

Celebrating Who We Are

What springs to mind when somebody mentions New Orleans? Probably Mardi Gras and the French Quarter, right? How about Minnesota? If you're a Garrison Keillor fan like me, you're probably thinking Norwegian bachelor farmers. Likewise, reference to Pennsylvania Dutch conjures images of horse-drawn wagons, women in bonnets and bearded men in black wide-brimmed hats.

This country has many distinct regions, each with its own character, dialect and customs. Some are very identifiable, others more subtle. But the differences, obvious or not, are part of our American identity. Our heritage as a nation of immigrants makes it so.

There is a trend that has gained tremendous momentum in recent years. Our national culture, in all its richness and variety, is being homogenized. This trend toward one bland sameness is robbing our country of its regional distinctions. A Wal-Mart in Austin, Texas is barely distinguishable from one in Springfield; McDonald's Restaurants are reliably the same from Boston to San Francisco.

National corporations see this trend as a good thing – a dinner at Olive Garden will be roughly the same, whether the plantings around the parking lot are Florida palm trees or Vermont maples. It's true that the corporate approach reduces the risk of a bad experience, but it also effectively eliminates the likelihood of a really great experience. We're trading the qualities that make various parts of the country unique for predictable mediocrity.

Local specialties are part of the charm of visiting a region. Think Coney Island hot dogs, Maryland crab cakes or Cajun jambalaya. You can probably get a Maine lobster in Nebraska, but it won't taste the same after it's been shipped halfway across the country in cold storage.

A friend, speaking about recycling paint, once told me that if you mix all the colors together, you'll end up with beige or taupe. Think of it – all the brilliant decorator colors mixed together, in all their richness and variety, to produce taupe! That's what we're in danger of doing to our vibrant cultural palette.

The Pioneer Valley has its own rich tapestry of culture that is worth preserving. We have Chicopee kielbasa and Hadley asparagus. We have soul food in Mason Square and Vietnamese cuisine at the "X." There's a Portuguese community in Ludlow, a French-Irish heritage in Holyoke, and Swedes in Southwick. We have the rich history of the Jewish community and the vibrant culture of the Latino population. Asians, Poles, Greeks, Ukrainians and Russians have all added to the cultural landscape of the Pioneer Valley.

Regional identity is constantly evolving. Change is an integral part of it. We should be accepting of change, but discriminating. To be discriminating is to make

thoughtful choices. It shouldn't be confused with racial or cultural discrimination, which is thoughtless intolerance. We should pay attention to what is genuine in the menu of changes that comes our way and not be quick to reject customs or marginalize people simply because they're different. An immigrant culture, by holding onto some of its defining customs, adds to the character of its adopted community. Assimilation doesn't need to mean rejection of one's traditions. Sometimes, a surprisingly pure reservoir of a culture's tradition can be found in an ex-patriot community.

I have a friend of Greek lineage. He told me recently about his 95ish mother traveling back to the "Old Country", and bringing baklava to give to her relatives. My friend initially scoffed at his mother, thinking it silly to bring the national treat back to the country of its origin. He was shocked to see how enthusiastically it was received. Come to find out, the Old Country Greeks had largely abandoned home-made in favor of packaged, store-bought and mostly inferior baklava.

Another time, I had an enlightening conversation with an Acadian who was working at a visitors' center in Digby, Nova Scotia. He pointed out that, because the Acadians had left France in the 17th century and had lost contact with the French culture over time, their customs and language had evolved separately. The traditions of modern Acadians are more closely associated with 17th century France than the France of today.

In both of these cases, the ex-patriot community represents a kind of "core sample" of its native culture. Each has also contributed the traditions it has preserved to its adopted culture, adding depth and texture to it. The result is a rich and unique blend.

Likewise, the cultural identity of the Pioneer Valley has been molded over hundreds of years. It stretches back to the Native Americans from whom we adopted so

many of our place names: Agawam, Tekoa, Nonotuck and Connecticut, to name just a few. The farmers who settled the fertile valley in the 17th and 18th centuries began a tradition that continues today. Sweet corn and asparagus grown in the rich soil of the Pioneer Valley still have a wide-spread reputation for flavor and quality today.

The Pioneer Valley has been home to many people that helped to define both our region and our nation. Jonathan Edwards, the firebrand Puritan minister, lived and preached in Northampton. Pelham farmer Daniel Shays and his confederates in the rebellion that bears his name, helped to give the region its reputation for Yankee independence. The abolitionist John Brown lived in Springfield during the years he was forming the beliefs he fought and died for. Calvin Coolidge was mayor of Northampton before becoming our 30th president.

Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, was born in Springfield and wrote about the city in his first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. Poet, journalist and long-time editor of the Saturday Evening Post William Cullen Bryant and Temple University founder Russell Conwell were both born in the Pioneer Valley. Emily Dickinson lived and died in her family's Amherst home. Journalist, publisher and political activist Samuel Bowles lived in Springfield.

I'm sure I've missed many other cultural luminaries who have called the Pioneer Valley their home, which only goes to show how rich a heritage we share. The richness extends well beyond literature, politics and philosophy too.

It's well known that Springfield is the birthplace of basketball. Springfield College physical education teacher Dr. James Naismith invented the game in 1891 as a way to distract rowdy athletes during the long winter off-season. The local origin of

volleyball is less well-known. Holyoke YMCA Phys. Ed. Director William Morgan is credited with inventing the game in 1895. The Springfield area also has a long association with hockey; the city has been home to an American Hockey League franchise since the 1920's. Star Boston Bruins defenseman Eddie Shore ("Mr. Hockey") ruled the Eastern States Coliseum and the Springfield Civic Center (now the Mass Mutual Center) as owner, first of the Indians, then of the Kings, long after his playing days were over.

Industry has played a huge role in defining the identity of the Pioneer Valley. George Washington commissioned the Springfield Armory in 1777 to arm the soldiers of the Revolution. He chose Springfield for its combination of strategic location, ample waterpower and skilled workers, giving birth to the local machining industry. Holyoke began as a planned community, developed around a network of canals and mill buildings in the early days of the industrial age.

One of the first builders of passenger cars for the railroad, Wason Manufacturing, was located in Springfield. The Duryea brothers of Chicopee built the first automobiles ever offered for sale. Indian Motocycles (the company's spelling) were built in Springfield for more than fifty years, and Rolls Royce built Silver Ghosts and Phantoms there for ten years. Up and down the Pioneer Valley, entrepreneurs and innovators harnessed the power of the rivers and leveraged the rich natural and human resources of the area, from the toolmakers of Millers Falls, the Florence silk mills, and the button factories of Haydenville and Easthampton, to the buggy whips of Westfield.

The character of the Pioneer Valley community is the sum of all the groups and individuals who have called this area home and have stamped it indelibly with their

collective personalities. But it goes beyond that. It's a continuum. It's what has been, what is, and what will be. It's the products we make, the produce we grow, and the food we prepare. It's the unique stores and businesses that line our streets and provide a tax base for our communities.

Local character is something to take pride in, in all its diversity. It's delicate and easily lost. But it's also messy – constantly shape-shifting and blending with neighboring regions. It's difficult to pin down, to sort into neat boxes. So how can we preserve it?

The first step is to recognize that it exists and that it has value. The second is to learn a little bit about it. You don't have to enroll in a local history class or read dry, dusty historical treatises. Go to local museums, attend cultural festivals, go to one of the regional fairs, drive the back roads, walk around your neighborhood, talk to old-timers from the area – have fun with it.

Thirdly, identify the defining characteristics of the valley that are important to you and support them. Get involved in groups that are actively preserving or creating valuable aspects of our regional identity. There are worthwhile organizations and activities all around us that need our help and support.

Shop local businesses. Corporate chain stores are corrosive to regional character. Local businesses add to the distinctiveness of the region, while big-box stores move the region towards a bland, characterless uniformity.

With the pervasive and seductive influence of mass-media advertising constantly pulling us in the direction most favorable to corporate interests, we can't afford to be passive, to allow ourselves to be led like so many sheep. If you give your patronage to

corporate franchises over local independents, that's your right. But please do it thoughtfully, because YOU choose to do it.

Support local agriculture. Farming is a vital part of the Pioneer Valley and we allow it to be eroded away at our peril. Treat yourself to some locally-grown asparagus, corn, strawberries, or other fresh-picked produce from a farm stand. Join a CSA farm program. Look for locally-grown produce in your supermarket. Plan your meals around produce that's in season here in the valley.

Be proud of our home, proud of our Pioneer Valley in all its variety. It's easy to become jaded – to get caught up in the negativity of daily headlines. It's tempting to think our best days are behind us. They are only if we allow it to be so. History is comfortable – it's solid and definite, unlike the future. Also unlike the future, history can't be changed.

We have the opportunity to help shape the future of the Pioneer Valley. In fact, we shape it whether we intend to or not. We should relish that opportunity – seize it enthusiastically.

Let's go boldly forth and create our own piece of our regional identity.