



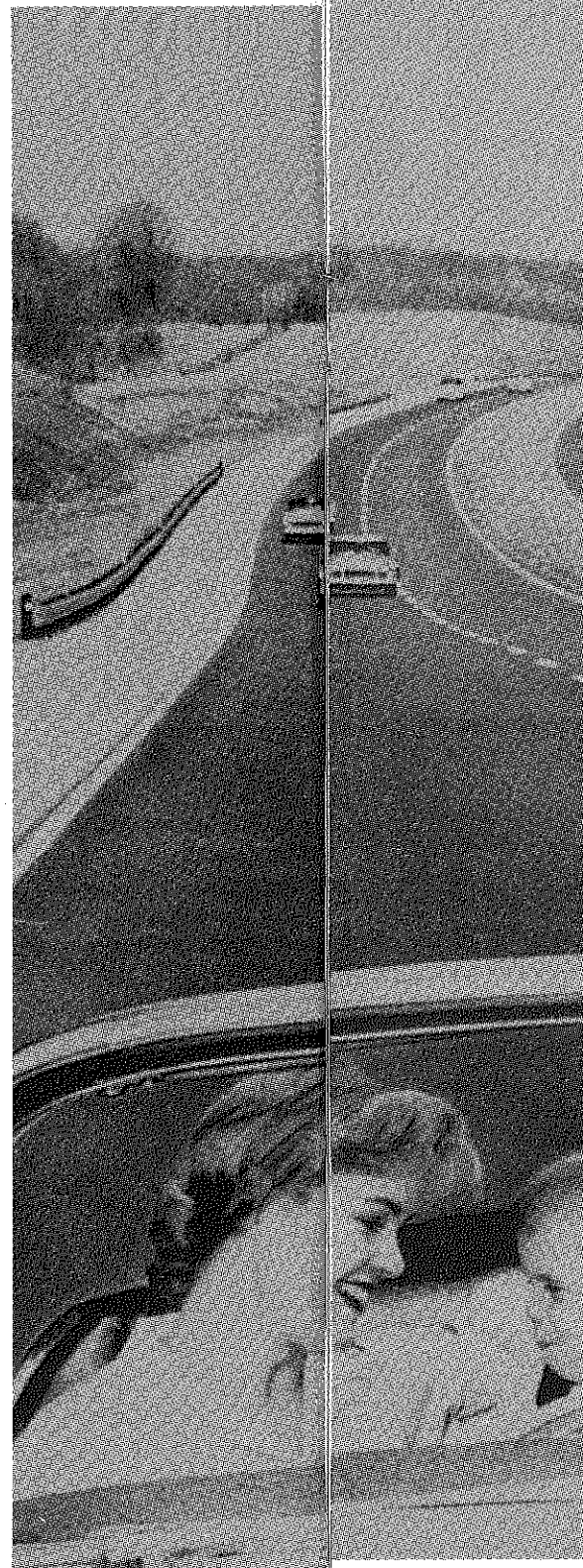
The View From The Road: Nature Tourism In The Postwar Years

Alexander Wilson

A year or so ago I took a train trip from Toronto to Vancouver. The train was called 'The Canadian'. It was old and tatty and filled with grumpy Americans who were travelling in Canada by default—that summer, we were a tourist destination without terrorists. But no tourist experience comes without its own logic, its own way of organizing landscape and our sense of it. The train carried us to Vancouver, alright, but on the way it stirred us to pay belated, though still sincere homage to the Canadian landscape. The dining car was the most intact remnant of this vestigial nationalism. Called the Queen Alexandra, it was a royal blue ode to prairie songbirds and 'prairie hospitality', with wonderful etched glass dividers and stars on the ceiling. Here was a colonialist nostalgia whose restraint and innocence spoke of the early 50s, yet it was overlaid with the ruthless corporate reality of our own day: mass produced meals and packaged travellers who were supposed to go to Greece but ended up unhappily in Saskatchewan. And out the window, as filled with the vast land itself flitted by, so familiar from postcards but silent and untouchable from inside our glass cases. I remember wanting to get off the train at every point and lie in the sweet August fields. While it's nice to think that my image of those fields came from within, from the memory of authentic, animated, real space, I know that they are also part of the repertoire of images of nature that tourist culture produces in great number and variety, and that in some ways are indistinguishable from nature itself.

Tourism organizes our experience of the world and its many aggregate cultures and landscapes. In the past 50 years or so, it has become a global phenomenon involving millions of people. It is also a big and growing industry—the principle one for many countries and regions in the developing world. It will probably be the largest industry in North America as well by the turn of the twenty-first century. The history of tourism is a confusing one, because no one knows quite what it is or when it can be said to have begun. What we can say is that its history parallels that of modern industrial society. While people obviously travelled for pleasure before that time, and the wealthy classes of Rome or China had holiday villas in the country, modern mass tourism is a vastly different way of moving through the world. It has created a whole range of new geographies like motel strips and campgrounds, airports, beach compounds and convention centres. It has promoted the growth of a managerial class and service sector whose job it is to organize human desires and leisure time. It has extended the commodity form both out into the natural world and back into our imaginations. Lastly, modern tourism is a phenomenon that is both urban and rural and that at the same time breaks down the distinction between the two. It has vastly reorganized not only the geography of North America, but also our perceptions of nature and our place in it as humans.

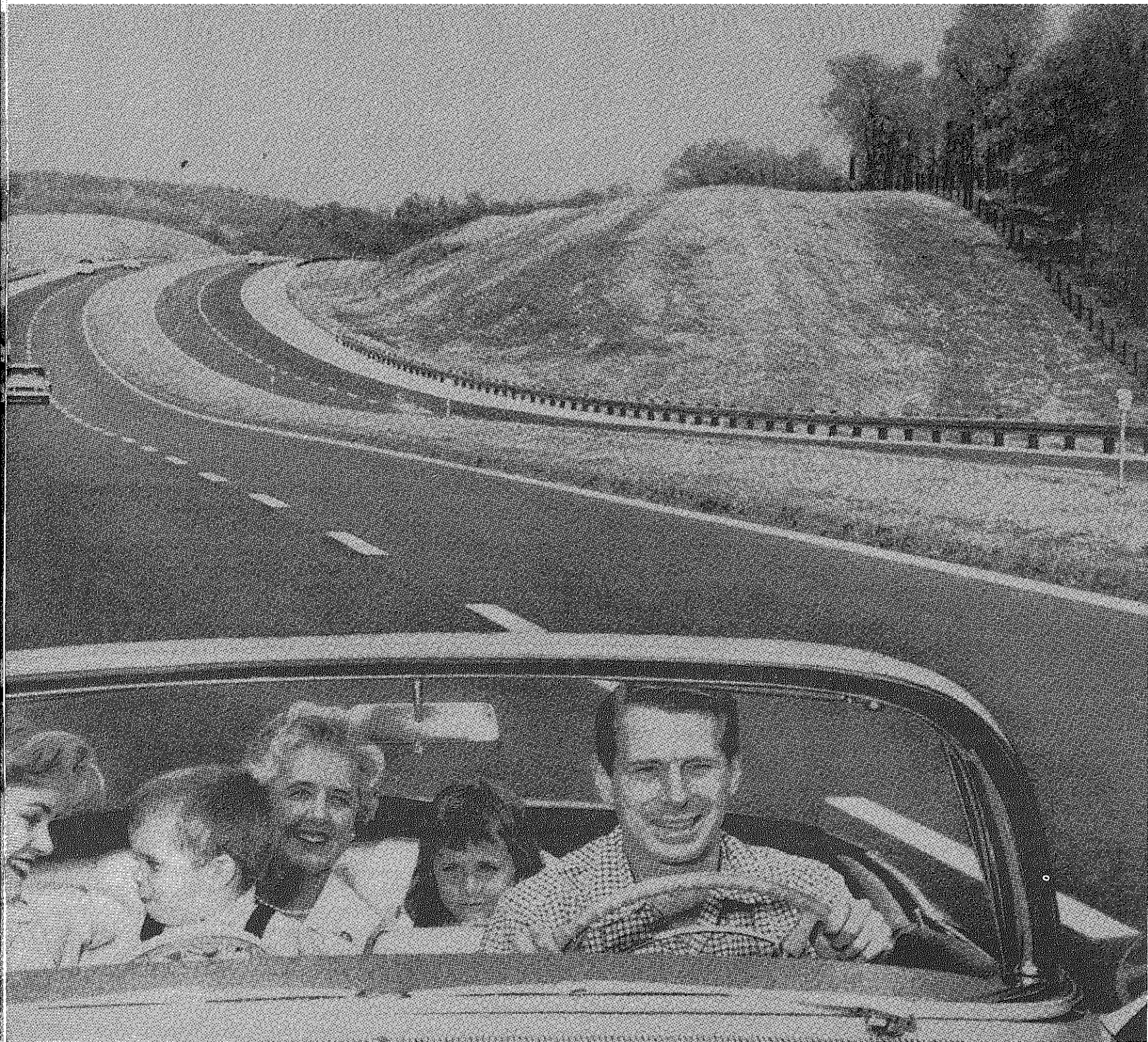
Tourism is a by-product of industrial society. Yet an economic history of tourism only tells part of the story. Tourism has all along had a particular role to play in our experience of modernity. By circulating through the material and natural world, we juxtapose the many contradictions of modern life and try to make a totality out of them. If I were to recall my experience of the train that summer, I would begin with images of dead queens and terrorists and grain elevators; then I would remember the microwaved 'Pacific Salmon Almandine' in the Rockies, the



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left: Tampa, Florida, 1958. Joe Steinmetz Studio below: ad for the Asphalt Institute, mid 1950s



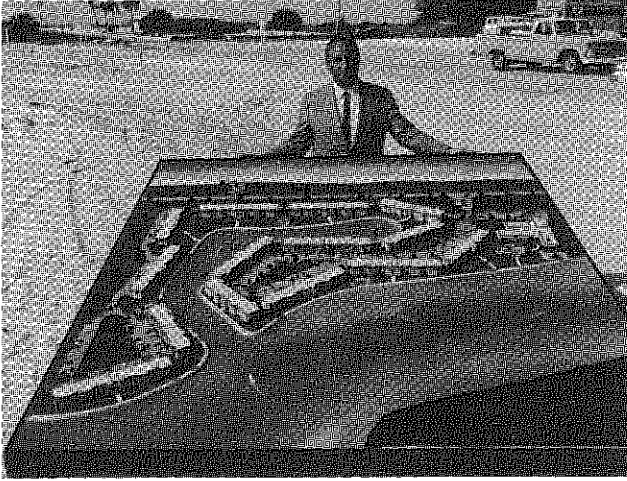
gleaming bank towers in Calgary, and the man fishing from a boat in the Precambrian Shield at sunset who the Korean monk in the next seat took a snapshot of. Sometimes I would read while all this was going on, and sometimes I would listen to music I'd brought along. That train trip, and its many small pleasures and disruptions, somehow coalesced for me into an orderly but still ambivalent image of contemporary life in Canada.

This ambivalence characterizes much of what's called 'modern life', and as modernity gets updated, we must keep sightseeing in order to understand our place in it. Our cultures, our landscapes, our social institutions are continually demolished and rebuilt. Each new moment of modernity promises to heal the wounds it continues to inflict, and at the same time encourages us to imagine an open future. We tour the disparate surfaces of everyday life as a way of involving ourselves in them, as a way of reintegrating a fragmented world. Tourism is thus a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Its institutions—package cruises, museums and amusement parks, self-guided nature trails, and visits to a shrine to the Virgin Mary or the site where a president was assassinated—continually differentiate and reorganize our experience of the world. One way these places do this is by naming the modern and separating it off from the premodern—or the merely old-fashioned, which in

contemporary culture often amounts to the same thing. Thus the tattered VIA Rail cars that hurtled us across the continent that summer were 'outdated', as our American visitors pointed out more than once, while Calgary was somehow new, or in any case, different from that. The outdated is sometimes demolished (as much of it has been in Calgary) and sometimes preserved as a reference point for us, an authenticized curiosity that reminds us of the victory of the modern over its ever-receding past.

Tourism locates us in space as well as time. It has redefined the land in terms of leisure. And it began to do this in the mid-twentieth century, at a time when most North Americans were being wrenched from traditional relations with the land. It's no accident that industrial agriculture, suburbanization and mass tourism all coincided.

Since I took that train trip, I've been thinking about how to write a contemporary history of the tourist landscape. By that I mean a narrative that would begin with this place we live in, which for me—a 'New Canadian' who grew up in the United



States—is the distinct geography of North America, its many land forms and its vast and interrelated communities of plants and animals. All of that is what we call *the natural world*, something we usually understand to be apart from, or prior to, human history.

Over top of that we might lay a number of human constructions of nature: Disney nature shows, resource and tourist industry brochures, etc—as well as specific interventions in the material world like, say, a nuclear plant, a national park, or indeed, a pot of marguerites on the front porch. I think of all of this as *landscape*, a way of seeing, a social activity that organizes our experience of the natural world.

And then there would be social history, and for reasons that are too complicated to fully go into here, I've begun this story with the end of the Second World War. In the postwar years, landscape came to be organized in new ways. An emergent leisure industry began to market its products to the large sectors of the white population who now had more time and money. The rapid development of an outdoor recreational infrastructure brought about a new set of relations between humans and the natural world. While the places people visited might all have existed before, people experienced them in new ways. Nature tourism catalogued the natural world and created its own spaces out there among the trees and rocks. It sold us nature-related products, and by and by has come to sell us natural space and experiences. All of these developments have served to fragment the natural world: here we have a sunbathing beach, over there is a nature trail for the blind, further along there's an RV campground or a petting zoo or a "singles' crosscountry resort." Nature tourism differentiates our experiences of the natural world. There are several consequences of this. The most obvious is that such fragmentation makes it much easier to package and sell nature as a product. It also means more people can enjoy natural places. And finally, it probably means that it's now more difficult to experience nature as a whole, as the total environment that for centuries and centuries has been our *home*—a very different kind of space from a 'recreation resource'.



Any account of nature and tourism in the postwar period must begin with the car and the road. The effect of the automobile on North American life has been immense, and it's well documented. The car and its ancillary industries were first developed around the turn of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, the car had become a popular means of transportation, and a highway infrastructure had been started. Inter-city travel increased dramatically. During the Depression of the 1930s, large-scale road construction continued unabated, often as a part of government relief programmes. The construction of surfaced roads increased fourfold between the First and Second World Wars. By the mid-fifties, multi-lane parkways and freeways had been built to expedite travel from city to suburb and city to city, and the car had insinuated itself into the daily habits and desires of millions of North Americans.

While the population of North America has roughly doubled in the past 50 years, highway travel has increased almost tenfold. Overall, the private car accounts for more than 80% of all travel in North America, and 75% of all tourist travel. All of these trends—from highway construction to car acquisition and use—have remained relatively constant for the past 50 years. They are a good indication of how the automobile became the keystone of the postwar American economy. These changes didn't happen by themselves of course; several American corporations, most notably General Motors, had ruthless marketing strategies that would ultimately ensure the car its central place in American culture as it has come to be emulated all over the world. This meant designing cars with what's now called

planned obsolescence, and making them the only choice for millions of commuting workers. This latter was achieved by buying up and eliminating mass transit companies.

This is a well known history, and one whose consequences most people have a good sense of. But what does it mean in terms of the natural world and our relation to it? In the first place, the car and the modern highway bring with them a different ordering of space. Before the car, most roads took care of all manner of traffic. But once the car was in general use, traffic had to be functionally separated: trucks from cars from pedestrians, local and feeder traffic from inter-city travel. Expressways, for example, are usually at a different grade from surrounding land, and access to them is strictly controlled. All of these changes imply a rationalization of space. Certain places for specific purposes (whether urban or rural) as quickly as possible. In this case, the landscape you pass through is subordinate to your destination. Other roads, such as the nature parkways begun in the 1930s, bar commercial traffic and by the design of their curves and rest areas instruct drivers about how to appreciate the scenery out the window. In both cases, the car further divides the landscape, and our experience of it, into discrete zones. It promotes some landscapes and discourages others.

New road building technologies in the 1950s enabled more people than ever before to get out of the cities to play in the country. In 1944, the U.S. Congress passed the Defense Highway Act, which authorized the construction of a massive national network of roads which would supposedly facilitate movement of troops and materiel in case of foreign attack. In Canada, the Alaska Highway, authorized in 1948, had similar military beginnings. In 1956, construction on the Interstate Highway System was begun in the US, using revenues from a gasoline tax. The tax, in fact, could *only* be spent on highway construction for the first 16 years. The highways encouraged car acquisition and use, the cars in turn consumed more gas, and the tax on the gas ensured the construction of more highways. The Interstate Highways, which were completed in the mid-1980s, amounted to a massive government subsidy to the auto industry and its many dependents, including tourism. Tourism, which grew by roughly 10% annually during the fifties and sixties, was largely organized around the car and the highway. Pleasure driving had by this time become the most popular form of outdoor recreation. Older forms of outdoor activities—camping would be an obvious example—became for many an adjunct of car travel. Camping would be an obvious example—became for many an adjunct of car travel. Not only a measure of a culture's technological prowess; they were fully integrated into the cultural economy, and were talked about as having an important democratizing role: modern highways allowed more people to appreciate the wonders of nature.

The car also made possible the development of a vacation home industry during the fifties and sixties. This changed the physiography of resorts in some interesting ways. It used to be—and here we might recall the great nineteenth century spas—that resorts were typed according to the natural features of the landscape they were part of. So there were mountain resorts like Banff, spas, ski resorts, seaside resorts, and so on. Once mass second home development got under way in the late fifties, these typologies broke down. The most obvious effect of the car on nature tourism was a large-scale diffusion of recreation across the landscape. Holiday-goers no longer took static holidays at one place, but sought out ever more distant and 'unspoiled' recesses in their cars. When A-frame homes replaced resorts and resort towns, there was a proliferation of tourist sites, and consequently the experience of nature became more private for many people. By the mid-sixties, the resorts themselves had changed in character: either they went out of business or they

adapted to the demand. They have been replaced by commercial seminars. These are called—that are not

As rural tourism, the natural features of the landscape have had mostly to do with the strategies of the tourism industry. These changes led to a re-evaluation of the landscape within the industry.

Where the landscape is much the better. In North America, where the landscape is a growth industry. The illusion of solitude in the country of the Great Lakes is very densely forested. Landscape in its most natural state (This is very like the way toward explaining why these communities make sense here are this geography allowed the frontier all at the same time to this equation, you have millions of second homes.

The car is not the only reason. In the 1950s. The trailer is a mobile home. We move across and across the country in the vacationers or itinerant communities become the predominant 'features of the landscape' trailer camps to trail these communities models'. Temporary communities have thus found a special place especially in the United States. Freedom to move with it. For people who include work in their lives from one place to another in for the dream of a better life. Camping is one form of home.

In any case the car has changed the landscape among other places. The cultures that surround the car and our technical mastery of it have flourished—an idea,

Joe Steinmetz Studio left: Bradenton, Florida, 1969. Joe Steinmetz Studio

below: The first McDonald's, Des Plaines, Illinois, 1955 courtesy of McDonald's Corporation.



adapted to the demands of a new and very different clientele. Today, families have been replaced by convention goers and corporate head officers attending marketing seminars. These clients expect familiar surroundings—'amenities', they're called—that are not specific to locale.

As rural tourist development proceeded, its geographical focus shifted from natural features of the landscape to 'artificial' ones like golf courses or African animal safari parks. The reasons for this are complex, but as we'll come to see they had mostly to do with the need for the industry to differentiate its products in order to serve a rapidly expanding market. Scenic legitimacy came to rest on the marketing strategies of the tourist industry as well as the vagaries of land speculation. All of these changes led to new fields of study like tourist motivational assessment and scenery evaluation, which by the 1960s had become the subject of intense scrutiny within the industry.

Where the landscape itself was adaptable to this new industrial situation, so much the better. An example of this is the forest-lake complex of eastern North America, where the aesthetic values already in place coalesce with the demands of a growth industry. The two most desirable features of a woodland cottage site are the illusion of solitude and the view out over water. In the sinuous lake and river country of the Great Lakes-St Lawrence watershed, the land is relatively flat and yet very densely forested. There are no sweeping vistas, so the aesthetics of this landscape in its more or less wild state is built on experiencing nature *in its details*. (This is very like the visual experience of the medieval town, which goes a certain way toward explaining its appeal to the modern urban dweller.) The activities that make sense here are intimate, even private, like canoeing or mushrooming, and yet this geography allows for great numbers of people to experience the immanent frontier all at the same time. When you add the automobile and the express highway to this equation, you end up with large sectors of the remaining bush settled with millions of second homes, each with its private road and intimate view.

The car is not the only vehicle that proliferated on the new highways of the 1950s. The trailer is a related technology that has had a profound effect on the way we move across and inhabit this continent. Originally—and this would have been in the early thirties—trailers were a kind of house on wheels, like a covered wagon for vacationers or itinerant workers. Now they're called mobile homes and they've become the predominant form of prefabricated housing. Today they are 'permanent' features of the landscape, as the evolution of their town names indicates: from trailer camps to trailer parks to mobile home estates. In the American Southwest, these communities are simply called 'parks', and the trailers themselves 'park models'. Temporary dwellings—which are ancient—imply a kind of freedom, and have thus found a special place in the North American ideological landscape as well, especially in the United States. They suggest freedom from ties to nature, to family, to job; freedom to move across this land as we wish and to make new connections with it. For people who work at migratory or temporary jobs—and today this includes work in corporate sales or mid-management as well on farms—moving from one place to another is often a necessity. It's as if physical mobility is standing in for the dream of social mobility American society has been unable to deliver. Camping is one form of this refusal of station; so is desert retirement in a mobile home.

In any case the trailer is now something people use to tour and dwell in nature, among other places. We could say in fact that technologies like the trailer, and the cultures that surround them, construct nature as a place of freedom and repose. As our technical mastery over nature has progressed, the idea of nature as freedom has flourished—an idea, by the way, that would be meaningless in a time or culture other

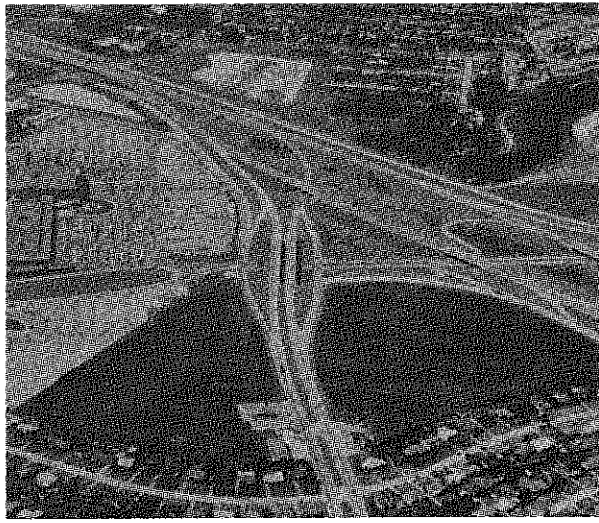
than this one.

There are many other transportation technologies that have been developed since the Second World War, and all of them have transformed this land and our perceptions of it. Most fall under the name of recreational vehicle, or RV, and they'd include the snowmobile, the off-road vehicle (ORV), the van and camper and so on. Many of these technologies have insinuated themselves into North American family life, and social activities like clubs and vacation caravans are now often planned around them.

The trucking industry was also born in the postwar years—often as a result of the marketing strategies of companies like GM discussed above—and it too has had a curious effect on the perception of nature in this culture. Before continuous streams of trucks plied highways of every size, trains carried most freight, and this included foodstuffs. Refrigerated train cars were first put to use in the late 1920s. As *East of Eden* documents with some bitterness, this allowed produce from warmer parts of the continent like Florida and California to be shipped to large markets in the cooler regions. Like the car, however, the transport truck is a more versatile, if less efficient, technology than the train. It was able to get right into the fields and collect the avocados and grapefruit soon after they were picked. This development coincided with two others of equal importance. Postwar agricultural research bred fruits and vegetables to be part of an industrial process—they could be mechanically picked, were 'resistant' to biocides, and took well to shipping. This led to 100% increases in farm productivity during the fifties. At the same time, the transportation industry was consolidating itself: trucking firms began to be vertically integrated with food growers, processors and retailers.

This is a complex tangle of changes. I bring it up as an example of the tortured nature of technological development and its effects on society and the natural world. There were a number of consequences in this case. One was the replacement of local and regional market gardeners by large, often corporate growers in the new agricultural zones of the Sunbelt. They in turn introduced vast amounts of biocides, the full ecological effects of which in many cases remain unknown today. The industrialization of agriculture—which included the development of supermarkets—led as well to a homogenization of the seasons as summer produce (or some semblance of it) began to appear in winter as well. This in turn led to a very different relation of the culture to the geography and climate of North America. The land began to look and feel different. As paradigms of domination began to flourish in North American cultures in the 1950s—and the industrialization of agriculture was mirrored by American foreign policy of the time—it became possible to think of nature as a servant, or a well-loved pet. Conversely, it also became possible to think of nature as a victim—a sentiment which underlay much of the thinking of the environmentalist movement in its earliest years.

The car also had a more material effect on the landscape. Most obviously, it brought massive environmental change in the form of roads and traffic and deteriorating air quality. These have had their own secondary and tertiary effects, most of them bad if not catastrophic. Much less discussed are the aesthetic and psychological changes the car has brought to land forms and our perception of them. Once there were roads full of cars, there had to be a physical infrastructure to service them. Thus we got the development of the strip: gas stations, roadside motels and drive-ins, coffee shops and so on. These came with their own logic. Highway businesses had to design their buildings and advertising to attract motorists, as recognition from the road



became paramount. This encouraged the use of standardized images and eventually logos in advertising, both on and off-site. Consider the repetitive architectures of chains like Howard Johnson's or the Holiday Inn, or indeed of national parks.

Tourist services had to be built at a scale compatible with the automobile. Large signs and facades and small cheaply constructed buildings were the lessons learned from Las Vegas. Motorized access and parking lots became necessary adjuncts to every new building, whether souvenir shop or campground office. These in turn were often 'naturalized' by planting gardens around them—and such work became the bread and butter of the burgeoning practice of landscape architecture. A roadside coffee shop or gas station was transformed into an oasis in the midst of the created deserts of parking lot and highway. Similarly, driveways and garages—and the reappropriated 'ranch' architectures that complemented them—contributed to the sprawling character of postwar urban design. More recent architectures like shopping malls turn inward from their parking lots, toward the retreats of indoor gardens, leaving the roadside environments prevalent just 30 years ago to decay.

The car has imposed a horizontality on geography as well as architecture. The faster we drive, the flatter the earth looks: overpasses and cloverleaf interchanges are almost two dimensional when seen from the car window. They are events in automotive time. As highway and tourist space has become more homogenized—like the universal space of modern communications—distance is experienced as an abstraction: suburbs lie 'minutes from downtown,' and the miles per gallon we achieve getting to them minify field and stream. Compare this experience of North America with that suggested by aerial photography, which wasn't really accessible to people outside the military until the sixties. From a plane window, the landscape flattens out to a map: it is a landscape of fact (or to the military, of secrets). With more advanced satellite photography, the landscape has been inscribed with representations of resources—healthy crops, or deposits of subsurface minerals, or Cuban missile bases. The image of the earth from space, and its 'Whole Earth' counterpart, is an extension of this impulse to picture the planet as a resource. But in the 1950s, this factual landscape could not yet be perceived. Before air travel became relatively common, what we saw out the window of the speeding car—and the Futurists were right after all, it is one of the great experiences of modern life—was the future itself. Right consider the thrill of the speeding New York along the Henry Hudson Parkway, or Vancouver crossing the Lion's Gate Bridge. The speeding car is a metaphor for progress. It is always moving ahead—although the effect is the opposite, as if the landscape were moving past us, into the inconsequential shadows of history. In this respect, time has replaced space as the predominant way our experience of the world is organized.

The car itself was increasingly laden with technology in the postwar years, and some of these devices accentuated the kinds of changes we've been discussing. Air conditioning was the most obvious. It began to be sold with a few luxury cars in the mid-fifties, and soon became a sign of status, especially in climates where it was unnecessary. Of course as more asphalt was laid down and more engines circulated, roadside temperatures rose, and air conditioning did often become a necessity even in temperate climates. High speed cars also encouraged the use of air conditioning. In a car or a building, air conditioning allowed the illusion of human control over environment. This was made possible by the 'magic' of what was understood to be a benign technology. Of more interest to us here is the aestheticizing effect of air conditioning on the natural world. Nature was now something to be appreciated by

the eyes alone. Never mind the dust and heat, or the snow, nature was now accessible year-round and under any circumstances. There were no longer any contingencies—just the purely visual experience of what lay outside the picture window. The other senses were pushed further to the margins of human experience as nature came to play a role in human culture that was at once more restricted and infinitely expanded.

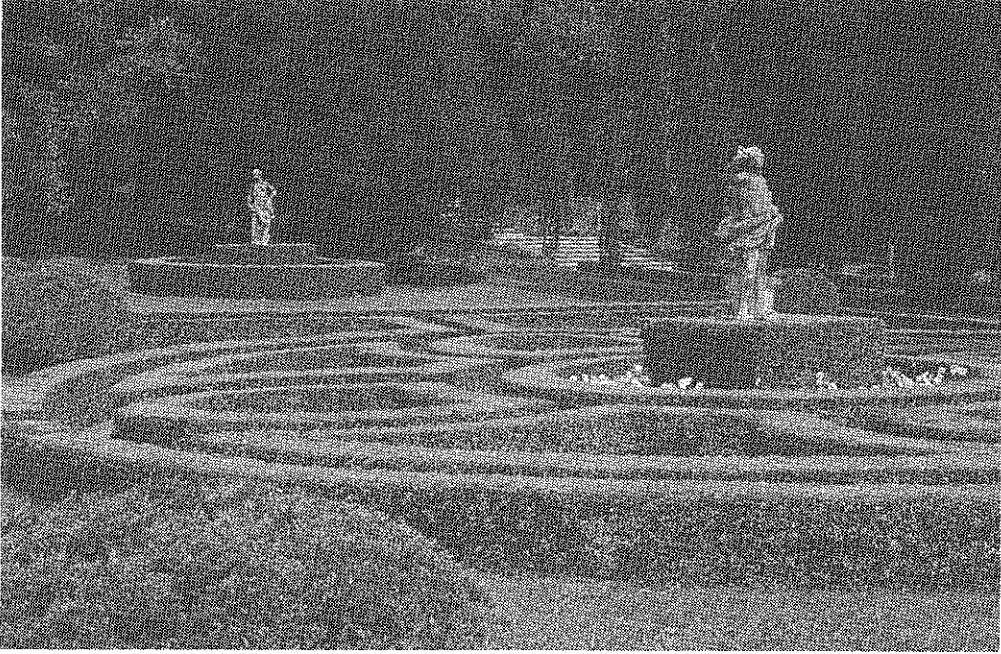
There is one last thing to say about the car and the road. Car travel is largely an *individual* activity. This is not to say that people usually drive alone, although for commuters and truckers that's usually the case. It's more that driving is a private exercise. It is a technology that fits well with the American psyche, and Detroit has done its best to manipulate this. The individual hero on the road, pushing back the frontiers and discovering this land for 'himself': this myth has a long and bloody history, particularly in American culture, and the car continues to play a part in it. It's hard to imagine a technology that better discourages communal activity and an egalitarian experience of the non-human world. Here we might recall that the private car and the nuclear family have a parallel history. They are both founded on an act of exclusion. Within is radically different from without. The family and the car—and the 'family car'—are bounded entities that discourage unregulated exchange. That said, it should be pointed out that the mobility the car has brought to North American society has contributed greatly to the restructuring of the traditional nuclear family. Its privatizing functions have been splintered by cultural practices like hitchhiking or drive-in movies. The car has also carried many North Americans, myself included, far away from the consumer culture that engendered it, and into closer contact with the natural world.

Reading List

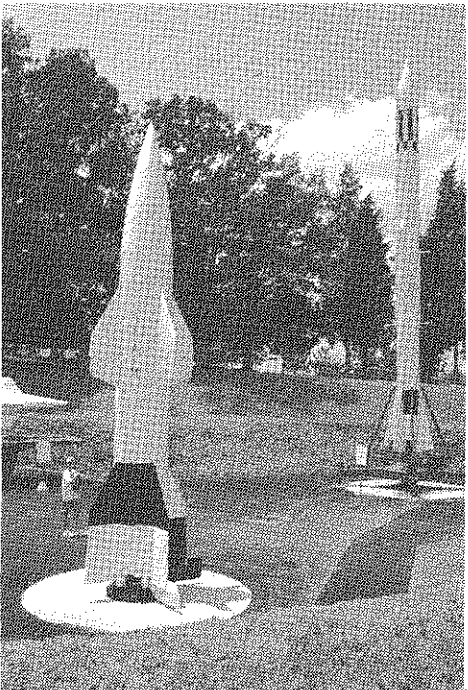
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Alexander Wilson, a Toronto journalist and horticulturist, is completing a book on popular landscape in North America since the Second World War.

THE RHETORICAL PARK



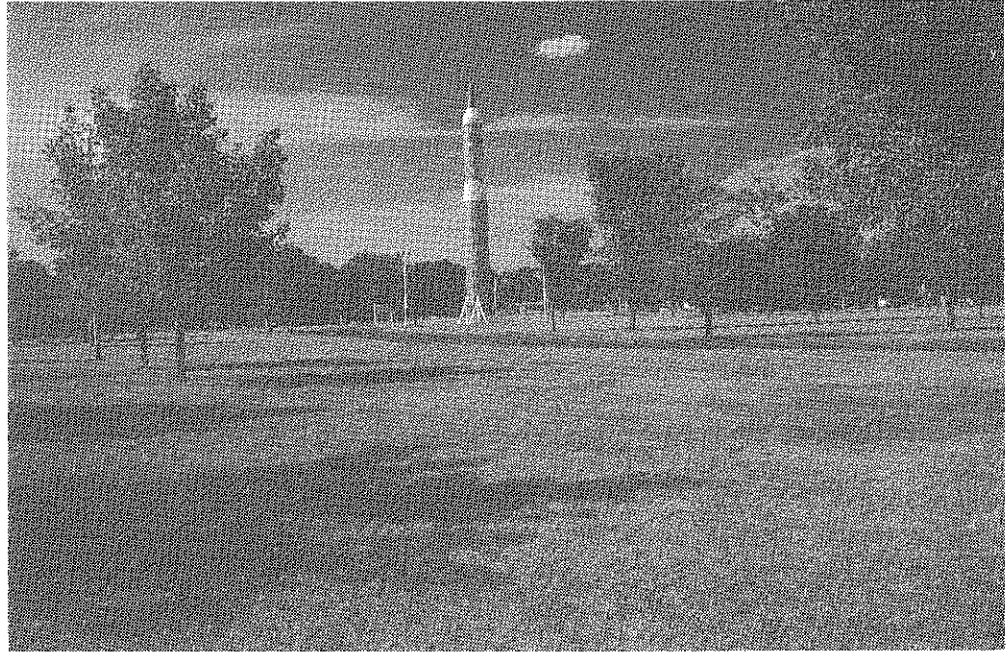
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- 15. Gardens, Villa Guista, Verona; circa 1500
- 16. Rocket Park, Alabama Space and Rocket Center, Hunstville, Alabama; 1970's

Stan Denniston

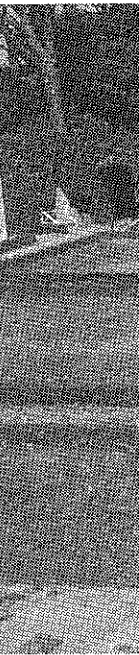


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THE RHETORICAL PARK



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17. Titan Rocket, Gotte Park, Kimball, Nebraska; 1968
18. Gardens, Villa Guista, Verona; circa 1500
19. Rocket Garden, Kennedy Space Center, near Titusville, Florida, 1970's
20. Gardens, Villa Medici, Rome, 1544

Stan Denniston



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21. Terrace Gardens, Versailles, Rome, 1544

22. Missile Park, White Sands Missile Test Range Headquarters, near Alamogordo, New Mexico; 1970's

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