THE GEOGRAPHY OF A CHILDHOOD

By Sam Brown

When I was twelve years old, I was sent to a private school I detested, where my most detested course was Geography. In that course, I learned to trace atlas maps of various unknown corners of the world (in order, I suppose, to make them less unknown to lunkheads like me). We committed to memory place names and geographical features of exotic locales, discovering as we did so that the world was an extraordinarily dull place, void of motion, characterized by unpronounceable names, and flatter even than the pre-Columbians had hypothesized.

At the school day's end, I left the insipid traced abstractions of the "real" world and returned home to about a hundred acres of the most fascinating and variegated landscape it has ever been my pleasure to know. The Geography of my school classroom was decisively trumped by the geography of my childhood.

The house I grew up in was on Hillside Road in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts. The street's name was apt; Hillside Road arose steeply from the valley of Washington Street, crested within fifty yards, and descended gradually thereafter into a dell, crossing a brook there from which it rose again to its terminus just short of a commuter rail station. From beginning to end, it ran about 450 yards. On either side rose abrupt slopes, some wooded, some in lawns. Over the ridge to the north, a short dirt road spilled down into the glen where the nearby Charles River meandered into the town of Newton, while along the ridge to the south, a broad grassy path covered an underground aqueduct which led to the city of Boston. Above the junction of aqueduct and brook in the Hillside dell, a skiing and sledding slope had been cleared; from the base of this slope, the brook then flowed along another dirt road, emptying at last into a snail- and frog-harboring pond connected to a private garden and nursery school (which both of my brothers attended). The *pièce de résistance*, as far as we children were concerned, was the small playing field across Hillside Road from the ski slope. In honor of its owner, it was called "Yotz's Field," and it provided so many hours of touch football, sandlot softball, and general roughhousing that it should properly have been called a field of dreams. Today, most fortunately, it is protected from development by a deeded covenant.

We children of the 1950's roamed this neighborhood pretty much as we wished. As an adult, I have often asserted that in any housing development, the adults own the real estate but the children own the neighborhood. This I learned on Hillside Road, where we children respected the property of our neighbors but crossed it freely, and utilized common space with proprietary nonchalance. The amount of such common space was generous: it was possible to enter the aqueduct from Washington Street, traverse its length to the contiguous ski slope, descend to the brook and

follow it almost all the way to the Brookgarden pond without ever setting foot in anyone's yard.

Following the aqueduct in the opposite direction, across Washington Street to the east, one immediately entered the grounds of the Annie F. Warren Elementary School, which accounted for about 20% of our children's play space. School, as an institution, was, of course, regarded by us kids with affectionate contempt. The Warren School was nonetheless central to our lives, geographically and recreationally, as well as educationally. It was the anchor of the neighborhood, accessible from and contiguous to our other common space. It was also a kind of temple: built on small but prominent hilltop, it rose higher than any building for nearly half a mile on three of four opposing compass points (the Bird Hill Ridge loomed to the southeast). Rolled out at its feet were a paved parking lot and basketball court, a partially paved playground, and two groomed diamonds used for kickball and softball. (I have never forgotten the home run I hit on the upper diamond during sixth-grade co-ed softball. A dedicated non-athlete, I was unprepared for the attention. I never hit another, before or since.)

When you add the multiple play yards of the Warren School to the common space of the residential neighborhood itself, you have a child's world of enormous reach and lyrical variation of terrain, a virtual haven, nearly free of traffic, strongly naturalistic, and remarkably well-suited to children's recreational penchants in all seasons of the year.

Geography, however, is not merely physical. It is also commercial. Our neighborhood was blessed with store clusters better suited to yesterday's child shopper than the best of today's malls would have been. It was a five-minute walk from my house to Ward's drugstore, a hole-in-the-wall shop featuring glassed cases of the latest in disgusting candy and sweetened wax, a tiny soda fountain (four stools), and a tinier photo-finishing counter (where I proudly ordered 5x7 black-and-white enlargements of snapshots I had taken of my first girlfriend). Of greatest importance was Ward's display of the latest comic books, which we bought profligately. In good weeks, Mr. Ward would have an overflow and would allow us in to the back room of the store to paw through what was not yet out on the racks. In bad weeks, Mrs. Ward (this was a classic Mom-and-Pop operation) would grouse at us if we didn't buy what we handled. Somewhere in the chaos, Mr. Ward filled an occasional prescription.

Next to Ward's, in the late 1940's, was a small grocery store, now long gone, a sort of pre-industrial 7-11. Another five-minute walk would take us to the small village of Newton Lower Falls, situated where the Charles River crossed under Washington Street in a series of pools and falls, both natural and man-made. Here there was a larger drugstore (Rexall), another grocery store, a barber, a cobbler, two lumber yards, a dry cleaner, and a hardware store. Kidston's Hardware repaired our bicycles. Leo, the barber, gave discounts for youngsters. There was, for a while, a Dairy Freeze. Some of the Warren School kids

rode their bikes to Wellesley Hills Square (1½ miles away) to shop, but most frequented "Lower Falls." After all, what more could a kid want?

Sadly, maturity diminishes the appeal of the geography of childhood. The progression from bicycle to automobile, and then to bus, train, and airplane, shrinks the mental map of childhood space until it seems almost like another page from an atlas. Part of the reason "you can't go home again" is surely because the adult has lost the palpable spatial sense of the child. It is no longer liberating – or possible – to race up a forested slope and along a grassy aqueduct path, anticipating with relish the impending braking run down the ski slope. One seeks recreation in vast, boat-infested bodies of water, not in the few square yards of a snail- and frog-harboring pond. But even though it is diminished, the geography of childhood – for those who can trace its maps in their minds – still performs an important function for the adults we have become: it shows us what our world was like when we began our journey, and thus suggests what we may have forgotten about what is in our baggage.

end