodblock sequence of my life, to Rita's and my marriage and children and our own home on the slopes of Vermont's Mount Abraham, several thousand miles east of Mount Tamalpais.

Of these two familial mountains, Abraham is associated with a much longer portion of my life. But my excitement in exploring it has been inextricable from those early adventures on Mount Tam, as well as from the invigorating perspective on wilderness and ritual that I found in Gary Snyder's writing. My own closest equivalent to his circumambulation of Tamalpais has turned out to be climbing to the top of Mount Abe with friends each New Year's Day. This celebration of forty-five years often requires snowshoes and involves both floundering upward through deep snow and climbing on hands and knees when coming to a steep slope of ice just below the summit. In recent years, though, I've found the winter climb up Abraham so exhausting that I've had to lie down for several hours afterward before my pulse returns to normal. Like my runs with Brock on the Dipsea Trail and Rita's and my emulation of Snyder's ritual circuit, these outings may soon take place only in the landscape of memory, its beautiful wintry vistas compounded from decades of excursions.

My past forays amid mountainous beauty have already been subsumed into a larger rhythm of venturing out and returning. A feeling of dynamic wholeness is evoked for me when I drive back to Bristol after a day spent in Middlebury. My breath catches as I see Abraham rising blue against the sky. Like the kindred profile of Tamalpais, it conveys a deeply satisfying experience of family and continuity. Night after night, Mount Tam and Mount Abe rise in my heart like waves, carrying me back, wrists and temples pounding, onto the warm shore of home. – John Elder

A Recipe for Remembering

I have always felt at home on the Mediterranean. It's hard to describe. I am drawn to that part of the world. The water, the air, the way the sun kisses my skin and turns it copper brown. My husband has commented on it over the years. "It's as if you belong here," he likes to say. Whether exploring the whitewashed cities of Tunisia and the bustling streets of Tel Aviv, taking a boat ride from Palermo to Naples, or driving down the Costa del Sol, I have felt as if this were true. It seems as though I come from a place with olive trees and vineyards, figs and oranges and lemons.

But of course I knew I hadn't. All four of my grandparents were Russian Jews who had settled in Chicago in the 1890s after fleeing the pogroms. I was particularly close to my maternal grandmother, Lena, who was one of ten children. Lena was a beautiful, buxom woman with a big laugh who relished gossip and delighted in making fun of my great-uncle's girlfriends. But she was also a very good storyteller, and she used to tell me chilling tales about life in Russia before the family fled.

We'd sit in her darkened living room, my hand in hers. Her clear blue eyes glistened as she recalled a cousin kidnapped by Cossacks. She explained how her own mother dug little graves for her children when the Cossacks rode through, putting reeds in their mouths so that they could breathe until the danger had passed. I remember the feel of her silken skin against mine as I listened, spellbound, to her claim that the branch of the family that stayed behind became Bolsheviks. Trotsky, she informed me, was our cousin.

Bolsheviks, Cossacks, little graves. Obviously we were Russian. So while the Mediterranean has often felt like my spiritual home, I knew, or at least I thought I knew, where I came from. That is, until a trip to Morocco a few years ago. My husband Larry and I had been traveling for two days: across the ocean from New York to Madrid; by train to Malaga; a ferry ride across the Straits of Gibraltar; and now to Tangier. It was late, and we were starving. When had we last eaten? Coffee that morning in Malaga? A cheese sandwich on the ferry? But that was hours ago. Now we were making our way to an old Moroccan restaurant I'd circled in the guidebook.

In the winding alleyways stores were shuttering their windows for the night. Moroccan women in kaftans, heads covered, hurried along on last-minute errands. In cafés men in pink and green djellabas sat sipping mint tea. Other men, hooded, pushed past us. At one point a donkey cart, filled with wood, almost pinned us to the wall in the narrow, maze-like street. I asked a group of boys for directions, and laughing they sent us the wrong way.

We found ourselves hopelessly lost. A shopkeeper who spoke French drew us a map. Half an hour later we were finally climbing the stone steps that led to our restaurant, but the minute we stepped inside I was uncertain. It looked like a place for tourists. The waiters wore fezzes, and there were four musicians sitting on a platform with a tip jar in front of them. The only other people in the restaurant were members of a large French family, who seemed to be celebrating somebody's birthday.

I was hoping for something a bit funkier but the place was clean, the people seemed nice, and we were exhausted. When the waiter asked if I'd like a drink, I decided to take a chance. "Do you have any wine?" I asked. He shook his head sadly. I was sure it wasn't the first time he'd heard this question.

"We have fresh pomegranate juice," he told me. I ordered the juice and the lamb tagine, and Larry ordered the chicken couscous. As we sat, the band started playing. The music was lively, and we decided to enjoy it. It wasn't long before our food arrived, and as the waiter lifted the lid of my tagine, the steaming aroma revived me. I took a bite. The lamb was moist and tender, cooked with apricots. I could smell the cinnamon, the ginger, the turmeric. Slowly the flavor seeped into my mouth. I put my fork down.

"Is it all right?" Larry asked, concerned.

Tears came to my eyes.

"What is it?" Larry feared there was something wrong with the food. How could I explain this to him? It was as if I were eating in my grandmother's kitchen.

Though I grew up in a house in the suburbs, my grandmother's apartment felt more like home. She was the matriarch of the family, and we descended on her house for every holiday. There were perhaps sixty of us in all – aunts, uncles, cousins, grandchildren, and spouses – and for some family gatherings we had to split into two groups.

I loved going to visit her. She lived in a three-story building on a tree-lined street on the North Side of Chicago with my mother's sister Beatrice and Beatrice's husband Lou. The apartment was a railroad flat with the living and dining rooms in the front and the kitchen behind them, then a long corridor to the bedrooms. One for Aunt Bea and Uncle Lou. A guest room. And in the far back a master bedroom where my grandmother, who had been widowed long before I was born, slept alone. In my grandmother's room there was a large, dark, wooden bed and, off to the side, a sewing room where she made all of her clothes.

I recall many random things about my grandmother's house: her sewing machine and boxes of buttons (which I have kept to this day); her elephant figurine, made of smooth metal with white ivory tusks. I have no idea why my grandmother had this elephant, but I remember it vividly and also recall that for some reason it was ultimately buried in the backyard. Her building had a large basement with lots of storage places where my cousins and I played hide-and-seek. And I also recall Grandma's huge bed, where my cousin Marianne and I would be tucked in for the night, and where we would laugh and laugh until our Aunt Bea came in and told us to be quiet, after which we'd laugh some more and then whisper to one another "Remember what Aunt Bea said," which would send us into another fit of laughter.

But what I loved the most about going to my grandmother's were the smells. She was forever cooking. There was always a stockpot on the stove; some meat dish simmering in the oven. Weeks before the holidays she began making the gefilte fish and matzo balls and broths that she would freeze. Indeed I cannot separate my grandmother's house from the smells. The chicken with onions that slow-cooked for hours, the soups and kugels, and the challah she baked every Friday. She also made delicious, crunchy pieces of fried dough that we'd drop into our broth and incredible sweet buns whose recipe

"My grandmother made this dish," the writer thinks when she takes her first bite. Photograph by Kieran Lamb.

I fear has been lost for all time. And she made her lamb with apricots and sometimes prunes. It was a dish that she also cooked for hours. I loved the tender, salty bites of lamb and the sweetness of the fruit. I would eat as many bowls as my parents would allow and then sop up the gravy with challah fresh out of the oven.

My grandmother never permitted anyone in the kitchen. It was her domain. She never taught her daughters or her son how to cook. She was as territorial as a tiger. Still, as she grew older, I assumed that one day she'd share her secrets with me – that I'd sit down with her, and she'd dictate precise instructions on how to make her magical food. But I was a busy teen and then a college student, living in Boston and New York, and I never got around to asking for them.

My grandmother fell ill in 1973. I happened to be home from graduate school, and I went with her to the hospital. She was over ninety. When the young resident who was filling out her admission form asked for the date of her last period, my grandmother began laughing hysterically. "Before World War II," she said. They admitted her, and she drifted into a coma that same afternoon. I went to see her every day I was home, but eventually I had to return to school. When I stopped by the hospital one last time, I found her sitting up in bed, bright eyed, her hair in two pigtails that her nurse had braided with two yellow ribbons. She smiled when I came in, and I sat holding her hand. I promised her that I'd see her soon. I promised her that I'd marry and that I'd be happy – promises it would take me a long time to make good on.

She died as my plane left the ground. And most of her recipes, I thought, died with her. So how was it possible that in a restaurant in North Africa I was tasting a meal that my Russian-born, Jewish grandmother had made for me in Chicago when I was a girl?

"My grandmother made this dish," I said.

"You mean she made something like this?" Larry asked.

I shook my head. "No, this is her recipe."

This dish of lamb with apricots sent me on an odyssey that led to the writing of my new novel, *Gateway to the Moon*. Part of my journey had to do with the history of food. What I learned surprised me because I had never thought of it before: food can have its own Diaspora. Recipes migrate with the people who cook them. I had no idea where to find my ancestors until lamb with prunes showed me the way. It was my first clue, and it became an integral part of the story.

Some five hundred years ago in 1492, the Alhambra Decree forced the Muslims and Jews to convert or be expelled from Spain. For over a thousand years both peoples had lived in relative harmony with their Christian neighbors until King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle determined that Spain should be a Catholic nation. Not only did the Spaniards banish the people. They banished their food. Spices such as cinnamon, ginger, and cumin soon disappeared from Spanish kitchens. In Andalusia sheeps and goats were butchered and pigs were brought in by the thousands because the authorities knew that those Jews and Muslims who held on to their rituals in secret would never eat pork. And so thousands fled, taking many of their ingredients and recipes with them.

The Jews who were expelled went in many different directions. Some to Portugal, where they would all eventually be forcibly converted. Others found their way to France and brought with them chocolate. Some made it to the Ottoman Empire. And others went to North Africa. My dinner in Morocco made me wonder if perhaps my ancestors were among them. In the centuries that followed, many hardships befell the Jews of this region, any one of which might have spurred them northward. And if you look at a map of the Mediterranean, from North Africa you can go directly up the Aegean, through the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara and through the Bosphorus to the Black Sea, which is where I know they came from. A village not far from Odessa. By water it is a straight shot.

So when my husband comments, "It's as if you belong here," now I think that maybe I do. But what that first bite of tagine restored to me most powerfully was less the lands of my ancestors than the world of my childhood: the boxes of buttons, the smell of baking challah, the hide-and-seek in the basement, the sound of my grandmother's laughter coming from the kitchen.

It didn't take much digging to find the recipe for my grandmother's lamb dish. It's in the *New York Times Jewish Cookbook*, under Moroccan lamb. I keep thinking that I will try my hand at this recipe – the spices it requires are always on my shelves, and I even bought the lamb shanks – but something makes me hesitate. I recall an anecdote about Chagall, who was exiled from his beloved Vitebsk as a young artist and fled to Paris. He always longed to return to the home of his childhood, and many of his paintings – of cows and cottages, and lovers that floated over rooftops – illustrate how he remembered and reimagined that home. When he was an old man, he was finally invited to return to Vitebsk, but in the end he refused. Perhaps those lamb shanks will remain in my freezer. Perhaps some things are best preserved in our remembering. – Mary Morris

The Homestead Lot: The Historic Landscape Surrounding the Morris-Jumel Mansion

On December 22, 1895 – the last Sunday before Christmas – a vociferous fusillade of quacks rent the air in the vicinity of Manhattan's 156th Street and Broadway. An officious citizen drew a constable's attention to the culprits: four ducks and a drake on the lam from the old Jumel homestead, located a few blocks to the north. What followed had the air of a comedy routine, played by policeman Meehan and his civilian sidekick, who were outnumbered by the poultry. First the two pounced energetically on the drake, tethering him to a lamp post with a borrowed clothesline. Then, huffing and puffing, they chased down the members of his harem and hitched each in turn to the lamp standard. The finale was the trek to the 152nd Street police station, each man juggling a squirming armful of fowls.

After the escapees were reclaimed from the West Farms animal pound by their owner, a journalist for the *New York Herald* wrote up an account of the episode. Animal stories have always made good copy, and this one was particularly piquant. The tale of the ducks induced a pleasant nostalgia in the urbanized city. It reminded readers of an era before police officers and animal pounds and macadam roads, when New York was still dotted with homesteads surrounded by meadows and orchards, wheat fields and vegetable gardens, wood lots and livestock: self-sufficient domestic dominions.

A handful of those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century homesteads survive today, chiefly as historic-house museums: the Lefferts Farmhouse, in Prospect Park; the Wyckoff House and Hendrick I. Lott House in Flatlands, Brooklyn; the Dyckman Farmhouse in Upper Manhattan; the Valentine-Varian House in the Bronx; the Kingsland Homestead on the old Flushing turnpike; and the Queens County Farm Museum, formerly the farmhouse of the Adriance family. There were grander homes that were homesteads too, serving as the foci of their tenant farms. They ranged in scope from Manhattan's Morris-Jumel Mansion – bounded in 1810 by 140 acres of land – to the Conference House on Staten Island, once anchoring the 1,600-acre property of Christopher Billup.

Almost uniformly, the acreage surrounding these homesteads, modest or grand, has been lost to urban development. The stories of their residents are disconnected from the land they enjoyed, worked, reigned over, and worried about. One of the last bits of rural real estate in Manhattan to succumb to the city's advance was the 36-acre homestead lot of the Jumel Mansion, preserved intact until the 1890s. It stretched from

159th to approximately 175th Street between St. Nicholas Avenue and the Harlem River (if we map it in terms of the New York street grid, which was not superimposed on Upper Manhattan until the second half of the nineteenth century). Today it has been reduced to the two acres immediately surrounding the mansion. The plot is called Roger Morris Park, after the house's first owner.

The chronicle of the 36 acres that once composed this particular homestead lot is a story that was repeated over and over, with modest variations, across the terrain that composes New York City. The parcel's changing fortunes illustrate in a microcosm the ways in which a largely undeveloped geographical region morphed into a metropolis of 8.5 million people over the course of just four hundred years.

The Morris-Jumel Mansion, seen in an 1854 lithograph by G. Haywood. Courtesy Morris-Jumel Mansion.

The human history of the lot goes back not centuries but millennia. It occupies a rocky bluff – the second-highest point on Manhattan Island – overlooking the shimmering waters of the Harlem River. People have always gravitated to high places. Excavations in 1986 and 1994 found debris from the manufacture of stone tools on both the east (Harlem River) and west side of the present house, as well as two projectile points of different types made approximately 5,500 to 3,500 years before the present. Did the lookout point have ritual significance for their creators, perhaps as a place to invoke hunting magic to increase the chance that spears and lances would meet their targets? We can only speculate.

By the time Dutch settlers arrived to colonize New York in 1624, an established trail, used by the Wiechquaesgeck Indians, went by the site. Over the course of the century, fewer and fewer Native Americans used it. They were driven off Manhattan Island by newly arrived Europeans, sometimes in bloody clashes. After 1800, with New York in English hands, the well-worn path became the Queen's Road, in honor of Britain's Queen Anne (reigned 1702–1714).

The bluff adjacent to it became the site of a homestead just before the new century. Jan Kiersen, born at Arnhout, in the Netherlands, about 1655, and his New England-born wife, Gerritie Van Dalsen, acquired a lot just east of the old trail in 1696. Carved out of the common lands of the township of New Harlem, it was spacious enough to accommodate a house, barn, and garden. The Kiersens expanded their acreage as opportunities arose, adding 8 acres in 1712, 4 in 1720, and an additional 8 at some point thereafter, until the homestead lot contained slightly over 20 acres. Judging from a description on a deed, the house occupied the south end of the parcel. (Its possible remains are hidden beneath Morton Court, an apartment building on the east side of St. Nicholas Avenue north of 159th Street; old bricks, Dutch tiles, and fragments of plaster were discovered when the excavations were made for the building's foundation in the early twentieth century.) Another old house stood farther west on the homestead lot as late as the 1850s, where it overlooked the fertile salt marshes of the Harlem River. No record of it survives beyond a rectangle on a map, accompanied by measurements indicating that the building was 19.3 feet long by 13.4 feet wide. It could have been a home for a hired man, or even a first building erected by the Kiersens for themselves, before they replaced it with a more commodious structure.

Of Gerritie Kiersen we know only that she had five children with Jan, of whom at least two sons and a daughter survived to adulthood. Like most women of her era, she was probably illiterate or could read but not write; a generation later her daughter would sign her own name with an X. As to Gerritie's husband, Jan, fragmentary records suggest that he was honest and trustworthy. Besides tending his farm, he served his community as a constable, church deacon, and tax collector. More startlingly, evidence collected by James Riker and Henry Toler for their *Revised History of Harlem* suggests that he lived to the age of 98. If so, a hardworking life was well rewarded.

Jan and Gerritie's youngest daughter, Jannetie, inherited the homestead lot with her husband, Jacob Dyckman, along with adjacent lands the Kiersens had owned on both sides of the Queen's Road (which had become the Kingsbridge Road under the Georgian monarchs). About ten years later they sold the property to James Carroll, a butcher who soon put it back on the market. Real estate speculation is a perennial New York occupation, and Carroll had scooped up a promising investment. The advertisement he placed in the newspapers in 1765 describes the then twenty-acre homestead lot, located between the road and the Harlem River, along with eighty additional acres that were part of the estate, stretching to the Hudson River. It was, he declared,

> a pleasant situated farm on the road leading to King's Bridge, in the Township of Harlem of York Island, containing about 100 acres: about 30 acres of which is Wood land, a fine piece of Meadow Ground, and more may easily be made: and commands the finest Prospect in the whole country; the Land runs from River to River, there is Fishing, Oystering, and Clamming at either end. There is a good House, a fine Barn, 44 feet long and 42 feet wide or thereabouts, an Orchard of good Fruit, with plenty of Quince Trees that bear extraordinarily well, three good gardens, the produce of which are sent to the York Markets daily, as it suits.[1]

The house, barn, orchard, and probably one of the gardens, as well as access to the banks of the Harlem River, were assets concentrated on the homestead lot.

Today the most memorable feature of the lot is the current homestead, a full-fledged mansion. It was erected by Mary Philipse Morris and her husband, Roger Morris, a colonel newly retired from the British Army, who purchased the estate in July 1765. Roger, born in Yorkshire and son of a builder-turned-architect, and Mary, a fifth-generation New Yorker, adopted the latest fashions in Georgian architecture for their summer home. Made of brick sheathed in wood that was painted white to imitate stone, the building had a towering front portico supported by Tuscan columns, surmounted by a triangular pediment. Every detail of the house was designed to make the most of the natural setting. A balcony tucked beneath the portico provided a sweeping view of the Harlem River. The opposite end of the house formed an octagon with parlor below and bedroom above, both with generously sized windows offering a range of perspectives. Roof decks, an amenity popular in Colonial New York, topped both the octagon and the front block of the house. From them the vista stretched from the Hudson Palisades to the Long Island

[1] W[illiam] H[enry] Shelton, *The Jumel Mansion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 3.

Sound, and southwards more than twenty miles to the hills of Staten Island.

Nor were country necessities neglected. Fences, some of wood and others of sturdy stone, protected crops and woodlands from straying livestock. Barn, coach house, and stables housed riding and coach horses, vehicles, and hay. A dairy in the basement of the mansion, its floor formed from a single rock, offered a clean and cool spot to make butter and cheese. The Morrises acquired an additional 16 acres of land to bring the homestead lot to its final size of 36 1/4 acres.

If Roger took the lead in making architectural decisions, presumably Mary did the same when it came to the dairy, gardens, and tenant farms. An heiress whose family was among New York's largest landowners, she would have been well accustomed to dealing with agricultural matters. A 1775 letter from Roger, then in England, reveals her interest in attractive landscaping as well: "You say (& I will not doubt your Taste)," Roger wrote, "the Road to the House will be very ornamental when it is finished." However, a cautionary phrase indicates he was aware of the latest fashions in English landscape design: "If you would have it like what is thought Taste here, it must not be straight."[2]

The Morrises had a happy marriage that produced five children. But rural pleasures on the homestead lot came to an end with the Revolution. In 1776 the mansion was requisitioned by the American forces during the New York campaign. Its elevation made it a valuable vantage point from which to track movements of ships and ground troops. It served as headquarters for General George Washington for thirty-four days in September and October 1776; then changed hands after New York fell to the British in November.

A clerk's notation, dating from the time of Washington's stay in the mansion, reveals the presence of a less well-documented member of the household. One "Marther Morris" – referred to in the records as "the Negro wench" – was paid for washing the general's linen. She may have been an enslaved woman left in the house as a caretaker by the Morrises. Working in the basement laundry, she would have come to know the members of the household staff who cooked and cleaned for Washington and his aides-de-camp. For these men and women, who traveled with the army – Jenny, "Negro Isaac," "Negro Hannah," and the cook, Mrs. Thompson – the mansion was only a temporary home.

Over the next few years the house would shelter English and then Hessian commanders, while enlisted men traversed, and sometimes camped on, the grounds. The homestead lot has yielded a few traces of their presence: brass pins, a button lost from the uniform of an infantryman in the 57th (West Middlesex) Regiment of Foot, and another button of a type worn by French officers. Also extant is an anecdote from the diary of an unlucky sergeant in the Hessian service, John Charles Philip von Krafft. In charge of six men assigned to picket duty, he spent a snowy December night at the edge of the Harlem River near the mansion in 1778. Struggling back to his quarters at daybreak, with the footpaths obscured by snow, he stumbled knee-deep into an abandoned cesspool.

The Morris's mansion survived the war in reasonable condition. The fences around house and garden remained intact, probably thanks to the military presence, but nary a fence post was left on the rest of the estate. The need for firewood to warm billets had left Upper Manhattan treeless and fenceless. The Morrises, who remained loyal to the British government during the Revolution, would not have the opportunity to replant. They returned to England in 1783. Their former country estate passed through multiple hands before finding new permanent owners in 1810.

Eliza and Stephen Jumel, the incoming proprietors of the homestead lot and its accompanying acreage, were not native New Yorkers. Stephen, the French-born son of shopkeepers, crafted a successful career as a merchant in the import-export trade after immigrating to the United States. Rhode Island-born Eliza had had the intelligence, guts, and willpower to overcome a youth that included residence in the workhouse and a stint as an indentured servant. They were among the unstoppable stream of men and women who poured into New York City after the American Revolution in search of economic opportunity. The population of the metropolis nearly doubled between 1790 and 1800, and grew by an additional 50 percent between 1800 and 1810.

With nearly 100,000 people living in the city by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, a country home offering an escape from summer heat and smells had understandable appeal to members of the rising merchant class. Eliza and Stephen purchased the Morris mansion, the 36-acre homestead lot, and an additional 104 acres (chiefly east of the Kingsbridge Road, but with 40 acres extending to the Hudson River). They made immediate upgrades to the homestead lot to ensure that it would be both beautiful and productive. Merino sheep were all the rage, and Stephen, who had grown up in a sheep-raising region of southwest France, opted in. Always the careful businessman despite his wealth, he selected a flock that contained a mix of one-half, three-quarters, seven-eighths, and full-blood Merinos – a frugal and practical choice.

More unusually, Stephen planted a small vineyard of French grapes that were in full production by 1814. This seems to have been one of the most successful early American attempts to raise grapes suitable for winemaking. As late as 1829 Stephen was inquiring about having two thousand shoots from a famous Fontainebleau vine sent from France. His knowledge of how to cultivate young grape plants, which he taught to Eliza, would have contributed to the success of the venture. In May 1827, with Stephen in Paris, Eliza wrote to him that they had six hundred vines in flower, which she had cleaned and tended. Mushrooms, moss, lichen, and the insects colonizing them had to be removed from vine stalks after the last frost.

For Eliza, who knew firsthand the transient existence of the impoverished poor, the estate was a visible symbol of the distance she had traveled and the security she had attained. She was deeply proud of the vineyard and also of the large garden southeast of the house, bordering on the Kingsbridge Road. "You will not be able to imagine how beautiful it is," she told Stephen. "The avenue and area around the house is so well kept that it seems a true paradise." Boxwood hedges bordered the garden and divided its interior into geometrical areas. These beds contained both edible and decorative plants, including vegetables, flowering shrubs, strawberries, raspberries, and currents. When Eliza sued an unsatisfactory tenant who was renting the property years later, one of her pointed complaints was of his failure to keep the shrubbery trimmed. That said, maintaining the fences was even more important. Flocks of sheep and cattle, driven south on the Kingsbridge Road to supply the New York markets, were

Eliza Jumel, pictured in a lithograph she commissioned in Paris in 1852 (detail). Courtesy Morris-Jumel Mansion.

[2]Constance Greiff, *The Morris-Jumel Mansion: A Documentary History* (Rocky Hill, NJ: Heritage Studies, Inc., 1995), 1:102.

quick to trample unprotected gardens and grain.

An array of practical outbuildings stood on the homestead lot in the Jumel era. For food preservation, there was a smokehouse and an icehouse. Stephen, working alongside his laborers, rebuilt the latter with three-and-a-half-foot-thick walls and dug a pool for cleaning the ice. An ash house stored fireplace sweepings that were valued as fertilizer, and an open-sided shed could shelter five hundred sheep. Barn, stables, and a coach house completed the ensemble. The acreage north and west of the homestead lot supplied wheat, hay, pasturage, timber for heating and fence posts, peach and apple orchards, and a cider mill.

The cultivation of the homestead lot became less intensive after Stephen died, although Eliza ensured that the garden was maintained. There is no further mention of the vineyard, which probably succumbed to the fungal diseases or phylloxera that doomed so many early American attempts at growing European wine grapes. Hay, however, was harvested every year as winter fodder for oxen, dairy cows, and the horses that drew Eliza's barouche. In an 1857 contract, she arranged for "all the grass growing in the lawn and meadow in the enclosure in which her Mansion house stands" to "be mowed close to the ground and in the best manner, and the hay to be made and properly cured and put in and well stowed away in the coach house and barn in good season."[3] The project, which included similar work on the rest of her estate, was done in three stages, with the homestead lot finished first. The completion dates – July 9, July 23, and August 18 – apprise us of what constituted New York's haying season in 1857.

The homestead lot fell on hard times after Eliza's death in 1865. The estate was tied up in litigation for two decades in a case that reached the United States Supreme Court twice. Three related families with claims on the estate shared the mansion for much of the period, troubling themselves to maintain only the land immediately surrounding the house. The swath of undeveloped acreage to the north that made part of the estate survived due to uncertainty over its title, even as working farms became rare in Upper Manhattan. Instead, professional men bought up scenic sites with relatively modest acreage and erected elaborate villas surrounded by ornamental gardens. The Hudson River Rail-Road had launched service between New York City and Poughkeepsie in 1849, making it possible to commute to work from Washington Heights to Lower Manhattan. Then in 1879 the Ninth Avenue Elevated reached 155th Street, only four blocks south of the southernmost border of the homestead lot. The mansion could be seen from the train platform.

It was the beginning of the end of Washington Heights as a rural enclave. The Jumel estate was broken up at auctions held in 1882, 1886, and 1888. The house and homestead lot remained in the hands of relatives of Eliza until 1887, but with two rows of Carpenter Gothic "cottages" lining the former entrance drive. They represented a new form of homestead – single-family houses built on speculation to attract aspiring middle-class families who wanted homes of their own.

Ferdinand and Lillie Earle, owners of the wayward ducks that caused a ruckus on Broadway in 1895, were the last private owners of the mansion and homestead lot. They sold off pieces of the land, so that by the time Ferdinand died in 1903, the plot was down to its current two acres. The city acquired the property, turning the land into a park and the mansion into the historic-house museum that it is today.

The landscaping has changed over time. In 1912 a sunken garden, with a fountain in the center in the Beaux-Arts style, was installed behind the house. Two decades later Works Progress Administration workers surrounded the plantings with a stone wall and added an octagonal toolshed – thoughtfully evoking the shape of two gatehouses that had guarded the mansion's entryway until the Kingsbridge Road (renamed St. Nicholas Avenue in 1901) was widened in the 1870s.

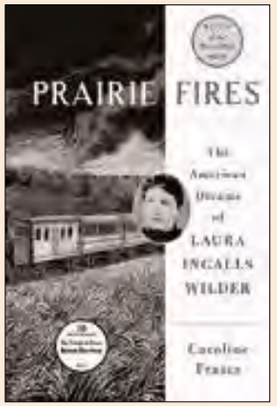
The sunken garden was re-envisioned between 2012 and 2014 as a Colonial-style garden under the direction of James Diaz, the mansion's gardener at the time. Divided into four sectors, each plot contains plants valued in the eighteenth century for a particular set of attributes: pleasing scents, household uses, medicinal properties, or culinary purposes. Boxwood shrubs at the ends of each bed bring back a plant favored by Eliza Jumel. Fruit trees like those that once grew on the homestead lot – including quinces, cherries, apples, and pears – flourish on either side of the walkway leading from house to garden. On the opposite side of the building are clusters of heritage roses – varieties that could have grown in New York City in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They make part of the Heritage Rose District established in Washington Heights in 2009.

The open space is well used by neighbors for dog walking, sunbathing, reading, and picnics. It is a rare sunny weekend that does not see a children's birthday party on the lawn or a marquee set up for a wedding or other special event. A yoga class meets in the park, and sometimes the mansion offers free films on summer evenings. Visitors tour the house and sniff the roses. The homestead lot is now a home for the community. – Margaret A. Oppenheimer

[3]New-York Historical Society, MS 336, Box 3, Folder D, Agreement of June 27, 1857, between Eliza Jumel and Dennis Mullens.

Book Review

Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder
By Caroline Fraser
New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017



The landscapes of some children's books are so vivid that they seem to be part of the reader's lived experience, lingering in memory like a once-familiar home. The great, green room where the little old lady whispers "hush" in Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947) or the island abode of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard and their ducklings in the middle of the pond in the Boston Public Garden in Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941) are two prominent examples. For millions of readers, the pioneer West depicted in the Little House books of Laura Ingalls Wilder (1867–1957) constitutes such a landscape of the heart.

Reliably in print since the 1932 publication of the first book in the series, these volumes lovingly portray her family's experiences in a succession of homes, beginning with the log house built by her father near Pepin, Wisconsin, and continuing with homes in Kansas, Minnesota, and the Dakotas, where Laura Ingalls met and married her husband, Almanzo Wilder.

The books teem with concrete details about daily life – how to cook over a campfire, how to build a sod house, how to survive a snowstorm on the Great Plains. Today guidebooks instruct tourists who want to retrace Laura's footsteps, and children dress up in sunbonnets and pioneer costumes to reenact their favorite scenes. Scholars have collected the songs played by Pa on his fiddle, and fans can find recipes in books and on blogs for homemade cornbread and butter made from cream shaken in a jar. NBC's popular television series (1974–83) reinforced the notion that Laura Ingalls Wilder gave future generations a direct glimpse into American history and a vicarious experience of the Old West. Despite the fact

that the author was sixty-five years old when the books were first published and had lived for thirty-four years far from the Great Plains in rural Missouri, the books continue to be treated by many as authentic reports on the pioneer experience.

What is the source of the books' emotional power? The first in the series, *Little House in the Big Woods*, begins, "Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs." The language is simple and direct, like a fairy tale, and although the book (unlike Laura Ingalls Wilder's notes) is in the third person, the viewpoint is definitely that of a child. "Laura knew that wolves would eat little girls. But she was safe inside the solid log walls. Her father's gun hung over the door and good old Jack, the brindle bulldog, lay on guard before it." Themes of safety and danger run through the book, as do lovingly concrete descriptions of small pleasures: pancakes made in the shape of little men, peppermint sticks in Christmas stockings, and honey from a hollow tree. Above all there are Pa's stories and the songs he plays on his fiddle. And the book, which began with the coming of winter, ends with the winter of the next year. As Pa plays "The Days of Auld Lang Syne," Laura thinks, "She was glad that the cosy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now. They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago."

No wonder many children feel as if the memories are their own. The books invite them to identify with the family's love and strength, and to find in it a source of security. Though the series would take readers through a litany of disasters that befell the Ingalls, the author never wavered in her idealization of the parents and the homes they created for their children. Yet these books are not so much the product of the 1870s and 1880s – the years in which they are set – as they are of the Great Depression. By then, the plow that broke the plains had also unleashed the Dust Bowl, and the westward trek of the nineteenth-century pioneers was being bitterly echoed in the desperate migration of homeless families from the Ozarks to the West in the hope of work. When *Little House in the Big Woods* was first conceived, the writer's own family was once again in peril.

After Laura Ingalls Wilder and her husband witnessed their savings evaporate in the stock-market crash, they stood in danger of losing the farm they had precariously maintained for almost four decades. And so to earn some money, the Ozark housewife – whose only previous literary work consisted of poems, articles, and columns in the *Missouri Ruralist* and similar publications – called on her daughter to help her write a memoir of her childhood. As it happened, Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968) was a seasoned writer. After escaping her family's rural poverty as a teenager, she had lived in San Francisco and New York, traveled in Europe, and established herself as a well-known biographer and journalist in the 1920s. During the Depression, however, she returned to Missouri. In need of income herself, Lane offered her mother literary advice, typed versions of Wilder's handwritten notes, and used her own New York connections to find a format and publishing home for the stories.

This unacknowledged collaboration, the extent of which is still debated, produced a set of books that represent the American past within a politics of nostalgia and offer a fierce defense of rugged individualism. While these are indeed hauntingly vivid accounts of a child's experience, written for children, the sensibility behind them owes a great deal to the libertarian beliefs of Rose Wilder Lane and the economic insecurity that drove mother and daughter to recast the painful struggles of the frontier as reassuring stories of a loving family.

We can now think afresh about these beloved children's classics, thanks to a remarkable book that is the 2018 recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for biography, Caroline Fraser's *Prairie Fires: The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder*. The book sets Wilder's experiences in a rich historical context, challenging any easy romanticization of pioneer life. Throughout her ninety years, Fraser reminds us, Wilder endured hardship and deprivation, even though she would later write cheerfully of these experiences. "Not by accident are her books about 'little' houses," Fraser observes. "They are also about making the best of little food and fewer choices." The subject of the biography, as opposed to the "self" of the children's books, was a person who had experienced failure and disappointment, hunger and fear.

Fraser begins her account by reminding readers that the Western frontier was settled by conquest, the building of farms and homesteads made possible only by deadly conflict with Native Americans. Massacres of Native people and uprisings against white settlers haunted the lands where Wilder and her family lived; the cheerful domesticity of the little houses belied the violence that had made their very presence possible. Furthermore, the landscape itself had been transformed; not only by the building of railroads and towns but also by the plowing of the prairie itself.

Ironically, the ill-informed rush to turn the Great Plains into farms on an Eastern model was doomed to failure: it destroyed prairie ecosystems and replaced them with a monoculture ill-suited to the climate. The aridity of the land west of the hundredth meridian meant that many thousands of farmers were trapped by the same disasters that bedeviled Laura's father, Charles Ingalls: drought, prairie fire, locusts, tornadoes, and a financial system that kept them mired in debt. El Niño weather patterns in the 1870s and 1890s, combined with the devastating Panic of 1893, led to hardship, displacement, and loss of land for the Ingalls family and for Laura and her husband, Almanzo Wilder. Ultimately the Wilders gave up on the Dakotas to settle in Mansfield, Missouri. But even Rocky Ridge, the farm they established there, barely provided for their needs.

Fraser draws on the latest scholarship in environmental and Western history and also relates the story of the Ingalls family to other accounts of Midwestern farm struggles: the reformist fiction and memoirs of neighbor Hamlin Garland and the fantasies of L. Frank Baum, who transposed the Dakota landscape to Kansas to create the barren and tornado-haunted setting of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). Fraser's book is a masterly account of the larger problem of Western settlement even as it focuses intimately on the life of a figure who most readers may think they know well already.

But of course, the question to which the book continually turns is exactly

that: what do we really know about Laura Ingalls Wilder and other women who experienced the life of the white frontier? Aside from Wilder's own fictional account, what else can we find out? Fraser diligently mines town records, deeds, and court proceedings, as does anyone who studies the history of poor people, but if the Little House books did not exist, the story of the Ingalls and Wilder families would be as sketchy as that of Fraser's own pioneer ancestors. How, she asks, can one be truthful to the grittiness of the lived experience while still acknowledging the power of its fictional representation?

Prairie Fires is a biography, so it carefully reconstructs as much as can be known of Wilder's family's travails without glossing over the missteps and miscalculations of Laura's father, Charles Ingalls. The Little House books elide the family's history in several respects, omitting the death of the only boy born to the Ingalls family, simply reporting after the fact her sister Mary's loss of eyesight, and changing the chronology of some of the family's movements, as well as accepting unthinkingly the displacement of the Native American inhabitants of the prairie and the casual racism of those who supplanted them. Fraser's account allows readers to assess the downward spiral of Charles Ingalls' career more fully, from homesteader to hotel manager to railroad worker to carpenter.

Before she married Almanzo Wilder at the age of eighteen, Laura had helped her struggling family in the towns where they then lived by waiting tables, cleaning, washing dishes, babysitting, and teaching school. The Little House books end happily as Laura and Almanzo move into a house of their own, but as Fraser points out, they would soon lose that house, and their move to Missouri entailed a painful separation from family members in the hopes of an economic security that eluded them. Fraser brings us a fully human Laura Ingalls Wilder, seen as an adult, with her struggles and conflicts on display. "If we listen to her, we can hear what she was telling us. Life in frontier times was a perpetual hard winter. There was joy – riding ponies, singing hymns, eating Christmas candy – but it was fleeting. There was heroism, but it was the heroism of daily perseverance, the unprized tenacity of unending labor."

Laura Ingalls Wilder left South Dakota in 1894, returning only to visit her father on his deathbed in 1902 and then not again until 1932, after her mother and her sister Mary had died. By that time she had a contract for the first of the books in which she reconstituted her lost homes as places of loving safety in the midst of danger. Fraser's excellent biography shows how longing and nostalgia colored these narratives, so long taken as factual; in one sense, the Little House series can be seen as an imaginative reclamation of one's family and past, when all has been lost. More troubling, however, is that the impossibility of self-sufficiency for so many frontier families – not to mention the keen financial want that prompted the writing of these books in the first place – has been so cunningly camouflaged. Fraser invites us to ask the question, what are the costs of romanticizing the past? Can we afford to imagine ourselves snug in our little houses, protected against Indians by Pa's shotgun and our faithful bulldog? Don't we need to look critically at our history, even – especially – at the landscapes of the heart? – Joy Kasson

Contributors

John Elder, Ph.D. taught English and environmental studies at Middlebury College for thirty-seven years. He is the co-editor with Robert Finch of *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990; 2nd ed., 2002). In a series of books beginning with *Reading the Mountains of Home* (1998) he has combined close readings of poetry and descriptions of the Vermont landscape with memoir. John and his wife Rita live in the Green Mountain village of Bristol and operate a sugarbush in the hills of nearby Starksboro with the families of their two sons.

Joy S. Kasson, professor emerita of American Studies and English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, is the author of several books on American history, including *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (1990) and *Artistic Voyagers: Europe and the American Imagination in the Works of Irving, Allston, Cole, Cooper, and Hawthorne* (1982).

Mary Morris is the author of fifteen books, including *The Jazz Palace* (2015) and *Gateway to the Moon* (2018). She has also published three collections of short stories and four travel memoirs, among them the travel classic *Nothing to Declare: Memoirs of a Woman Traveling Alone* (1988). Her numerous short stories, articles, and travel essays have appeared in such places as the *Atlantic*, *Narrative*, the *Paris Review*, and the *New York Times*. Morris is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize in Literature, and the 2016 Anisfield-Wolf Award for fiction.

Laurie Olin, FASLA, is professor emeritus of landscape architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and founding partner of OLIN, a landscape architectural firm. He was the designer for the transformations of Bryant Park and Columbus Circle in New York City, the grounds of the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, and the landscape of the J. Paul Getty Center in Los Angeles. In 2011 he received the American Society of Landscape Architects Medal for Lifetime Achievement.

Margaret A. Oppenheimer holds a Ph.D. in art history from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. She is the author of *The Remarkable Rise of Eliza Jumel: A Story of Marriage and Money in the Early Republic* (2015) and *The French Portrait: Revolution to Restoration* (2005), as well as a consumer-health book. Her articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Apollo*, the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and the *Metropolitan Museum Journal*.

FOUNDATION *for* LANDSCAPE STUDIES

7 West 81st Street
New York, NY 10024

[site LINES]

Volume XIV, Number 1
Fall 2018

For more information about the Foundation for Landscape Studies,
visit www.foundationforlandscapestudies.org,
or contact info@foundationforlandscapestudies.org