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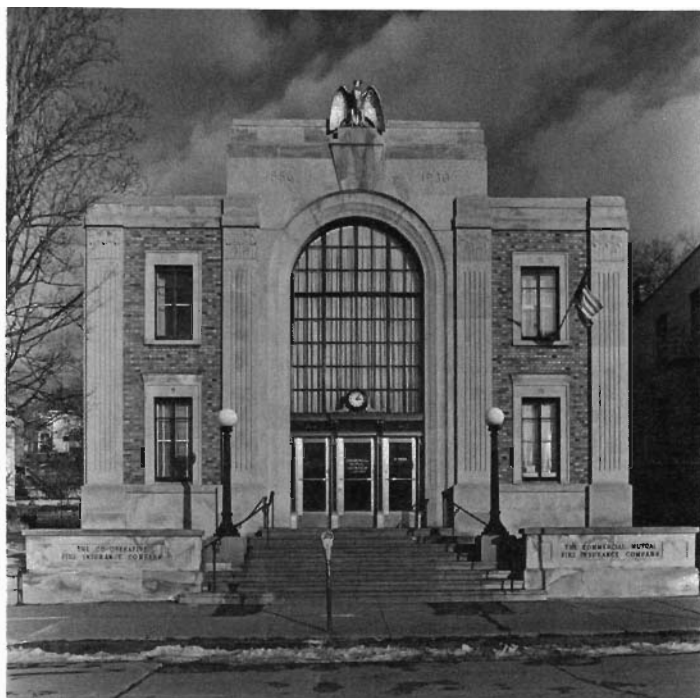
# A Place For Regionalism?

by *David C. Pierce and  
Richard C. Wiles*

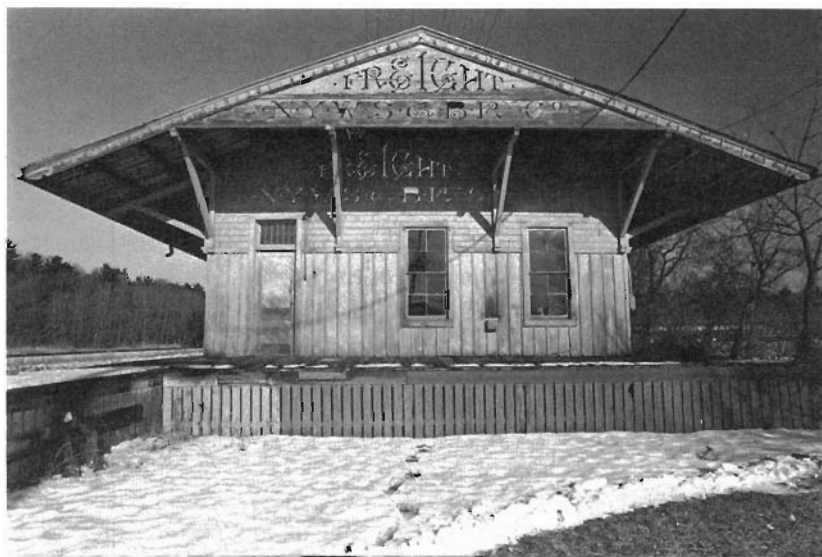
**T**he debate concerning the meaning and usefulness of a “regional approach” has been common in American intellectual life for well over a century. The fields of history, literature, art and political and social relations have, at one time or another, been invaded by such discussions. Pros and cons of the desirability of a national culture, literature or history fill the pages of American historical analysts and literary historians. Much of the discussion stems from an attempt to cope with the levelling tendencies of socio-economic phenomena in the forms of growth of large scale industrialization and communication technologies.<sup>1</sup> These themes rise and decline in cyclical pattern over our national development. In recent years the discussion has taken on new currency with the fear of the possible homogenization of American culture and the consequent blurring of regional differences and characteristics.

Such debates, as current as they may be today, or as common as they have been in the past, are most likely irresolvable. However, the forums they have created and still create are the valuable elements in such discussions. The fact that the topic reoccurs points to the fact that regionalism has appeal and usefulness for the American public.

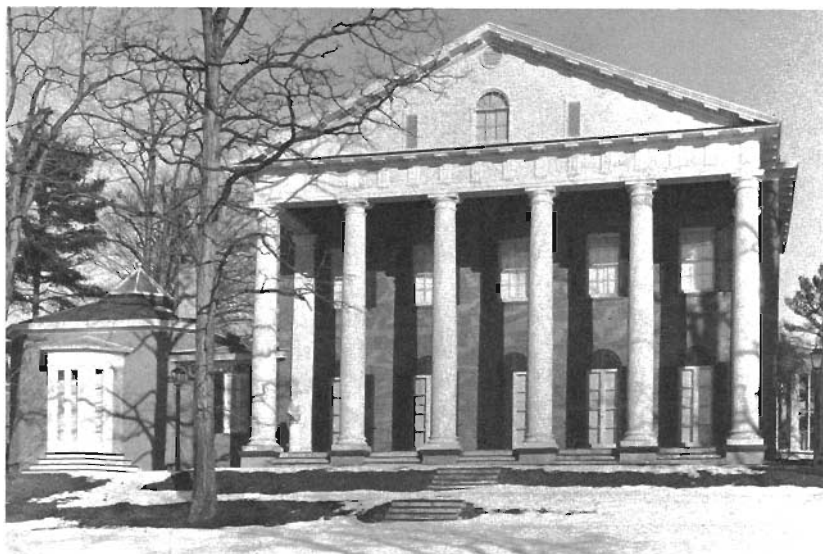
It is our hope that this *Review* will become the vehicle for a continuing discussion of the significance of the concept of “regionalism” and, at the same time, a contribution to the growing understanding of a particular



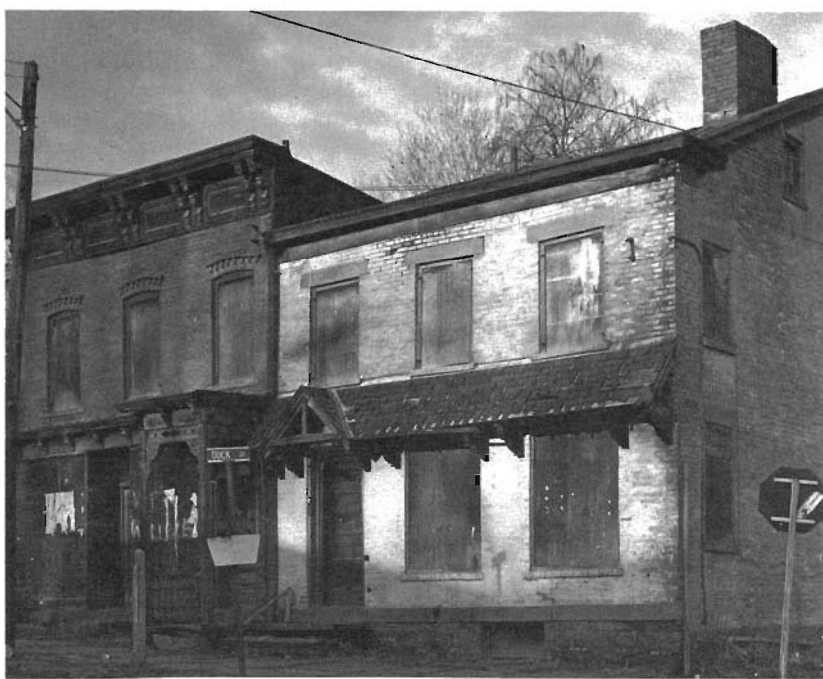
*Main Street, Catskill, N.Y.*



*Abandoned Freight Terminal on Conrail Line, Saugerties, N.Y.*



*Edgewater, Barrytown, N.Y.*



*Saugerties, N.Y.*

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region, the Hudson Valley, in both its intimate detail and in its larger relations.

To begin this task it is worth asking once again: is there a place for regionalism? There is surely much that seems to necessitate a negative reply to this question. The long-term direction of our historical development has clearly been characterized by a shift away from the circumscribed social, political and economic horizons of village, town and province which defined much of the world over most of its history. Take, for example, E.J. Hobsbawm's description of Europe on the eve of the French Revolution. The world of 1789, he reminds us, was "at once much smaller and much larger than ours."<sup>2</sup> It was smaller because population was a fraction of that of the contemporary world and the "area of effective human settlement" was less. But it was also smaller geographically because so little was known even by the best informed about much of that world. Yet if the world of 1789 was more limited in these respects, "the sheer difficulty or uncertainty of communications made it in practice much vaster than it is today."<sup>3</sup> Improvements had come in this regard but "for the greater part of the world the speed of the carter walking beside his horse or mule governed land transport."<sup>4</sup>

The world of 1789 was therefore, for most of its inhabitants, incalculably vast. Most of them, unless snatched away by some awful hazard, such as military recruitment, lived and died in the county, and often the parish, of their birth . . . . The rest of the globe was a matter of government agents and rumour.<sup>5</sup>

Town dwellers stood apart in many respects yet the provincial town was still tied to the economy of the countryside and the burgers of the town, Hobsbawm concludes, "were almost as ignorant of what went on outside their immediate district" as the rural population.<sup>6</sup> This world, predominantly rural and agricultural, dominated by the near at hand and divided into a vast number of village centers distant from one another in time and space has, of course, been subject to two centuries of radical transformation.

Our own world is, in contrast, both larger and smaller than that of 1789: larger, not simply because the number of human inhabitants and places of habitation has vastly multiplied, but because the scope of knowledge regarding the inhabited world has increased so enormously. It is smaller, on the other hand, because, as we are so often reminded, we are now equipped with systems of transportation that move us with unimaginable speed from place to place and with instruments of communication which put us in instant touch with virtually every town and territory not only on this continent but throughout the world. Thoreau's comment upon the telegraph was to ask what Maine and Texas had to say to one another. Obviously, a great deal has been said in this direction and every other. We

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*Olana State Historic Site, Bell  
Tower, Hudson, N.Y.*

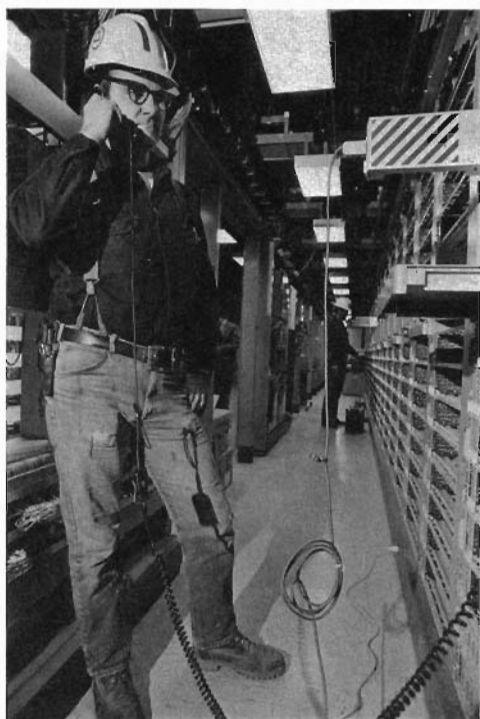


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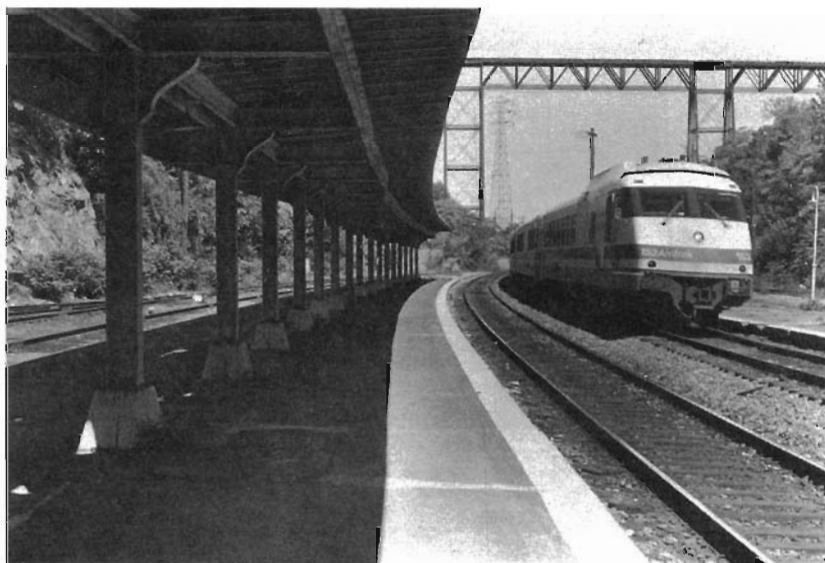


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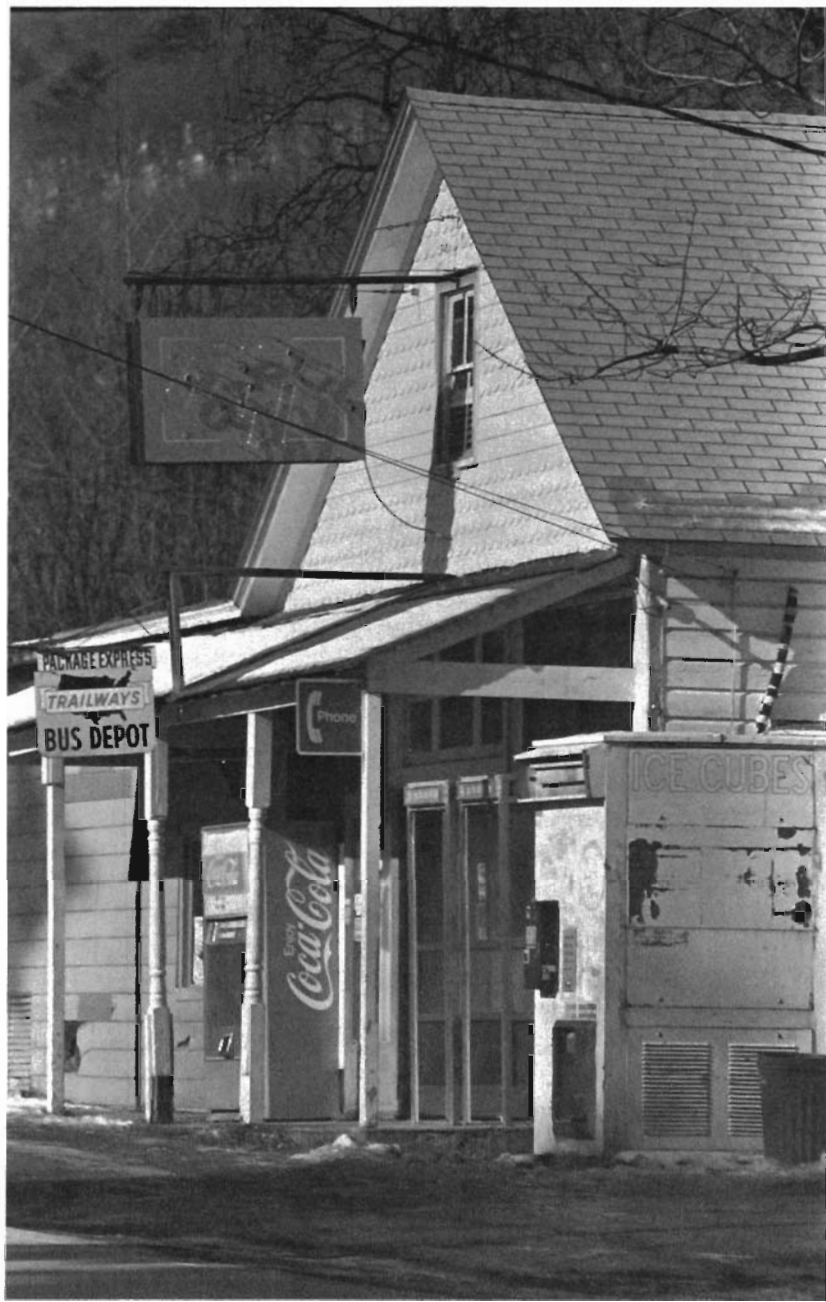
*Red Hook Public Library, Red Hook, N.Y.*



*New York Telephone Switching  
Station for IBM Facility, Pough-  
keepsie, N.Y.*



*Amtrak, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.*



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*Route 23A, Palenville, N.Y.*

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call Bombay more rapidly than we can walk to our neighbor's house. The television screen brings a New York City ballet performance to Topeka, Kansas or the affairs of a tribe in New Guinea to the Hudson Valley and to all it brings the staccato sounds of battle and cumulative images of violence. Not the least outcome of this development is that we may be more familiar with the social conflict of Northern Ireland or the latest political development in Israel than with the issues nearest at hand in our town or county.

**T**hus our world is less circumscribed than that of two centuries ago and less separated, less localized and more thoroughly centralized and integrated. In the political sphere, the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the modern nation-state equipped with an effective bureaucracy capable of replacing the plurality of local and provincial powers with centralized and rationalized programs of political management. The United States moved somewhat more slowly in this direction. As late as the 1830's Tocqueville could note the astonishing absence of the signs of central government encountered in his travels, but the Civil War gave powerful impetus to the expansion of the instruments of centralized decision making and the increasing demand for economic and industrial regulation by the end of the century prepared the way for the well developed state and federal bureaucracies of twentieth century America.

This shift in political power accompanied a corresponding movement in business and industry toward consolidation, a movement that was only beginning to get underway in 1789. The outcome was the dissolution of localized cottage industries, the breakdown of local systems of supply and consumption and the shift of population to industrial centers. Here again, the general movement is from smaller scale to large scale both in terms of enterprise and social organization. Moreover, economic horizons were not only being increasingly nationalized but internationalized as well. At mid-century Marx could declare: "In place of the old local, and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations."<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent events have done nothing to diminish the significance of that claim. Our economy is truly global and the lines of our interdependence are only reinforced from day to day. The nails with which we build are from China or Yugoslavia, our clothing from Hong Kong, our electronic devices have been to Indonesia and back. American commerce spans the world in equal fashion as do Americans themselves. We are a mobile people and have been long on the move as we are reminded by legend and story as well as by our own passage from place to place and the vast spread of our family connections about this continent and the world.



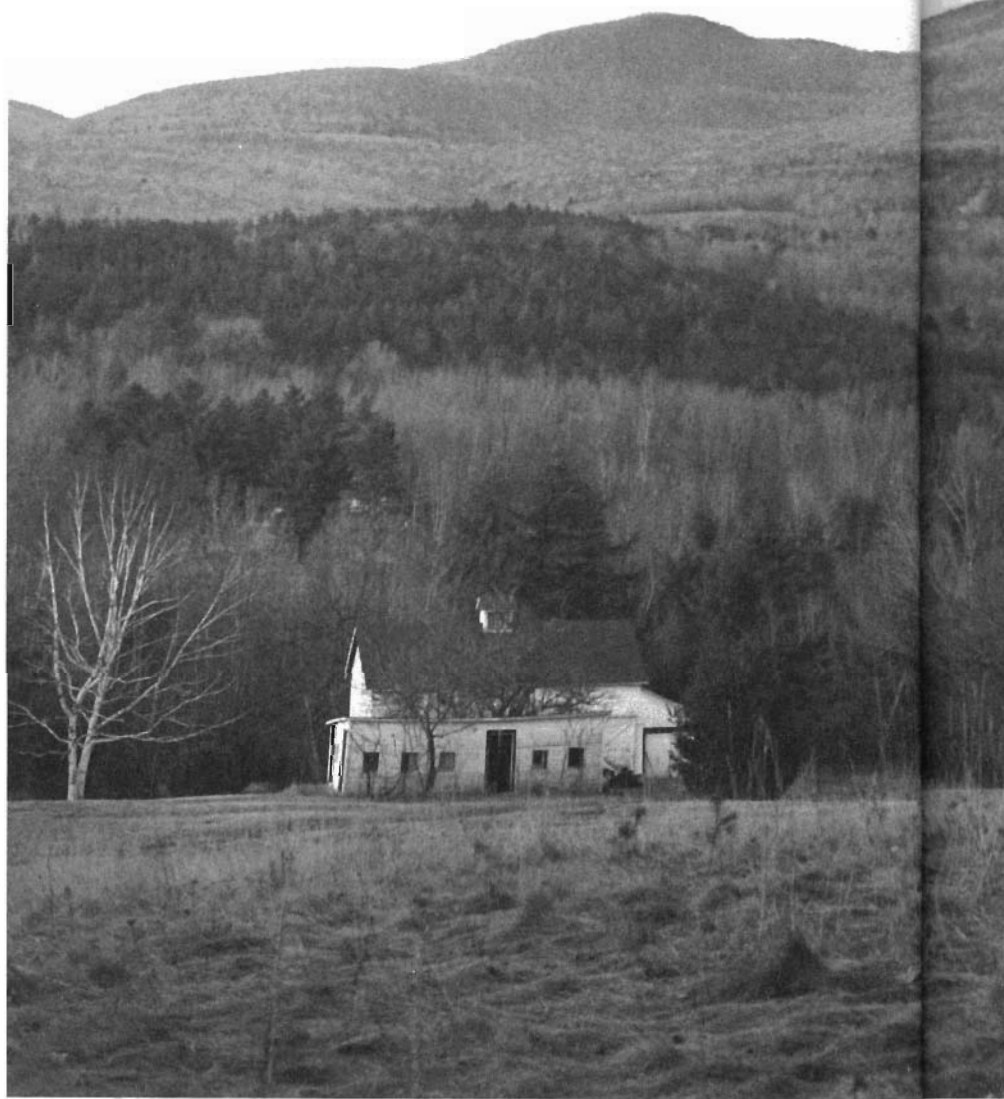
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We are "at home" in many areas. We may know Delhi as well as Detroit.

Our culture has in similar fashion been internationalized. Its ingredients are drawn from Africa and Asia, Latin America and the entire constellation of European peoples from Scandinavia to Spain and Ireland to Russia. Truly, that "Passage to India" which Whitman foretold with its global encirclement of cultural and material bonds has become reality. The spiritual traditions of India, the poetry of Japan are as much a part of our contemporary cultural inheritance as are the leisurely, expansive verses of Whitman himself.

Human society has, of course, rarely been *wholly* circumscribed by place or entirely isolated from outside influence. There were "international markets" in the second millennium B.C. and on the trading vessels and caravans of every epoch since have travelled ideas, stories and beliefs as well as cloth, pottery and spices. But until recently the distances were enormous, the time required formidable and the impact of these commodities and utterances counterbalanced by the weight of tradition and the durability of ties to family and soil. The horizon remained localized but it is no longer. The outcome is the blurring of that which is near at hand as we focus on more distant affairs and the erosion of the older ties to particular places and institutions as we find ourselves increasingly citizens of the nation and of the world. What point then in reopening the question of regionalism?

To begin with the essential: the local is the point of departure for all life. Even the most volatile mobility cannot wholly exempt us from the necessity of being *somewhere*, at some *time* and in some given set of conditions. For most of us, however long our lines of communication and cosmopolitan our knowledge and experience, we are more or less habitually inhabitants of a place. This conviction indeed constitutes a rich and continuing theme of American thought. Eudora Welty once argued with eloquence the importance of "place" for the novelist in a manner which applies as much to everyday life as it does to fiction. Such self-identity as we experience and much more of our experience is attained by participation in the near at hand. "Place," she said, "is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting . . . gathering-spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced . . ."<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, in his own extended reflections on the shape and dynamic of human experience insisted, in a similar way, upon the important depth and breadth of the immediate. Typically, when Dewey turned his attention to the problems of a fragmented society, he found an answer in the possibility of linking social inquiry to the art of communication and communication, he was convinced, rested upon "the vital, steady, and deep relationships which are present only within the immediate community." "The local," he said, "is



*Mount Tremper, N.Y.*

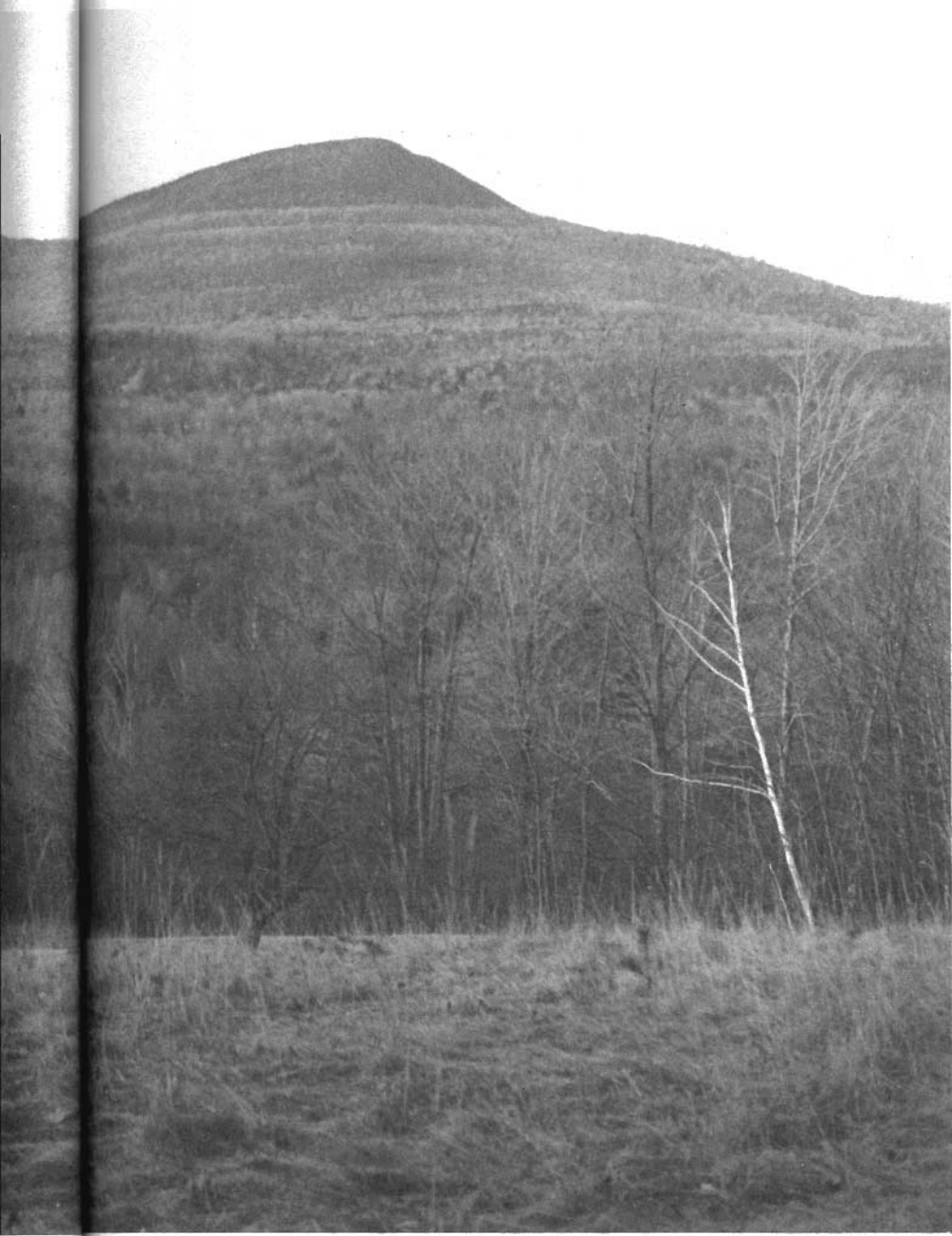


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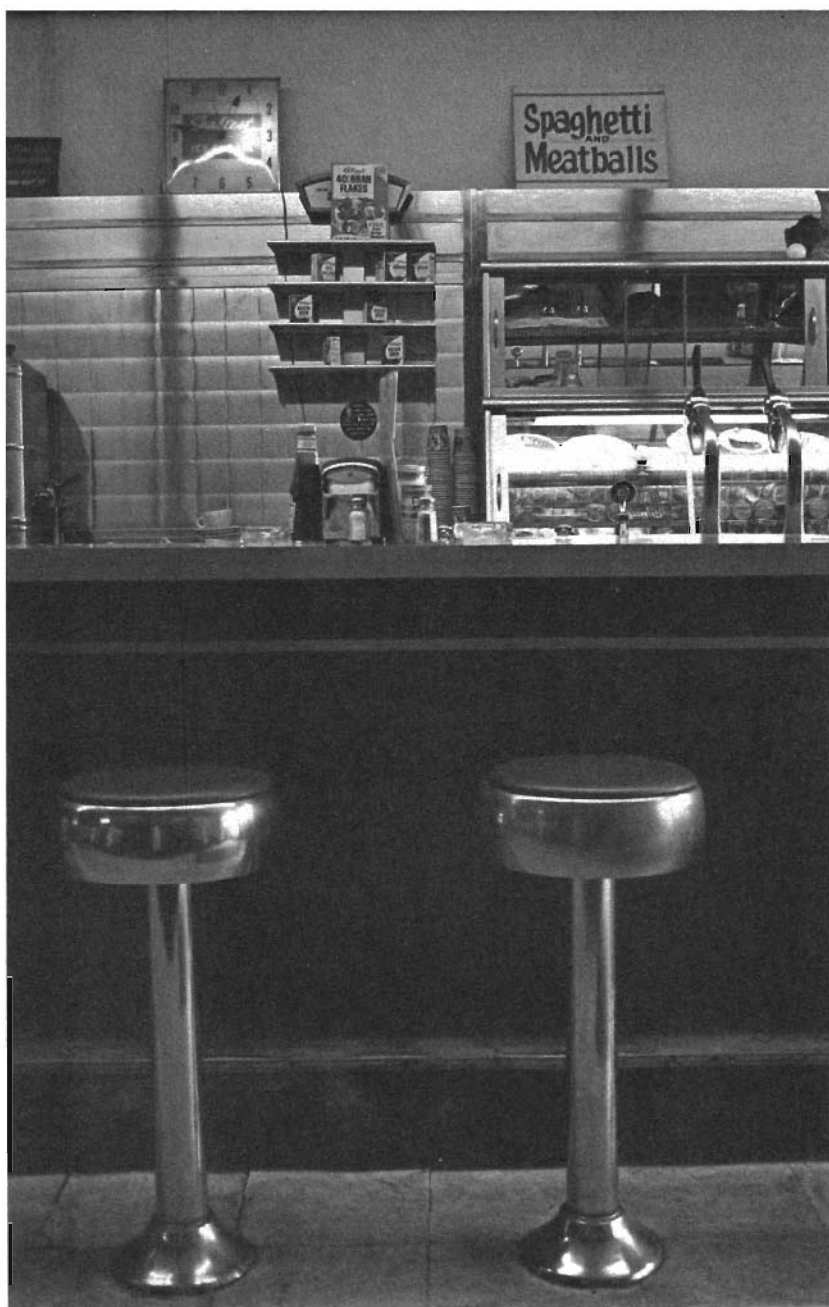


PHOTO BY HOWARD DRATCH

*Murray's Luncheonette, Market Street, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.*

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the ultimate universal, and as near an absolute as exists."<sup>9</sup> We must, said William Carlos Williams, "make a start,/out of particulars . . ."

But the local, for all this, is not enough. It is necessary but not sufficient for place comes to be what it is only in some larger pattern of matters and concerns. Let us return to the question of place. Place is, first of all, geo-physical. We find ourselves in some particular place on the earth. But that particular place, be it town, urban neighborhood or whatever else might be circumscribed by our habitual and familiar intimacy, is itself *placed* in a surrounding environment which contributes distinctiveness and definition to our particular locale. This is true whether that place is urban or rural. Manhattan is part of a geological configuration, including rock, river and sea, that extends in every direction and which not only defines that metropolis as an island with all the consequences for concentrated urban development but also as part of a larger system of geological formation including mountains and rivers and climatic conditions bearing upon the possibility of life in that City. The local geo-physical circumstances lead out to wider contexts and are, in turn, situated in that context. We recognize this shared circumstance when we speak of "Sun-Belt" or "Mountain States" or of the Mississippi or Hudson Valleys. These regions are, of course, bound up in larger geo-physical systems but this does not annul the durable characteristics of each particular environment. What must be observed is that "places" and "regions" will only rarely be well defined in terms of geographic boundaries. The edges overlap and become the matter of yet other places and regions and all will be part of yet larger systems of earth and climate. There will always be a vagueness at the periphery and there will always be particularity at the "center" of any regional perspective.

**O**n this geo-physical base will be constructed the economic lives of the people. Out of the material resources of soil, vegetation and mineral deposits comes the means of livelihood, at least in the first instance, and upon such resources will be built the characteristic social and political possibilities of the local community. We are farmers, mechanics, shopkeepers, bankers as the place offers such possibilities to be realized in and through our labor. Here again the local is linked to a larger context. The economic life of the local area is bound up with that round about in profound mutual interdependence. The linkages between the earth and economic and social opportunities are not always obvious but they are rarely entirely absent. Services, labor supply, markets, natural resources, energy supply and even geographic ambience all unite local enterprise to wider circles of business and industry in the region.

Such interdependence is recognized by the presence of various agencies

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and programs which have for many decades directed their efforts to environmental, energy resource, recreational and health care planning on a regional basis. Not all such efforts have been wisely conceived and executed. "Regionalism," as Harvey Flad has observed, "has its limits." Too many examples of large-scale regional schemes remind us of their capacity to ride roughshod over local communities. Yet their very existence underlines the fact that we do live, for better or worse, as participants in regional systems, even as we live in the immediacies and contours of a particular place.

**B**ut a region is not only a thing of geographic, economic and political inter-relations, it is an embodiment of historical continuity as well. Thus Lewis Mumford:

Local history implies the history of larger communities to a much greater extent than national history implies the local community. Every great event sweeps over the country like a wave; but it leaves its deposit behind in the life of the locality; and meanwhile that life goes on, with its own special history, its own special interests.<sup>10</sup>

But such "deposits" of larger historical events as well as the "special history" of the locality represent choices made, causes pursued, courses followed. They possess for us a humanly recognizable shape insofar as earlier communities of men and women have shared in their making. Their historical labors will be reflected in the very reshaping of the topography and its record of economic activity but these labors will also be reflected in the literature, art and architecture of the region as well as its social institutions. The geographical world has been transformed, certain economic possibilities have been given priority, society has evolved in a given way, the imagination has taken certain distinctive shapes and forms. All this is part of the definition of a region as an historical and, therefore, a human achievement, a realization of values and worth.

"In the absence of perspective there is triviality," remarked Alfred North Whitehead. History helps to grant such perspective. It is a continual reminder that we are citizens of a larger community, that the shape we give to our world matters beyond the moment and to others beyond our generation, that as we live always out of the past so we live toward a future. Thus history points to our sense of relationship through time. The point of convergence between a region's history and the present occasion is the point at which a regional perspective commences for it is here that we begin to see ourselves and our community as genuine participants in a pattern of conditions, interests and events which are in some measure shared. It is this conscious grasp of the temporal context of the present moment as well as of the spatial spread of the particular place that constitutes the heart of a regional perspective.



*Catskill, N.Y.*



*Hudson, N.Y.*

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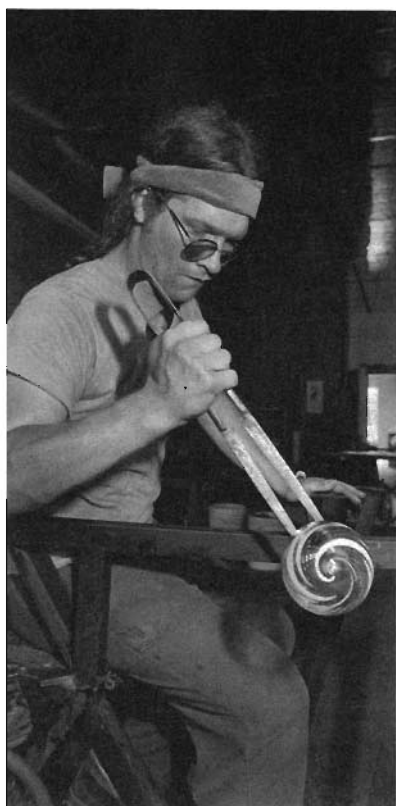


*Shad Fisherman demonstration, Hudson River Maritime Museum, Kingston, N.Y.*



*New York Telephone Company Splicer, underground facility for IBM telecommunications, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.*





*Glass Blower, Tundra Glass, Upper Red Hook, N.Y.*

*Van Kleeck Tire Service, Commercial Retreading, Lake Katrine, N.Y.*



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Since this perspective is an evaluation, a personal appreciation, it cannot be taken to be an empirical entity. Is the Hudson Valley to be defined geographically as the River and the Mountains, i.e., the Catskills, the Highlands, and the Taconics? Do the economic and the commercial uses of this topography over the years give us a unified area of treatment? Or is a region defined as having had a common historical past—Dutch settlement, English development, political and ethnic heritage? Do architectural continuity and social patterns denote a region?

So-called regional writers abound in nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature. But is the setting of a novel or series of paintings in the Hudson Valley enough to guarantee the regional sense we seek? One must distinguish between what used to be called “local color” and true regionalism. Is a liberal sprinkling of local scenes and place names in a novel enough to qualify a work as a regional one? Does a canvas that depicts a mountain that all can recognize and identify make the artist a regional one? These various attempts to provide a single definition are bound to fall short.

Here it is useful to speak of a “sense” of the region as something more than merely an inventory of its bounds, topography and socio-economic features. This “sense” cannot be imposed in any preordained manner. It is in many respects a personal response to the geographic presence of a place, its cumulative history and the pressure of present circumstances. In our opinion this “sense” is already present in a region’s inhabitants—both natives and newcomers. Some have it to a greater or lesser extent. It must, in many cases, be elicited from them. What is elicited will no doubt be marked by infinite variety for there will of necessity be a multitude of perspectives upon the region as there are many places and persons. This is why diversity—one could say fragmented responses—is of the substance of regionalism. If diversity is absent, then richness, complexity and variety are lost in nostalgia and parochialism. The region will not be a unified concept but a many-faceted way of interaction with place and circumstance.

Examples, perhaps, can bring us as close to this “feel” as is possible; the work of Mari Sandoz about her native Sand Hills area of Nebraska is a case in point. The sense of place in her *Love Song to the Plains* is perhaps a prime example of what we seek. This is no simple local color. It is instead a non-self conscious treatment of and feeling for a region. In our Hudson Valley, John Burroughs’ writing of the irresistible pull of his boyhood hills in the western Catskills is a fine example. Sarah Orne Jewett’s Maine comes alive for similar reasons.

But such a sense is not reserved for natives, life-long residents, or the expatriate returned. If this were the case, one would have a difficult time

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distinguishing such writings from that ever present danger to true regionalism—nostalgia. In many ways the region is in the individual author, artist, or historian. Effective regional writing often is an intensely personal response to a physical place—but not so personal that a reader or viewer cannot identify with at least to a small extent. A work of Richard Jeffries, the English naturalist, called *Story of My Soul* would seem at first glance to be an intense, almost solipsistic treatment of faith. Yet the work is permeated by a sense of his region, Sussex in England, that is presented in his other writings explicitly to his reader; yet never more powerfully than in his highly philosophical response. A look at writing of the Hudson Valley over the past may bring to light our own Jeffries.

While Literature and art may be the most obvious place to seek this more qualitative response to regional settings, historical work can also provide it. Yet, it is rare. Regional historical work has often been too riveted to the locale and many times degenerates into a dry collection of facts. Regional history, if done well, transcends the local; it amalgamates and the whole is far greater than the sum of its parts. It also incorporates regional responses to national (or extra-regional) events. Perhaps New England historians and those from the South and West have done this most effectively in the past. In the opinion of David Maldwyn Ellis it remains to be accomplished for our region a part of what he called in 1954 the “forgotten region.” We are fortunate here because of the existence of one of the finest histories of a region in contemporary writing—Alf Evers’ work on the Catskills. Few readers can come away from Evers’ book without a recognition of the fact that Evers feels for the Catskills what Sandoz felt for the Sand Hills, or Jewett or Celia Thaxter felt for the coast of Maine. It is a seminal work—a model that can be carried, one hopes, to the broader reaches of the Hudson Valley.

The search for a regional “sense” or definition should not seek isolation, division nor a smug, self-conscious provincialism. “One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives equilibrium: extended it is a sense of direction too,”<sup>11</sup> argued Eudora Welty. In one of the finest essays on the contrasts between regional awareness versus provincialism, Josiah Royce the American Philosopher, maintained that the former need not automatically lead to the latter, i.e., provincialism in the sense of exclusionism and elitism. Such a dichotomy has often been posed in terms of a conflict between the Country and the City or Metropole and province. These distinctions themselves are often the result of a “provincial” attitude. As Royce wrote: “In the sense of possessing local interests and customs, and of being limited to ideas of their own, many great cities are almost as distinctly provincial as are certain less

*Bruce Deaton, Assistant Music Director, Hudson Valley Philharmonic conducting children's concert, Kingston, N.Y.*



PHOTO BY PATRICIA BERINGER



PHOTO BY HOWARD DRATCH

*Aboard the Clearwater, Pumpkin Festival, Saugerties, N.Y.*

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populous regions."<sup>12</sup> For Royce, regional identification need not be an exercise in parochialism, but an important identifying factor in a world that, in his mind, was tending toward the homogeneous. Royce boldly asserts his thesis: ". . . in the present state of the world's civilization, and of the life of our own country, the time has come to emphasize, with a new meaning and intensity, the positive value, the absolute necessity for our welfare, of a wholesome provincialism, as a saving power to which the world in the near future will need more and more to appeal."<sup>13</sup> And in a tone reminiscent of much of the writing of social critics in recent years, Royce continues: "The nation by itself, apart from the influence of the province, is in danger of becoming an incomprehensible monster, in whose presence the individual loses his right, his self-consciousness, and his dignity. The province must save the individual."<sup>14</sup> This was written in 1902.

While we need not go so far in our claims, a sense of the region is attainable and desirable. But let each take what they will from the attempt at such a definition. We do seek an image drawn from the literature, art and history of the region; but an image that does not connote a conservatism in the worst sense of that term. A certain defensiveness must, by definition, be present; yet not the defensiveness in as strong a sense as that developed in the image of the South in American literature—*I'll Take My Stand* published in 1930 by Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Alan Tate *et al.* In many ways, their "stand" involved an anti-industrial, pro-agrarian response to many of the same national tendencies that Royce feared. In the process of this the Southern past they constructed may not have existed at any time, a problem with many attempts at regionalism. As Davidson himself wrote some years after the statement of the "Twelve Southerners," "The writer of a given region cannot shut himself away under the name 'Regionalist'; but he must, from his region, confront the total and moving world."<sup>15</sup> □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For example, Josiah Royce's "Provincialism" in *Basic Writings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup>E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848* (New York, New American Library, 1962), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York, Penguin Books, 1967), p. 84.

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<sup>8</sup>Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. LX, (January, 1956), p. 62.

<sup>9</sup>John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago, n.d.), pp. 214-215.

<sup>10</sup>Lewis Mumford, "The Value of Local History," *Dutchess County Historical Society Year Book*, 1928, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction," p. 67.

<sup>12</sup>Josiah Royce, *Basic Writings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), II, p. 1068.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, p. 1069.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 1083-84.

<sup>15</sup>Donald Davidson, "Regionalism and Nationalism in American Literature," in *Still Rebels, Still Yankees*, (Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 277.