

# The Wild West's Own New York



"We do not enjoy the personal freedom possible to those who can get lost in the crowd. We are policed by the eye of the neighborhood."

By ANNE O'HARA McCORMICK

THE grave report of Mr. John Barrett, following a recent tour of the provinces, that the Middle West hates the East is like the returning traveler's astonished discovery that Europe hates America. Both rumors are exaggerated. What the explorer finds in the harassed interior of both continents is irritation, an irritation rooted in the same tendency in human nature everywhere to suspect the immune and to make a target of the high-and-mighty.

To the Middle West, the East means mostly New York. New York typifies all that geographically and traditionally distinguishes the East from the West—congestion, conservatism, complacency, concentrated power. When the farmer suffers he blames the city—all cities but particularly the metropolis—eating the bread of idleness; and when the townsman suffers he blames the capitalists of New York.

What makes us peevish is New York's assumption of superiority. In that we share Europe's irritation against America. When Senator McCormick yawned at a meeting of the assembly of the League of Nations at Geneva and told Europe he was bored by its conferences and its problems, he was more exasperating than the all-commanding Wilson or the all-forbidding Lodge. Europe bored itself so desperately that the fatigued Senator who could yawn his way out of its dreary councils filled it with envious and unavailing rage. The Middle West is similarly vulnerable to the condescension of New Yorkers. Our provincial pride is stung by the provincial pride of the metropolis.

But hate the East? Why, New York is enthusiastically populated by tireless Middle Westerners, and our suburbs are contentedly inhabited by tired New Yorkers. New York is only our town grown big. It perfectly represents our Middle Western effort to be large, and rich, and lavish, hustling and efficient by day, flashing and extravagant by night. New York is the pattern for us all. With plenty of space to spread out in, we all measure our metropolitan altitude by the New York skyscraper. We cramp our natural domesticity by squeezing it into the New York kitchenette and in-a-for-bed apartment, built on the edges of our satiric fields. We read New York papers. We flock to New York shows. We wear New York clothes. We tremble over New York tickets in our business hours and shake to New York jazz in our hours of ease.

New York has not, it may be, the charm to evoke emotion in the provinces as do older national metropolises. We do not love New York as the English love London. We are

not proud of it as the French are proud of Paris. We do not thrill to it as the Italians thrill to Rome. We do not weep over it as the Austrians weep over Vienna. It changes too quickly to become familiar, and shuffles its population too often to become human. Like all the rest of us, it is incessantly on the move, tearing down and building up, shifting, renewing, growing, obliterating.

But if we do not love New York, we admire it as a great American institution and we cheerfully keep going. We feed it with our best beefsteaks, our choicest cauliflowers, our brightest young men. Our buyers support its best hotels, our honeymooners occupy its bridal suites, our tired business men fill its theatres and cabarets, our social leaders maintain its dressmakers and milliners.

We do not hate it. Rather we understand it. We know it as we know ourselves. And out of that too intimate understanding arises the irritation Mr. Barrett suffered from among us. New York no longer has power to bluff the Middle West, but it still has power to annoy us. In New York we see ourselves amplified and magnified and distorted, as in one of these preposterously exaggerating mirrors at Coney Island. And we do not like the reflection.

We used to resent the domination of the East in national politics. We are more politically adventurous than the Atlantic seaboard, perhaps, because we are more undilutedly and boldly American. We are more afraid of experiments in life, but less afraid of experiments in government. We are extremely conventional in our way of living. We do not enjoy the personal freedom possible to those who can get lost in the crowd. We are policed by the eye of the neighborhood; our houses are kept in order and our meals and habits and diversions are regulated—and regularized—by community custom. We are all exemplars, and therefore exemplary. Such rebellions against tradition as agitate us we express in government.

We are all citizens in the Middle West. We are drafted by public sentiment to do our public duty. The civic conscience and the community consciousness are Middle Western institutions. We try out first all the new ideas in state and municipal administration. We watch the political spectacle in New York and Philadelphia and Boston and rejoice in our emancipation from the corrupt and stupid civic slavery of the East. We used to resent it, but since we have abandoned the East to its sins, since we have chosen four out of the last five Presidents of the United States from small towns and three from Ohio, since we have enthroned the small town

in the Senate and in the White House, and have given Congress over to the West, we forget our old grudge in the enjoyment of our political independence.

We no longer even protest against New York's blustering belief that it is the centre and arbiter of American art, American drama, American literature. It is a harmless delusion, inviting its own ironic penalties. It is true that we seem to accept without question what passes for New York's critical verdict. We refuse to be lured into our opera houses, especially at the present prices, by any attraction that has not proved its popularity by a record-breaking run in New York. Any but the guaranteed New York cast is out-cast among us, and none but the authentic stars of Broadway are deemed bright enough to blaze athwart our darkness. We like to confirm our own judgment. We are quite aware that it is the transient Middle Westerner who decides which are the plethoric box offices of New York, and having ourselves thus chosen and established the "great New York successes," we cannot do less than feed the monsters when they visit us. New York never thinks of blaming us for their monstrosity; and we, with equal self-complacency, acknowledge our complicity by refusing to disown the creaking and unalterable thing we have created in our hours of irresponsibility.

Likewise, we are inclined to encourage the East's quaint idea that it makes public opinion because it prints it. New York, reinforced by Boston and Philadelphia, is the main centre of the publishing business of the country. It produces the magazines that cater to our literary appetites and the books we give away at Christmas and borrow from the circulating libraries. But however we obtain our books, by gift or hire, we of the Middle West are the readers of the land. Books are written and made for us. The further we get from cities, the more we read. Whatever we are not, we are cultured; we grow corn and study clubs with equal energy and success. We have a pure passion for being educated. Some of us go East to college, but most of us work our way through the State universities or the other institutions of learning that spring out of our fertile plains as easily as wheat crops. We go to lectures. We enjoy being instructed. We read, we study, we travel; if our town is so small that we have not much else to do, we even think. Anyway, the presses of the East hum for us, and it is to our order that American literature, weekly, monthly or semi-annually, is manufactured. Why, then, should we cavil at an output of opinion which we sow for the New York

harvest and which we all alike—witness the unanimity of our nationwide choice of "best sellers"—most indiscriminately reap?

No. The scattered Fleet Streets of New York print our own revelations. The sins of Broadway are our own sins. The windows of Fifth Avenue are the national glasses of fashion. Greenwich Village is the resort of the illusioned and petulant young from all our villages. It is a pity to prick the general satisfaction, because there is no pleasanter sight in a dull world than the spectacle of New York as a strutting scapegoat, it is surely that of the Middle West as a plaintive and innocent lamb.

There remains only Wall Street. And there you have it. Wall Street is the real stumbling block, the Sinner Street of the Middle West, the only New York thoroughfare which makes boasts that are not our boasts and asserts a supremacy that disturbs us. We balk at Wall Street.

The countryman distrusts all cities, and New York most because it is the chief and most impenitent of cities. It has no shame of its size, its case, its noise, its levity, its crowded barrenness. And above all he distrusts that unnatural nursery of wealth which is Wall Street, those tyrannous and secret chambers where gold breeds gold, and unknown powers and principalities conspire to control his destiny. The townsfolk of the provinces do not share his other animosities, but they, too, are touched by his smoldering rebellion against New York's financial domination. The political power of the East they have shaken off; its other claims to pre-eminence they do not mind shouldering on the East. But New York as the financial capital of the country they all alike, farmer and townsman, resent and fear. It is the one imperialism of the metropolis, only partly undermined by the Federal Reserve Banks, that is not to be endured because it is not to be denied.

There are no Wall Streets in the Middle West. We are all agreed that one city with brokerage for its chief business is more than even a rich country can afford. But would we grow Wall Streets if we could; or if our financiers, having accumulated more money than they can conveniently gamble on our productive industries, did not move to New York to play the game where it is more popular and better understood?

Two visitors met in our town the other day. One was a scientist from the East, and after he had looked over our laboratories and our factories, our City Administration and our leading citizens, he told us that he envied us our freedom to do any fool thing we wanted to do. "We have too much experience in the East," he lamented. "We are hampered by old demonstrations of

what can't be done. Therefore we never do it. It is great to be free enough to take a chance that impossible things are possible."

The other visitor came from the West. He fixed us with a blazing and terrifying eye. "The blight of the East is upon you," he cried. "You are become smug, conservative, unaware of the country. Do you not know that in the Dakotas and beyond there are leagues of uncultivated fields because the farmers are either starving or emigrating to Canada? Do you not know that in great sections of the United States whole communities are exchanging commodities because there is no money? No, you are forever looking blindly toward the East!"

Thus one by one are snatched from us our precious bones of contention until little is left to stiffen New York cockiness and to sustain the Middle West's sense of virtue. Can it be that what most separates us is miles? Is it possible—humiliating reflection for a Middle Westerner—that we are really more alike than we are different?

Having strayed thus far out of the safe bounds of orthodoxy, one is tempted to plunge further into heresy and to suggest that New York is not only typically American, but far more typical of the entire country than any place else. Consider the population of Manhattan Island. It is crowded with people from our town and from every other town in the United States. When they get there they become, like all islanders, a little more insular than the rest of us. They become less domestic, less neighborly, less civic-spirited, more isolated by crowds, more afraid of space and change. But they are there, all America. All Europe is there, too, and Asia, and the shadow of Africa. They make the steaming, strong-flavored, racy stew which is New York—and America.

New York is megalomaniac; so is America. New York is rushing, restless, formless, strident, sensational, credulous, vulgar. What American city is not? It is cluttered with ugliness, the irretrievable ugliness of the temporary in decay. It has impulses of beauty, sudden and splendid, intimations of its power, its imagination, its hurried and interrupted dreams. It is friendly and valiant and generous, careless and young, sure of its capacities, unsure of its judgments. It is a little like the New Poetry, difficult to scan, unamenable to reason and tradition, trailing off indifferently into the baldest and most jerry-built prose, but with a robust and magnificent intention, sometimes justified by clear new images and by occasional vivid evocations of beauty and of truth.

And in that, also, is it not America?