Suburban Sprawl Reflections

July 21, 2005

The term "suburban sprawl" has become ubiquitous in our twenty-first century American lexicon. We hear of its effects on pollution, traffic congestion, wildlife, and a myriad of other issues. However, I don't believe that I fully realized how it robs people of their soul, identity, and uniqueness until now, when suburban sprawl is overtaking my childhood haunts.

I grew up on a farm near Indianapolis, Indiana, outside of the town of Zionsville, in the 1970s. There were mostly corn and soybean fields as far as the eye could see, punctuated by rows of trees on the horizon. We lived near an interstate highway exit on the way to Chicago, so the seeds of development had already been sown, but at that time they had not yet sprouted. The nearest neighbor was a quarter of a mile away. My father didn't operate the farm, but we had horses and pastures. My grandparents owned and lived on the farm adjoining to the north and my great-uncle had the farm to the east. My family had been farming in this area since the 1830s, when my great-great-great-great-grandfather Charles Harrison Schooler purchased 240 acres of land from the United States government for $1.25 per acre.

Our house was on the corner of two dead-end roads which had been severed when the interstate was built in the early 1960s. This created an isolated environment which had both benefits and detriments. According to the stories told by my grandmother, who grew up in the same house that I did, there was quite a little community there in the early years of the twentieth century. For us it was quiet and my brother and I rode our bikes without fear of traffic, but it also sometimes caused a feeling of remoteness and loneliness, like we were disconnected from what the rest of the world was doing. As I neared adulthood, I was anxious to get away and experience all which that world had to offer. Eventually my parents built a new house on the southern end of my grandparents' farm, and my father's cousin bought the old farmhouse where I grew up.

In the last few years, development has sprung up in the area like weeds used to spring up in the cornfields. Once it starts, it stimulates its own growth. My great-uncle's farm to the south and east developed into a 700-home subdivision. To the north one of the largest commercial real estate companies in the United States is building an entire new town, a planned community. They purchased the north half of my grandparents' farm, including their house, to include in the new town. They also purchased 1700 acres of everybody else's farm.

Recently I was staying with my parents on a visit back to Indiana. One beautiful May evening I decided to go for a walk to get some exercise and see what new developments had transpired. I strolled out the back door and headed a little way down the "Old West Road", as we called it. This was one of the dead-end roads that once had narrowed into a forgotten country lane. When I was a boy, on one side was the woods behind our old house. The other side was my grandfather's south field, where there were

so many large trees growing along the fence that the road had become a shrouded tunnel of leaves and vines. Before the interstate, this had been the main road to Zionsville, and you could still see the faded yellow centerline and a dented road sign warning of a crossroads ahead. But when the interstate was built the road was realigned a quarter-mile to the north, and this ribbon of pavement was relinquished to those who were "up to no good", to bike-riding boys, and to trees and blackberry and raspberry bushes. A car going down the Old West Road was always cause for watchfulness and perhaps a call to the sheriff. The road was known at Zionsville High School as "Lover's Lane", and was occasionally used by the students as a site for wild parties (which invariably provoked my dad to make that call to the sheriff). There was one particularly large sycamore tree that loomed out over the road, marking the end of the safe zone. To go beyond the sycamore tree truly meant that you were now in the danger zone. Beyond it we would find used condoms and once a pair of underwear on the asphalt. There was a wonderful sordidness to it that titillated young sheltered boys like me.

With danger can also come fear. My bedroom faced onto the Old West Road. At night if car headlights traveled the road past my window, a sense of foreboding would pervade my being. I imagined a host of burglars and axe-murderers creeping up from the Old West Road, peering over my window-sill, and slipping into my bedroom to do me harm. Any chance at sleep came only from hiding under the covers. To this day I still have dreams that I am in my childhood bed hearing cars travel down the Old West Road, and I am crawling along the floor so that "they" can't see me through the window.

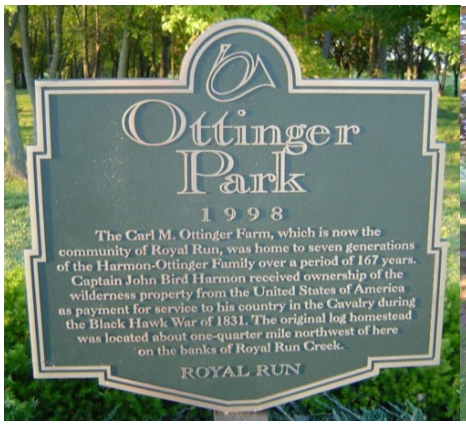
The woods was another world altogether. Separated from our yard by a grassy field that always formed a pond after heavy rain, to me the woods truly represented the dark and primeval forest of mythology, that bastion of the unknown where unpredictable adventures transport one from boyhood to manhood. The front edge was guarded by a row of huge forbidding trees. Once you climbed the remains of the wire fence and crossed over the trees' demarcation, you were swallowed up by the dense undergrowth and enormous old-growth trees. After I discovered The Hobbit in the sixth grade, I always imagined that our woods was Mirkwood, and that a dark and evil necromancer lived in a great tower in the back corner – not too far from the interstate. There was even a giant dead hollow tree with an arched opening at the bottom that was obviously the malevolent tower. A low swampy place in wet weather, the rich smell of an Indiana forest permeated the air, particularly in the autumn. In winter, there were tracks of rabbits and an occasional deer that crisscrossed in the snow. From the secluded depths of the woods, after school my friends and I could spy on the afternoon trysts that a businessman took with his secretary parked on the Old West Road.

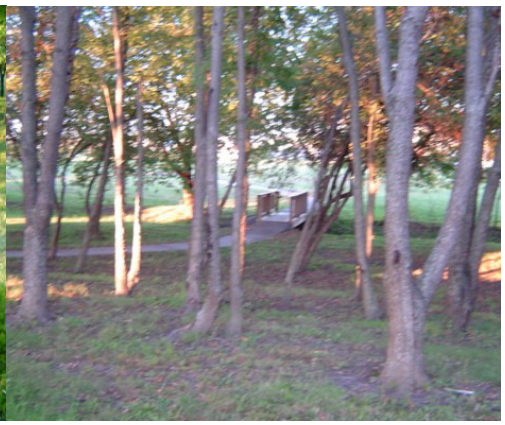
On this night in 2005 the location was unrecognizable. The builders of the housing subdivision completely razed the woods and filled in the low areas, leaving not a single one of the ancient trees. A residential street now wound from the Old West Road through the site of the woods, the field, and our old horse pasture. It still caught my attention to see a car's headlights traveling down that road, taking me a moment to realize that instead of looking for trouble, these were just people heading home from work. With not a single landmark left, I could not even determine where the lane separating the horse

pasture and the woods from the south field had been. The entire area was covered by

cheap, identical, ticky-tacky houses, suburban cul-de-sacs, and barren patches of grass with sprinklers. It looked like sod had been laid across the fields and rows of houses instead of corn had grown up between. While attempts were made to dress up the house fronts with a bit of brick, the other three sides of each house were covered with vinyl siding, every house sheathed in white, light gray, or beige. Often an entire wall was devoid of windows. It was a sea of colorless boxes, mimicing housing developments across the country, devoid of any individual expression. As dusk descended, I could see in through the windows. Undoubtedly in order to easily match any resident's home furnishings, the interior walls, carpets, and tile were all shades of white and beige, as sterile as an insane asylum. In a feeble attempt to add a sense of culture, the streets had English names such as Sussex Drive, Bradshire Court, and Abby Lane, adding an almost comic relief to the inanity. My primeval forest had been replaced by tidy concrete curbs and reproduction street lights.

Even though there was a beautiful twilight and the air was just perfect – a rarity in Indiana – no one was about. The streets and sidewalks were deserted. No one was out for a walk, or even driving anywhere. Perhaps that was because there was no place to go. There were no cultural events in which to participate or to attend, nor was there any nature left to enjoy during a walk. There was nothing here to nurture the soul or foster a sense of place; these houses were just spaces to watch television and sleep between work shifts and soccer games. I could see the people in every living room, mesmerized by the television casting its constant visual babble. I did finally pass one woman out walking in a jogging suit. As I smiled and said "Good evening", she passed me by as if I were completely invisible. She didn't even look scared or perturbed; there was no acknowledgement whatsoever. Perhaps I didn't even exist to her, or she didn't want me to exist in this, her "community". I finally saw one car approach and turn into a driveway as the automatic garage door raised. The car was a late-model Jaguar, which seemed incongruous with these low-end houses. Perhaps this person had to work late to pay for his status-symbol car.





In the midst of the housing subdivision is a "park", a miniscule patch of small trees left along the little ditch and named for my great-uncle's family who owned the farm. An historical marker explains the significance so that people are not left to wonder if the developers had forgotten to clear this briar patch. There is a lone unused picnic table and a wooden footbridge over the tepid, stagnant water in the ditch. The picnic table is likely

unused because its view is of the back yards and vinyl-sided houses on the other side. The footbridge appears to have been built primarily to facilitate access to the clubhouse, tennis courts, and swimming pool for those who live on the other side of the ditch. Nearby is the "lake", a common feature found in new Indiana developments. Since Indiana farmland was, since the time of my ancestors, cleared from a swampy forest, the new fields of concrete had to come up with a way to drain the water that used to run through the clay drainage tiles under the fields of corn and beans. The universal solution has been to dig a retention pond with a pipe sticking out of the middle, spewing water. This artificial aeration is to prevent the pond from turning into a fetid green bog. Thus each development can boast a "lake" with a "fountain". As I walked by this lake, I could hear a single tree-frog chirping his night song. When I was a child, the air was filled with a cacophony of such sounds. Perhaps this last tree-frog was feeling a bit lonely and scared, and I was beginning to identify with him. The words "you can never go back" hit me in the center of my chest. I can never go back "there" because "there" has been utterly eradicated, replaced by a great nothingness that leaves a hole in one's psyche. I don't mean to try to idealize my childhood, but there was a strong sense of not appreciating what one has until it is gone. I was reminded of the ending of The Lord of the Rings, when the hobbits return to The Shire to find that its idyllic, pastoral harmony has been overrun by industrialism, overbuilding, and a totalitarian government.

As I wended my way back to my parents' house, I passed the old family farmhouse where I grew up. My dad's cousin still lives there and has made modest improvements to

the house. However, facing one of the main roads is the old wooden corncrib, its gray wood crumbling in decay. We used to play in its old grain loft. As I approached the corncrib from the side, I could still see the two patched shingles on the roof where we boys had punched holes through to create skylights for our playroom. Since the lower floors were falling through then, I was amazed that it still stands now. The old barn is without a doubt considered a tremendous eyesore by every new denizen of the subdivision, a blemish on their fair community. But as I walked past its brooding dark shadow on this night, it seemed to me to be thumbing its nose at the trimmed yards and carefully edged lives that surrounded it, stubbornly clinging to its heritage as the lone reminder of the farming community that once defined this part of the country, refusing to collapse into oblivion like every other old landmark.

No one here bears the memory of past dangers, both real and imagined. Suburban populations do create a certain safety, however ephemeral and illusionary it may be. Who here has ever heard that when these fields were dotted only with lonely farmhouses, a man was run down and then shot on the Old West Road by Chicago dealers after an Indianapolis inner-city drug deal went bad, or that an escaped convict crashed on the interstate and was running across the field toward our house, spawning a siege of police cars? These were frightening events, but they also added excitement and adventure to our lives. Now this place is… safe – and devoid of any adventure.

The next day I stopped by my grandparents' house, which now belonged to the real estate development company. The yard was overgrown and the house had been gutted of its windows and doors, leaving a brick shell ready to fall to the wrecking ball. The front screen door hung wildly from one hinge. The barn was burned last spring as practice for the Zionsville Fire Department, leaving only the old metal silo. All of the other farm buildings had been long gone for several years. Just over the tops of the weeds I could

see the top of the little doghouse that my grandfather had built for the numerous collies that had lived on the farm; how odd that it had not yet been removed with the other debris. The cherry trees in front of the house were laden with their red fruit, which this year would be enjoyed for the last time by the birds. A "No Trespassing" sign declared its authority, nailed to the old maple tree by the entrance to the driveway. I defied its authority to take the last photographs of my father's birthplace. The old privy behind the house still stood, engulfed by the apple tree that had been left to grow wild. This will become the site of professional medical buildings and townhouses.

I was reminded of an old abandoned house that stood near Zionsville in my childhood that for some reason we always seemed to pass on Christmas Eve as we scurried about on our last minute holiday errands. Undoubtedly we passed it many other times throughout the year, but perhaps it seemed more forlorn to me on Christmas Eve. Each year I would wonder who had lived there and what kind of festivities took place there on past Christmas Eves many years ago. I imagined a mother preparing the Christmas feast, waiting for the extended family members to arrive and add to the merriment. I could almost see the warm glow of the lights in the window. It seemed sad to me that the house was now alone on Christmas Eve, and that its rooms would be dark and cold on that night while we would gather, enjoy our holiday meal, and open our presents. Now the house where I had spent my Christmas Eves, as well as countless Easters, Thanksgivings, birthdays, and just everyday visits to my grandparents sat in the same abandonment. When the new citizens of the planned community drive through this neighborhood, what will they know of the history that occurred on this very spot where they are now having their teeth cleaned? Hints will remain for those that choose to see them; it has been announced that a road along the townhouses will be named for my family, which will intersect a street named for my grandmother's father. But people will be bent on their daily errands and will pay no heed to the name on the street signs, which will undoubtedly be lost in the chaos of signs accompanying such development. They won't know that these were fields that my grandfather traversed with a horse and plow, and then his new 1950 Case tractor, or that right here was where young chicks were hatched every spring in the brooder house. Every day we all go about our business, knowing nothing of what went before on these spots, because every corner of the earth retains a memory of those who came before. Shopping malls and suburban tracts never spring out of nothingness; there was something there before, mowed down and replaced wholesale by the new model. The web site for this new town says it will be "a

community… that will respect the environment and the traditions of the people who have come before." While this community appears that it will provide more greenspace than the typical development, it is still a clear-cutting of the land to remold it. It takes more than naming the town for a Civil War soldier and designating the streets after the farmers who tilled this soil to respect the traditions of those who came before. I have no doubt that my grandparents would have been appalled and furious at this transformation.

Since all of the surrounding farms were purchased the previous spring for development in the summer and fall, all of the fields were now lying fallow for the first time in a century and a half. Everywhere that we drove I saw meadows waving in the wind with goldenrod, creating golden rippling seas. It was quite beautiful, and it struck me that this was the calm before the storm. The land was getting a respite before being bulldozed and covered in concrete and asphalt. If left alone for long enough, land in this area always returns to the forest, but no such opportunity would be afforded here. The site of my grandparents' farm will briefly return to the flat fields that were there before the house, barn, and fences were built, shortly to be replaced by suburbia.

The great irony is that my family has profitted in financial terms. This is, of course, the trap. How can anyone say no to financial security, even if it is in exchange for their past? Moreover, who can stand in the way of the inevitable plundering of the earth? Suppose we had held out and refused to sell? The development would have continued with or without our approval, and the farm would have been surrounded by the same suburbia, rendering it obsolete. Perhaps in the grand scheme of things that is the lesson. The world is always changing. This part of the country was once tended by Native American populations, and my ancestors radically and violently changed the face of their world. The neighborhoods where I have resided in other cities across the United States, each developed in the 1910s, were rolling meadows and scrub-covered mesas before they were created as suburbs. Sinclair Lewis's novels from the 1920s echo the same sentiments that I have felt – the sameness of new houses and the emptiness of modern life, referring to these exact places. Maybe today's suburbia can one day grow into a richer tapestry. The history of the world is cyclical, and this is simply the next cycle. So all we can do is keep the memory and move on into the future. Hopefully we can find ways to keep that future in accord with the earth instead of destroying it.