During the heat of one August afternoon, following the complaints of my daughter that her room was too hot, I installed an old Whirlpool air conditioner in her window. It didn’t work. I called their 800 number in St. Joseph, Michigan, for repairs, asked for advice, and was put on hold. For nearly half an hour I waited for the air-conditioner specialist to come on the line. But it was not a sojourn to Michigan in silence. I was treated to canned home-improvement messages: ways to keep my home warm in winter and cool in summer; tips on sewing clothes; and instructions for preparing nutritious, but still good tasting, recipes. Eventually, I began to notice the peculiar lilt to the speech patterns—almost a song presented in solo female voices. It was my native dialect.

For those who travel extensively, as I have been fortunate to do since I left high school and my hometown in 1958, the way people speak is one cultural trait that impresses itself upon us immediately. What we recognize need not be a completely foreign tongue, such as Turkish; it may be as minimal as the local generic term for a soft drink: pop in the Midwest, soda in the East, and coke on the coast of Mississippi. Everywhere we journey, we must learn to converse with strangers by employing new words, substituting different meanings, and rearranging rhythms and cadences of our familiar speech patterns to assimilate yet another dialect of a language in which we thought we were already fluent.

Growing up during the early to mid-1950s in the small, farm town of Berrien Springs, Michigan, I acquired particular habits of speaking that seemed normal and natural to me. A bonnet was an item of clothing that a woman wore on her head as protection...
from the sun. A soda included a scoop of ice cream, normally vanilla. It was a surprise to learn that a boot could also be the trunk of a car and that “y’all” could refer to only one individual under direct address. Small difficulties to overcome, perhaps. But how could I, at the age of 16 in that geographical context, have understood that the construction “the horse kicked the man in the head” was impossible to phrase directly in Navaho? That was something I was to learn years later.

On the surface, Midwesterners, such as I, seem to speak a mutually intelligible dialect of the English language, eat many of the same foods prepared in similar if not identical ways, and interact with our parents, children, and other kin in a manner not unlike that of my eastern students. Though Midwesterners may not be fully the cultural other to these upstate New York youths, our small degree of foreignness provides a sufficient number of examples of diversity at the introductory level. I knew more about the people and the cultural forms of the United States’ heartland than I did about Southerners from Dixie, native Californians, or New Englanders—enough at least to find plentiful instances of these types of cultural variability nested comfortably, if still deeply, in our own midst.

American culture, as a system, obviously differs from all others throughout the world. It exhibits great internal variability even today despite the homogenizing effects of cable television and the ease of travel from one coast or region of the United States to any other. We do not all behave in identical fashions. Midwesterners, for example, do not robustly hug and kiss across the genders as a usual part of the ritual greeting, and most certainly not upon being introduced for the first time. Yet, this ritual greeting is common (and even after more than 20 years of residence in New York State still bothersome to me) among many Easterners. Neither do we Midwesterners blithely inquire about people’s salaries—or what they paid for their houses or their new cars—immediately upon meeting them at a social gathering. Yet these, too, seem to be common everyday behavioral traits that our fellow upstate New Yorkers appear to find completely normal, and wholly acceptable, cultural practices.

A host of significant historical reasons exists for this cultural variability. The Middle West was settled at a later time in our nation’s past, as compared to the East Coast, and often by different ethnic groups who faced dissimilar social and economic prob-
lems upon arrival in their new homeland. For me to come to grips with this diversity, it seemed logical to place cultural events into their specific historical contexts. Since I had grown up in Berrien Springs during the 1950s and had left Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan (where I first arrived in 1958) by the late 1960s, migrating slowly eastward, this temporal period appeared to be the most logical one from which to draw my examples.

The year 1956 was extremely special to my hometown because it celebrated the 125th anniversary of its founding. The celebration involved four days of parades and speeches. A special edition (June 20, 1956) of the village weekly newspaper (*The Journal Era*) was printed, and multi-page spreads appeared in dailies from local urban centers—far-away, exotic locales such as South Bend, Indiana, some 20 miles to the south. This date, thus, served as a more focused point from which to launch my inquiry.

As I began to construct my classroom public narratives, however, I came to realize with some small degree of panic that specific details of United States and world history did not easily surface—even those of events that occurred while I was growing up in the mid-1950s. On the one hand, I could vividly recall experiencing the dramatic impact of the rising phenomenon named Elvis Presley when he made his first national appearance on television on Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey’s “Stage Show” in January of 1956. (Presley would sell 13.5 million singles and 3.75 million albums in 1956 alone.) Yet, the majority of world happenings remained far too shadowy in my memory. Did none of them affect me in any way while I was in high school, not even to the point that I could bring them readily to the forefront?

We certainly must have been aware of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary, Khrushchev’s angry denunciation of Stalin for his depredations upon the peoples of the Soviet Union, and the British/French/Israeli attack on Egypt over control of the Suez Canal. Each of these major international news stories occurred in 1956. Yet as I read about these events nearly 40 years later, nothing crashes back into my mind—no context and no memory of where I was or what I was doing when the news descended upon my teenage ears.

I have the uneasy impression that I must have grown up so entirely isolated that the world beyond the United States could not and did not much intrude. I am sure that this is not completely accurate. Still, it does manage to convey a sense of small-town,
1950s America. Despite earth-shattering global events and the constant specter of menacing Communism presented to us incessantly through the media and the A-Bomb drills that we frequently practiced in our school (“under your desks with your heads between your knees, please, and quickly now”), the international scene does not appear to have occupied inordinate amounts of our waking hours.

I think that we were slightly more aware of the national scene because it impinged more immediately upon our daily lives. The bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, began in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white patron, and it lasted until the end of December in 1956. That event was attended by a vivid outpouring of racial hatred and included the massive white resistance to the attempts undertaken by African-Americans to integrate the southern segregated schools (all filmed in black and white for the television news programs). It became a topic that we did recognize and discuss. Berrien County did have integrated schools; the nearby town of Benton Harbor was the prime example. In 1955, Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP attacked the Benton Harbor School Board over its proposal to build new schools which, he argued, would create two separate but equal (one black and one white) school systems. Yet, at that time, only about 10 percent of the high-school graduating class in Benton Harbor was African-American.

We had the normal (and shameful) prejudices for that era, but we precipitated no ugly public, racial incidents—no Little Rocks—that would bring the national press corps to our seemingly well-hidden, tucked-away corner of the world.

Before the early 1950s, our own town and a few surrounding communities constituted our operative world. But by the mid-1950s, television began to create a larger, and new, environment with a host of sights and sounds while we reclined on the sofa. Our smugness began to evaporate in black-and-white pictures. Live action was not always possible—”film at 11:00” was more the norm. And our town, being bombarded with this new medium, no longer seemed quite so physically isolated from the world outside. That spatial shield would be further diminished with the enactment of the Interstate Highway System Bill, properly the “Highway Act of 1956.” I had seen neither the Pennsylvania Turnpike nor the New York State Thruway. It took nearly five hours to drive on two-lane roads to Ann Arbor, about
150 miles to the east. That trip by the mid-60s could be completed in half that time.

Dwight David Eisenhower was our nation’s president. If the American nation, Berrien County included, could again overwhelmingly “Like Ike” in that year’s national election rather than Adlai Stevenson (my mother was a rabid Democrat), it was, in part, because we could not in our wildest fantasies imagine him sleeping with Kim Novak or Marilyn Monroe or seeking political advice from Frank Sinatra or Roy Rogers (or even from that minor actor Ronald Reagan for that matter). If Ike had his several indiscretions, too, they were performed in great secret and, if discovered by the press, remained completely suppressed by the mute Fourth Estate. His public actions could not have conceivably paved the way to a sexual revolution, something that would have made him far more politically attractive and, ultimately, worth admiring by a 16-year-old male adolescent in 1956. In short, President Eisenhower was a wholly comfortable figure as the country’s leader, equally at home on his favorite golf links as he was as general on the battlefields of Europe. The nation’s course would be steady: onward but always, in a teenager’s eyes, smooth and even.

This revolutionary role as cultural hero was to be left to John F. Kennedy early in the following decade, a man of whom I was totally unaware in 1956. Unlike Kennedy, Ike was not the direct descendent of King Arthur in our minds. And nowhere in the United States, at least that any of my peers or I knew of first hand, was there a true Camelot. Ike was a solid, dependable, and unexciting chieftain. He was a symbol of cultural stability, a man who was neither a throwback nor a visionary.

Notwithstanding the looming specter of Communism and the daily threat of all-out atomic annihilation, we did believe in a future. We vaguely anticipated it even while we actively resisted what I presume today to have been an almost minimal effort of our teachers and parents to prepare us for time to come. Our lack of overt interest, I believe now, stemmed largely from the excitement of the present. We were “teenagers” (there were some thirteen million of us nationwide), a status term that had just come into popularity in the late 1940s. We would begin to develop our own separate subculture—hip language, extravagant hairstyles (ducktails), wild music (rock and roll), and new and outrageous,
but extremely cool, behaviors. We would be the first daring and wholly independent generation in American history. What we did not realize, of course, was that this same cultural revolution had been attempted unsuccessfully by countless numbers of young people in this country on many occasions long before us.

Rock and roll was just bursting onto the American scene, and television—still in its infancy—brought Elvis and Dick Clark (1957) directly into our living rooms. We all had our driver’s licenses by the age of 16. We drove the farm pick-up trucks or the newly manufactured V-8 Chevrolets customized with dual exhausts, dual antennas, chopped and channeled bodies, sporty fender skirts, and all the extras that could be built on. We were a new generation, breaking totally free from the confining bondage of the past (about which we knew precious little anyway).

The past of my county and my hometown was never communicated to us beyond what old stories the adults might relate to us as an aside—a chance comment simply in passing during an odd moment of repose. But this retelling was never undertaken in any formal sessions of instruction in any high-school classroom or even more informally through the medium of tales concerning the heroic acts and deeds of our forebears. Our pioneer ancestors had apparently been (conveniently?) forgotten as individual heroes within just slightly more than a century. It was as if history, particularly the local variety, no longer mattered. My hometown’s past, if not dead and buried with formal honors in a stirring public ritual, was at least certainly deemed irrelevant.

“History is bunk,” Henry Ford (from Michigan) is alleged to have once remarked. Whether the town’s elders felt the same way or not, I cannot say. I can only assume that, since these residents were so completely secure in their own basic cultural traditions, long-ago events never needed to be articulated in a more stilted, academic-like fashion.

Thus, as I look back, I feel as if I grew up in a setting that only scarcely acknowledged the linear concept of time. We had no local historical society of which I was aware. A specific time-oriented, worthwhile, and relatable past did not seem to exist for my own hometown—at least one was never clearly articulated to us.

The only event that I can clearly remember being commemorated by the entire village was Memorial Day (or Decoration Day as we referred to it). This annual, ritual occasion required a total-
ly different concept of time—one that is cyclical. Its renewal each year was always accompanied by a parade led by the high-school marching band dutifully followed by the local Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops, the Woodmen of the World with their fake axes snugly nestled upon their shoulders, the American Legion and the Women’s Auxiliary, and our two fire trucks and sole police car. Inevitably, there was also extensive, heart-lifting, patriotic oratory. Its ending was signaled by the discharging of rifles at Rose Hill Cemetery on the edge of town by the uniformed and bemedaled American Legion survivors of foreign wars. To this day, I am still emotionally moved by the music of marching bands in any parade. So that, at least, did have one lasting, and wholly positive, effect on me.

This, then, is a personal history of one place because it is within this specific matrix that my own eventual maturation took place. What was important to me then and how I learned to behave properly, as a white male and a small-town Midwesterner, were based upon more than a century of cultural traditions. They were successful for the townspeople, the white males at least, of a small Midwestern country village at mid-century because these behaviors were well-worn through experience. They were visible daily actions that could be transmitted to us orally while we actually participated in them. We learned by emulating and by listening. And while we rebelled, it was merely a rebellion of music, cars, and language—never an outright rejection of the moral values which we stretched but never intended to reject. These precepts were set in me for life, and I still appreciate and defend them some forty years later.

I have tried, usually in vain, to balance both rebellion and values in my own research and academic career which is now well beyond its 30th anniversary. During these three decades, I have been actively engaged in creating pasts for other peoples in other places, other times, other cultures. My field research in prehistoric archeology has taken me to four of the world’s continents, and I have extensively studied and analyzed the archeological records and ethnohistoric documents of both Native Americans and ancient Middle Easterners. These research findings have been transmitted not only to my peers in published form but also orally to several generations of my students, both graduates and undergraduates, in lectures, seminars, and shouting matches in bars from Jackson, Wyoming, to Bordeaux, France.
No such research undertaking is ever successfully accomplished in an intellectual vacuum. Science is not, and certainly never can be, a value-free system of inquiry. Our personal and cultural pasts, including mine most assuredly, impinge directly upon our interpretations of events that have already transpired. We view the bits and pieces of evidence through multicolored, distorted lenses. Any single event from the past may denote many different meanings, each depending upon the cultural context of the specific viewer. And a major portion of this context depends upon the place within which it was constructed.

This search for the past of the cultural other is a particularly Euro-American obsession. Ethnic peoples elsewhere are normally content with their own unique histories, and they exhibit little abiding interest in anyone else’s past. Clearly, then, in my ongoing quest, I am a true product of my own specific cultural world and not the ones that I am seeking to reconstruct. Thus, in order for me to assess my work in retrospect, I must first reflect upon my own past. I must interpret my own ghosts and place them into an understandable cosmic order. My narrative can be neither strictly linear nor ethnographic in voice. It must shift to whichever seems germane because the past, both our own and that of our place, is never far from the present. Both call simultaneously, and they must be recognized and answered. Returning and regenerating, time ago informs, guides, and haunts us.