

# A Sentimental Journey

## Small Town America

By Richard Lingeman

Putnam.

547 pp. \$15.95.

Reviewed by

Richard J. Margolis

WE HAVE before us a wonderful failure of a book, a beautifully crafted history of rural America that should win a Pulitzer for what it includes as well as the rural equivalent of a Bronx cheer for what it omits. The omissions loom particularly large to anyone seeking to understand rural America's history in a context that is neither entirely white nor exclusively middle class. For the places Richard Lingeman so lovingly limns are essentially the same unchanging elm-shaded villages memorialized by Thornton Wilder in *Our Town* and Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio*, two of the many writers he copiously quotes.

There is no room in this otherwise ample work for, say, Wattensburg, Colorado, a Chicano village 50 miles north of Denver where the citizens have spent half a century unsuccessfully lobbying the county for paved streets; nor for Eatonville, Florida, the all-black "folk hamlet" that inspired Zora Neale Hurston's brilliant ethnography, *Mules and Men*. Such ethnic tributaries, with their separate but unequal currents, flow outside Lingeman's mainstream mystique. What he lavishes attention on instead is the Midwest village, that romantic repository of so many faded dreams.

In fairness, Lingeman does include a chapter on "Caste and Class in the American Town," but it draws largely on the stale sociology of community studies (*Middletown* and the like), with hardly a nod toward political history. The cooperative movement, a radical rural invention, is barely mentioned; ditto the important and heartbreaking

farm labor struggles in the South and Far West. Given equally short shrift are the New Deal's rural innovations, courtesy of the Farm Security Administration: the attempts at land redistribution, the recognition of sharecroppers as entitled citizens, and the rudimentary "health maintenance organizations" that took root in more than 3,000 rural communities.

Still, the virtues of this book are conspicuous, even gaudy. For what Lingeman has fashioned out of the dust and detritus of towns past is a remarkable interior chronology. He gives us some dates and some data, but mostly he gives us *Zeitgeist*, a record of what it must have felt like to live in those towns, both the early frontier settlements and the later, more settled communities.

So, among other things we learn that in 1827 the trustees of Greenville, Ohio, appointed three school directors, "no two of whom by reasons of feuds and ill-feeling would speak to each other"; that some of the rural roads back then were so bad that certain luckless horses were rumored to have drowned in the rain-filled "pot-holes"; and that the "false-front" store commonly found in pioneer Western towns, with its fake second story, "was a Potemkin-village device designed to present the illusion of an eastern main street with its rows of two- and three-story blocks."

Much of this is interesting and some of it is not. Lingeman gives the impression of telling *everything*—why the Puritans clustered around town squares, how sod huts were built in Nebraska, what William Allen White said about his beloved Emporia—but after a time we begin to fear he will explain nothing. What is he up to anyway? Most writers give their game away in introductions replete with theme music; but Lingeman plunges right in without preliminaries, instantly introducing us to "The [Colonial] New England town . . . stored like a faded postcard in the attic of American memory."

Lingeman finds a great deal in our attic to rummage through, but for all his discoveries the effort finally seems

an exercise in nostalgia—millions of fascinating faded postcards piled to the rafters. Here he is, for example, waxing nostalgic about the frontier even before it was tamed:

"Gone too was the wildlife that once had roamed the land, the bears, the wolves, deer, elk and wild turkeys and the rattlesnakes too, probably exterminated by the hundreds in mass hunts. . . . No longer did dark, rumbling clouds of passenger pigeons darken the sky for hours at a time. There were other changes too, marked now only by some grizzled elder as he rambled on about how once the river had run high and fast, how the nights had been cool in summer because the great 'butts,' or trees, that blocked out the sun prevented the ground from soaking up heat. . . . But probably the bustling townspeople in their factory-made clothes were too busy to listen to his maunderings."

One guesses this talented writer is searching for another kind of Eden—not the aboriginal paradise of a sky darkened by pigeons but the bright garden of his own childhood. For Lingeman, like so many Americans, is a displaced villager doomed to wander in the urban wilderness. As a youth he forsook the Babbittry of Main Street (in his case, Crawfordsville, Indiana) for the Babel of Manhattan, and more than anything else, this book seems to reflect the pain of his voluntary exile, an anguish rooted in loss of community and heightened by a knowledge that "you can't go home again."

A good deal of his intellectual energy, then, is directed backwards, toward recollection and recovery and away from discovery or reform. In a moving but discouraging peroration, Lingeman spells it out, alluding to "The town in our hearts. . . : good, generous, kind, helpful in trouble, cradle to grave; materialistic, insular, suspicious, set in its ways, canny, backbiting, smothering. . . ."

Well, now that we have worked through our ambivalence, perhaps we can leave the attic and get back to the ground floor, where the problems persist.