

ON SEEING AMERICA SECOND

by Samuel L. Blumenfeld

There are many Americans like myself, who because of the war or the G.I. Bill, got to see Europe before they ever got around to seeing the United States. There may even be, among some of these loyal Americans, a particular urge to see Europe before the United States. My own case may be one in point. At the age of 18, fresh out of a New York high school, the U.S. Army saw fit to ship me to the then slightly battered peninsula of Italy. Thus, I crossed the Atlantic before I crossed the Rockies. I did not complain. In fact, my stay in Italy, which lasted a year and a half, turned out to be a wonderful experience. What I did regret, however, was that I did not get a chance to see France, a country for which I had always had, for some unknown reason, a very strong liking. And so, in 1950, after completing my studies in college, I used some leftover G.I. Bill time to study in France. During this time I got to know many other parts of the continent as well. By the time I returned to the U.S.A. in 1952, I knew much more about Europe than I did about my own country. I was determined to eventually rectify this situation, and I finally got around to it this last summer when, with great determination, I drove from New York to California and back.

As an Easterner, I can attest that going up and down the East Coast, crisscrossing New England, or even heading out as far as Chicago is not seeing America. The only bona fide, genuine way to see America is to cross it on the ground from one end to the other, East to West, and back if

necessary. There is no other way in which the size, the geography, and the spirit of the country makes itself known. The fact is that you cannot know the country unless you have seen the West, for the simple reason that the West is still undeveloped enough to show very clearly the basic pioneer and frontier traditions that count for so much in the American outlook on life. In fact, in the East, America is not much different from Europe, except for the tremendous material opulence which always strikes the European as he hits our shores. The skyline of New York is the symbol of American wealth with its great international connections, the culture of New York is the culture of the world, the feel of Boston is in its Englishness, and the architecture of Washington is Greek. But where is America? It really begins in Nebraska.

I don't mean to imply that everything east of Nebraska is not America, but, for the American who has seen Europe first, the real important difference between America and Europe does not become apparent until one does get as far West as Nebraska, for it is here that the frontier tradition becomes clearly visible. It is one thing to sit in a New York living room and watch a Western on TV and another to travel to where the West actually is. The people out West feel the presence of the American continent much more than we in the East do. The mountains, the plains, the deserts are the basic realities of their lives. The geography of the region exerts an influence over them, so that they are much more rooted in it and a part of it. The economic life of these people is also very much tied up with the land--in the mines, the ranches, and farms. Industry, too, is attached to

the geography there, whereas in the East millions of people earn their livelihoods in services that have nothing to do with geography: communications, advertising, insurance, publishing, banking, fashion, entertainment. And then the Indians. What greater reminder is there~~of~~ of the primitive continent recently conquered than the Indians who are still very much present in the West. True, there are Indians in the East, too, but how many of them can you spot walking down Broadway?

Then there is the strange phenomenon of those great cities in the West: Denver, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, all oases in a great desert that begins in the middle of Nebraska and doesn't end until one is practically bearing down on the Pacific. Here ~~is~~ something that Europe does not have. The deserts and its cities. Where else can one find such a miracle as Salt Lake City, a sprawling metropolis, a modern Jerusalem with a real Temple, rising out of nothing--one of the genuinely original creations of America. It is in Nevada where one finally admits that man has met more than his match in nature. This huge bleak state, which is lunar in its emptiness, has almost nothing to offer the traveler except its dryness. If it weren't for the slot machines no travelers would stop within its borders.

It is on crossing into California that one feels a goal has been reached. Here, once again, man takes over with a vengeance. One sees highways, towns, cities, buildings, farms, industries sprouting everywhere. And in San Francisco, one finds once more the sophisticated touch of the East. After crossing one thousand miles of desert, California is, indeed, a garden of

paradise, yet by no means as lush or green as Easterners have been led to believe. Much of California is itself desert, and most of the state's agricultural prosperity has been due to irrigation. The state, in addition, is very much an island. On one side is the Pacific, on the other the desert. You are immersed in this much celebrated isle of paradise, and when you visit Los Angeles, you realize quite clearly why Hollywood has never been able to make a picture that truly resembles reality, for in a flourishing isle of paradise, who wants to think of reality?

Leaving Los Angeles and heading back east one immediately plunges back into the vast empty desert, broiling by day, freezing at night. Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Kansas are traversed. It is in eastern Kansas that one is back on the American mainland. No more frontier. From Kansas City to New York the land becomes closer to Europe. And on the East Coast one has reached a new geographical and cultural entity, which is more international than American in outlook, more cosmopolitan than provincial in culture. It is the Atlantic Community, of which New York, London, Paris, Montreal, Boston and Washington are the main centers. A community linked culturally, politically, and economically. In New York one looks to Paris and London. Omaha seems like on another continent. Salt Lake City? A religious center far off in the wilderness. California? An isle of paradise, way off somewhere in the direction of Australia. When all is said and done, America, even without Alaska, has taken on a strange new shape.

The New York Times

TIMES SQUARE NEW YORK 36 N.Y.

LACKAWANNA 4-1000

January 22, 1959


Mr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld
Grosset & Dunlap Inc.
1107 Broadway
New York 10, New York

Dear Sam:

Your letter of January 15 has caused me to stir some gray matter about the idea of seeing Europe first so you know what to look for in the U.S. There may be a piece in this idea, but at the moment I am not sure just what you have in mind and which way it will go. Can you make it jell a little more and then let me look at it, perhaps in an outline or maybe just a telephone conversation will do.

There is a very remote possibility that this piece might work out to be something for our international travel section on March 1 which is all foreign and has no domestic coverage at all. Why don't you think about this and then let's us talk about it and see what happens.

Sincerely,



Paul J. C. Friedlander
Travel Editor

PJCF/mgr

"ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT"