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JOHN BRINCKERHOFF JACKSON

"The Almost Perfect Town"

Landscape (1952)

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Editors' introduction John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1909–1997) can best be described as a historian of landscapes as physical, cultural, and conceptual artifacts. To Jackson, the landscape was neither wilderness nor rural nature "out there," but the totality of natural and built environments that simultaneously surround and infuse all forms of human activity.

Jackson taught for many years in schools of landscape architecture at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley. He was the founder of the influential journal *Landscape* and its editor from 1951 to 1968. He may be regarded as an heir to the nineteenth-century French and English landscape gardening traditions and to the pioneering work of Frederick Law Olmsted (p. 314) and the American parks movement. What sets him clearly apart from those traditional roots, however, is that, for Jackson, the urban landscape is not just a city's parks, public gardens, official buildings, and treelined boulevards, but its highways, its shopping malls, its rundown warehouse districts, its standard-built two-bedroom houses, and its slums as well. Jackson sees these many elements of the built landscape not just as physical objects, but as social constructs full of meaning and moral implication. It is hardly surprising, then, that J. B. Jackson's approximate version of urban utopia – his *almost* perfect place – is the commonplace, vernacular, Main Street environment of a typical American small town.

In "The Almost Perfect Town" Jackson describes a semi-mythical Optimo City that is located in the American Southwest but could just as easily have been found almost anywhere in North America, Europe, Australia, and even parts of Asia and Africa beyond the margins of the great metropolitan regions. It is important that Optimo is a small place. Jackson observes that "the world of Optimo City is still complete" precisely because "the ties between country and town have not yet been broken." It is also important that Optimo has a history, however slender, that can be read in its architecture, in the layout of its streets, and in its traditional rivalry with Apache Center twenty miles away.

Jackson uses his loving, elegiac description of Optimo City as a way of criticizing developments in city planning after World War II that threatened to destroy local communities in the name of economic progress. He compares Optimo's unexceptional Courthouse Square to the Spanish plazas and the great public squares of the Baroque era in that they all serve as socially unifying communal centers. And he notes with dismay that some of Optimo's business leaders want to tear the courthouse down to build a parking lot and to replace it with the typical "bureaucrat modernism" of so many contemporary civic centers. Jackson would like to preserve positive features of small towns that Peter Calthorpe (p. 350) and other architects associated with the "new urbanism" seek to recapture in "pedestrian pockets" and related neo-traditional designs.

Jackson's Optimo City provides a revealing snapshot of small town America in the 1950s before freeway construction, mass auto-ownership, and the proliferation of highway-based shopping centers. It also represents a way of thinking about urban space that is timeless.

J. B. Jackson's "The Almost Perfect Town" and the following selection by Witold Rybczynski (p. 170) make a nice pair. Rybczynski picks up nearly half a century after Jackson with a description of the effects that the automobile and shopping centers have had on the downtown of another small American city. Review Jane Jacobs's critique of rigid, automobile-based planning (p. 106) for another defense of vernacular urban evolution.

Among the best of J. B. Jackson's booklength studies and collections of essays are *Landscapes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), *American Space* (New York: Norton, 1972), *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), and *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994). Also, see the journal *Landscape* for additional writings by J. B. Jackson himself and for a continuing outpouring of articles exploring the meaning of landscape by academics and the architects, urban planners, and landscape designers Jackson inspired.

Books by Jackson's student and his successor at Harvard John R. Stilgoe are *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986) and *Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History and Awareness in Everyday Places* (New York: Walker and Co., 1998).

Other books on vernacular architecture include Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), Dell Upton and John M. Vlach, *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1986), Ronald W. Haase, *Classic Cracker: Florida's Wood-Frame Vernacular Architecture* (Sarasota, FL: Pineapple Press, 1992), John A. Kouwenhoven, *Made in America: The Arts in Modern Civilization* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), Thomas Carter (ed.), *Images of an American Land: Vernacular Architecture in the Western United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), Jim Heimann, *California Crazy: Roadside Vernacular Architecture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1981), Colleen Josephine Sheehy, *The Flamingo in the Garden: American Yard Art and the Vernacular Landscape* (London: Garland, 1998), Fred E. H. Schroeder, *Front Yard America: The Evolution and Meanings of a Vernacular Domestic Landscape* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University, 1993), John Chase, *Glitter Stucco and Dumpster Diving: Reflections on Building Production in the Vernacular City* (London: Verso, 1998), Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non-pedigreed Architecture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), and Paul Oliver (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Optimo City (pop. 10,783, alt. 2,100 ft.), situated on a small rise overlooking the N. branch of the Apache River, is a farm and ranch center served by a spur of the S.P. County seat of Sheridan Co. Optimo City (originally established in 1843 as Ft. Gaffney). It was the scene of a bloody encounter with a party of marauding Indians in 1857. (See marker on courthouse lawn.) It is the location of a state Insane Asylum, of a sorghum processing plant and an overall factory. Annual County Fair and Cowboy Roundup Sept. 4. The highway now passes

through a rolling countryside devoted to grain crops and cattle raising.

Thus would the state guide dispose of Optimo City and hasten on to a more spirited topic if Optimo City as such existed. Optimo City, however, is not one town, it is a hundred or more towns, all very much alike scattered across the United States from the Alleghenies to the Pacific, most numerous west of the Mississippi and

south of the Platte. When, for instance, you travel through Texas and Oklahoma and New Mexico and even parts of Kansas and Missouri, Optimo City is the blur of filling stations and motels you occasionally pass; the solitary traffic light, the glimpse up a side street of an elephantine courthouse surrounded by elms and sycamores, the brief congestion of mud-spattered pickup trucks that slows you down before you hit the open road once more. And fifty miles farther on Optimo City's identical twin appears on the horizon, and a half dozen more Optimos beyond that until at last, with some relief, you reach the metropolis with its new housing developments and factories and the cluster of downtown skyscrapers.

Optimo City, then, is actually a very familiar feature of the American landscape. But since you have never stopped there except to buy gas, it might be well to know it a little better. What is there to see? Not a great deal, yet more than you would at first suspect.

Optimo, being after all an imaginary average small town, has to have had an average small-town history, or at least a Western version of that average. The original Fort Gaffney (named after some inconspicuous worthy in the U.S. Army) was really little more than a stockade on a bluff overlooking a ford in the river; a few roads or trails in the old days straggled out into the plain (or desert as they called it then), lost heart and disappeared two or three miles from town. Occasionally even today someone digs up a fragment of the palisade or a bit of rust-eaten hardware in the backyards of the houses near the center of town, and the historical society possesses what it claims is the key to the principal gate. But on the whole, Optimo City is not much interested in its martial past. The fort as a military installation ceased to exist during the Civil War, and the last of the pioneers died a half century ago before anyone had the historical sense to take down his story. And when the county seat was located in the town the name was changed from Fort Gaffney with its frontier connotation to Optimo, which means (so the townspeople will tell you) "I hope for the best" in Latin.

What Optimo is really proud of even now is its identity as county seat. Sheridan County (and you will do well to remember that it was NOT named after the notorious Union general but

after Horace Sheridan, an early member of the territorial legislature; Optimo still feels strongly about what it calls the War between the States) was organized in the 1870s and there ensued a brief but lively competition for the possession of the courthouse between Optimo and the next largest settlement, Apache Center, twenty miles away. Optimo City won, and Apache Center, a cowtown with one paved street, is not allowed to forget the fact. The football and basketball games between the Optimo Cougars and the Apache Braves are still characterized by a very special sort of rivalry. No matter how badly beaten Optimo City often is, it consoles itself by remembering that it is still the county seat, and that Apache Center, in spite of the brute cunning of its team, has still only one street paved. We shall presently come back to the meaning of that boast.

To get on with the history of Optimo.

THE INFLEXIBLE GRIDIRON

Aided by the state and Army engineers, the city fathers, back in the 1870s, surveyed and laid out the new metropolis. As a matter of course they located a square or public place in the center of the town and eventually they built their courthouse in the middle of the square; such having been the layout of every county seat these Western Americans had ever seen. Streets led from the center of each side of the square, being named Main Street North and South, and Sheridan Street East and West. Eventually these four streets and the square were surrounded by a gridiron pattern of streets and avenues - all numbered or lettered, and all of them totally oblivious of the topography of the town. Some streets charge up impossibly steep slopes, straight as an arrow; others lead off into the tangle of alders and cottonwoods near the river and get lost.

Strangely enough, this inflexibility in the plan has had some very pleasant results. South Main Street, which leads from the square down to the river, was too steep in the old days for heavily laden wagons to climb in wet weather, so at the foot of it on the flats near the river those merchants who dealt in farm produce and farm equipment built their stores and warehouses. The blacksmith and welder, the hay and grain

supply, and finally the auction ring and the farmers' market found South Main the best location in town for their purpose - which purpose being primarily dealing with out-of-town farmers and ranchers. And when, after considerable pressure on the legislature and much resistance from Apache Center (which already had a railroad), the Southern Pacific built a spur to Optimo, the depot was naturally built at the foot of South Main. And of course the grain elevator and the stockyards were built near the railroad. The railroad spur was intended to make Optimo into a manufacturing city, and never did; all that ever came was a small overall factory and a plant for processing sorghum with a combined payroll of about 150. Most of the workers in the two establishments are Mexicans from south of the border - locally referred to in polite circles as "Latinos" or "Hispanos." They have built for themselves flimsy little houses under the cottonwoods and next to the river. "If ever we have an epidemic in Optimo," the men at the courthouse remark, "it will break out first of all in those Latino shacks." But they have done nothing as yet about providing them with better houses, and probably never will.

DOWNTOWN AND UPTOWN

Depot, market, factories, warehouses, slum - these features, combined with the fascination of the river bank and stockyards and the assorted public of railroaders and Latinos and occasional ranch hands - have all given South Main a very definite character: ~~easy-going, loud, colorful, and perhaps during fair week or at shipping time~~ a little disreputable. Boys on the Cougar football squad have specific orders to stay away from South Main, but they don't. Actually the whole of Optimo looks on the section with indulgence and pride; it makes the townspeople feel that they understand metropolitan problems when they can compare South Main with the New York waterfront.

North Main, up on the heights beyond the Courthouse Square and past the two or three blocks of retail stores, is (on the other hand) the very finest part of Optimo. The northwestern section of town, with its tree-shaded streets, its view over the river and the prairie, its summer

breezes, has always been identified with wealth and fashion as Optimo understands them. Colonel Ephraim Powell (Confederate Army, Ret., owner of some of the best ranch country in the region) built his bride a handsome limestone house with a slate roof and a tower, and Walter Slymaker, proprietor of Slymaker's Mercantile and of the grain elevator, not to be outdone, built an even larger house farther up Main; so did Hooperson, first president of the bank. There are a dozen such houses in all, stone or Milwaukee brick with piazzas (or galleries, as the old timers still call them) and large, untidy gardens around them. It is worth noting, by the way, that the brightest claim to aristocratic heritage is this: grandfather came out West for his health. New England may have its "Mayflower" and "Arabella," east Texas its Three Hundred Founding Families, New Mexico its Conquistadores; but Optimo is loyal to the image of the delicate young college graduate who arrived by train with his law books, his set of Dickens, his taste for wine, and the custom of dressing for dinner. This legendary figure has about seen his day in the small talk of Optimo society, and the younger generation frankly doubts his having ever existed; but he (or his ghost) had a definite effect on local manners and ways of living. At all events, because of this memory Optimo looks down on those Western mining towns where Sarah Bernhardt and de Reszke and Oscar Wilde seem to have played so many one-night stands in now-vanished opera houses.

A WORLD IN ITSELF

Wickedness - or the suggestion of wickedness - at one end of Main, affluence and respectability at the other. How about Sheridan Street running East and West? That is where you'll find most of the stores; in the first four or five blocks on either side of the Courthouse Square. They form a rampart: narrow brick houses, most of them two stories high with elaborate cornices and long narrow windows; all of them devoid of modern commercial graces of chromium and black glass and artful window display, all of them ugly but all of them pretty uniform; and so you have on Sheridan Street something rarely seen in urban America: a harmonious and restful and dignified business section. Only eight or ten blocks of it in

all, to be sure; turn any corner and you are at once in a residential area.

Here there is block after block of one-story frame houses with trees in front and picket fences or hedges; no sidewalk after the first block or so; a hideous church (without a cemetery of course); a small-time auto repair shop in someone's back yard; dirt roadway; and if you follow the road a few blocks more – say to 10th Street (after that there are no more signs) – you are likely to see a tractor turn into someone's drive with wisps of freshly cut alfalfa clinging to the vertical sickle bar. The countryside is that close to the heart of Optimo City, farmers are that much part of the town. And the glimpse of the tractor (like the glimpse of a deer or a fox driven out of the hills by a heavy winter) restores for a moment a feeling for an old kinship that seemed to have been destroyed forever. But this is what makes Optimo, the hundreds of Optimos throughout America, so valuable; the ties between country and town have not yet been broken. Limited though it may well be in many ways, the world of Optimo City is still complete.

The center of this world is Courthouse Square, with the courthouse, ponderous, barbaric, and imposing, in the center of that. The building and its woebegone little park not only interrupts the vistas of Main and Sheridan – it was intended to do this – it also interrupts the flow of traffic in all four directions. A sluggish eddy of vehicles and pedestrians is the result, Optimo's animate existence slowed and intensified. The houses on the four sides of the square are of the same vintage (and the same general architecture) as the monument in their midst: mid-nineteenth-century brick or stone; cornices like the brims of hats, fancy dripstones over the arched windows like eyebrows; painted blood-red or mustard-yellow or white; identical except for the six-story Gaffney Hotel and the classicism of the First National Bank.

Every house has a tin roof porch extending over the sidewalk, a sort of permanent awning which protects passersby and incidentally conceals the motley of store windows and signs. To walk around the square and down Sheridan Street under a succession of these galleries or metal awnings, crossing the strips of bright sunlight between the roofs of different height, is

one of the delights of Optimo – one of its amenities in the English use of that word. You begin to understand why the Courthouse Square is such a popular part of town.

SATURDAY NIGHTS – BRIGHT LIGHTS

Saturday, of course, is the best day for seeing the full tide of human existence in Sheridan County. The rows of parked pickups are like cattle in a feed lot; the sidewalks in front of Slymaker's Mercantile, the Ranch Cafe, Sears, the drugstore, resound to the mincing steps of cowboy boots; farmers and ranchers, thumbs in their pants pockets, gather in groups to lament the drought (there is always a drought) and those men in Washington, while their wives go from store to movie house to store. Radios, jukeboxes, the bell in the courthouse tower; the teenagers doing "shave-and-a-haircut; bay rum" on the horns of their parents' cars as they drive round and round the square. The smell of hot coffee, beer, popcorn, exhaust, alfalfa, cow manure. A man is trying to sell a truckload of grapefruit so that he can buy a truckload of cinderblocks to sell somewhere else. Dogs; 10-year-old cowboys firing cap pistols at each other. The air is full of pigeons, floating candy wrappers, the flat strong accent erroneously called Texan.

All these people are here in the center of Optimo for many reasons – for sociability first of all, for news, for the spending and making of money; for relaxation. "Jim Guthrie and wife were in town last week, visiting friends and transacting business," is the way the *Sheridan Sentinel* describes it; and almost all of Jim Guthrie's business takes place in the square. That is one of the peculiarities of Optimo and one of the reasons why the square as an institution is so important. For it is around the square that the oldest and most essential urban (or county) services are established. Here are the firms under local control and ownership, those devoted almost exclusively to the interest of the surrounding countryside. Upstairs are the lawyers, doctors, dentists, insurance firms, the public stenographer, the Farm Bureau. Downstairs are the bank, the prescription drugstore, the newspaper office, and of course Slymaker's Mercantile and the Ranch Cafe.

INFLUENCE OF THE COURTHOUSE

Why have the chain stores not invaded this part of town in greater force? Some have already got a foothold, but most of them are at the far end of Sheridan or even out on the Federal Highway. The presence of the courthouse is partly responsible. The traditional services want to be as near the courthouse as they can, and real-estate values are high. The courthouse itself attracts so many out-of-town visitors that the problem of parking is acute. The only solution that occurs to the enlightened minds of the Chamber of Commerce is to tear the courthouse down, use the place for parking, and build a new one somewhere else. They have already had an architect draw a sketch of a new courthouse to go at the far end of Main Street: a chaste concrete cube with vertical motifs between the windows - a fine specimen of bureaucrat modernism. But the trouble is, where to get the money for a new courthouse when the old one is still quite evidently adequate and in constant use?

If you enter the courthouse you will be amazed by two things: the horrifying architecture of the place, and the variety of functions it fills. Courthouse means of course courtrooms, and there are two of those. Then there is the office of the County Treasurer, the Road Commissioner, the School Board, the Agricultural Agent, the Extension Agent, Sanitary Inspector, and usually a group of Federal agencies as well - PMA, Soil Conservation, FHA and so on. Finally the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, and the District Nurse. No doubt many of these offices are tiresome examples of government interference in private matters; just the same, they are for better or worse part of almost every farmer's and rancher's business, and the courthouse, in spite of all the talk about county consolidation, is a more important place than ever.

As it is, the ugly old building has conferred upon Optimo a blessing which many larger and richer American towns can envy: a center for civic activity and a symbol for civic pride - something as different from the modern "civic center" as day is from night. Contrast the array of classic edifices, lost in the midst of waste space, the meaningless pomp of flagpoles and

war memorials and dribbling fountains of any American city from San Francisco to Washington with the animation and harmony and the almost domestic intimacy of Optimo Courthouse Square, and you have a pretty good measure of what is wrong with much American city planning: civic consciousness has been divorced from everyday life, put in a special zone all by itself. Optimo City has its zones; but they are organically related to one another.

Doubtless the time will never come that the square is studied as a work of art. Why should it be? The craftsmanship in the details, the architecture of the building, the notions of urbanism in the layout of the square itself are all on a very countrified level. Still, such a square as this has dignity and even charm. The charm is perhaps antiquarian - a bit of rural America of seventy-five years ago; the dignity is something else again. It derives from the function of the courthouse and the square, and from its peculiarly national character.

COMMUNAL CENTER

The practice of erecting a public building in the center of an open place is in fact pretty well confined to America - more specifically to nineteenth-century America. The vast open areas favored by eighteenth-century European planners were usually kept free of construction, and public buildings - churches and palaces and law-courts - were located to face these squares; to command them, as it were. But they were not allowed to interfere with the original open effect.

Even the plans of eighteenth-century American cities, such as Philadelphia and Reading and Savannah and Washington, always left the square or public place intact. Spanish America, of course, provides the best illustrations of all; the plaza, nine times out of ten, is surrounded by public buildings, but it is left free. Yet almost every American town laid out after (say) 1820 deliberately planted a public building in the center of its square. Sometimes it was a school, sometimes a city hall, more often a courthouse, and it was always approachable from all four sides and always as conspicuous as possible.

Why? Why did these pioneer city fathers go counter to the taste of the past in this matter?

One guess is as good as another. Perhaps they were so proud of their representative institutions that they wanted to give their public buildings the best location available. Perhaps frontier America was following an aesthetic movement, already at that date strong in Europe, that held that an open space was improved when it contained some prominent free-standing object – an obelisk or a statue or a triumphal arch. However that may have been, the pioneer Americans went Europe one better, and put the largest building in town right in the center of the square.

Thus the square ceased to be thought of in nineteenth-century America as a vacant space; it became a container or (if you prefer) a frame. A frame, so it happened, not merely for the courthouse, but for all activity of a communal sort. Few aesthetic experiments have ever produced such brilliantly practical results. A society which had long since ceased to rally around the individual leader and his residence and which was rapidly tiring of rallying around the meetinghouse or church all at once found a new symbol: local representative government, or the courthouse. A good deal of flagwaving resulted – as European travelers have always told us – and a good deal of very poor “representational” architecture; but Optimo acquired something to be proud of, something to moderate that American tendency to think of every town as existing entirely for money-making purposes.

SYMBOL OF INDEPENDENCE

At this juncture the protesting voice of the Chamber of Commerce is heard. “One moment. Before you finish with our courthouse you had better hear the other side of the question. If the courthouse were torn down we would not only have more parking space – sorely needed in Optimo – we would also get funds for widening Main Street into a four-lane highway. If Main Street were widened Optimo could attract many new businesses catering to tourists and other transients – restaurants and motels and garages and all sorts of drive-in establishments. In the last ten years” (continues the Chamber of Commerce) “Optimo has grown by twelve hundred. Twelve hundred! At that rate we’ll still

be a small town of less than twenty thousand in 1999. But if we had new businesses we’d grow fast and have better schools and a new hospital, and the young people wouldn’t move to the cities. Or do you expect Optimo to go on depending on a few hundred tight-fisted farmers and ranchers for its livelihood?” The voice, now shaking with emotion, adds something about “eliminating” South Main by means of an embankment and a clover leaf and picnic grounds for tourists under the cottonwoods where the Latinos still reside.

These suggestions are very sensible ones on the whole. Translate them into more general terms and what they amount to is this: if we want to get ahead, the best thing to do is break with our own past, become as independent as possible of our immediate environment and at the same time become almost completely dependent for our well-being on some remote outside resource. Whatever you may think of such a program, you cannot very well deny that it has been successful for a large number of American towns. Think of the hayseed communities which have suddenly found themselves next to an oil field or a large factory or an Army installation, and which have cashed in on their good fortune by transforming themselves overnight, turning their backs on their former sources of income, and tripling their population in a few years! It is true that these towns put all their eggs in one basket, that they are totally at the mercy of some large enterprise quite beyond their control. But think of the freedom from local environment; think of the excitement and the money! Given the same circumstances – and the Southwest is full of surprises still – why should Optimo not do the same?

A COMMON DESTINY

Because there are many different kinds of towns just as there are many different kinds of men, a development which is good for one kind can be death on another. Apache Center (to use that abject community as an example), with its stockyards and its one paved street and its very limited responsibility to the county, as a community might well become a boom-town and no one would be worse off. Optimo seems to

have a different destiny. For almost a hundred years – a long time in this part of the world – it has been identified with the surrounding landscape and been an essential part of it. Whatever wealth it possesses has come from the farms and ranches, not from the overall factory or from tourists. The bankers and merchants will tell you, of course, that without their ceaseless efforts and their vision the countryside could never have existed; the farmers and ranchers consider Optimo's prosperity and importance entirely their own creation. Both parties are right to the extent that the town is part of the landscape – one might even say part of every farm, since much farm business takes place in the town itself.

Now if Optimo suddenly became a year-round tourist resort, or the overall capital of the Southwest; what would happen to that relationship, do you suppose? It would ~~vanish~~. The farmers and ranchers would ~~soon~~ find themselves crowded out, and would go elsewhere for those services and benefits which they now enjoy in Optimo. And as for Optimo itself, it would soon achieve the flow of traffic, the new store fronts, the housing developments, the payrolls and bank accounts it cannot help dreaming about; and in the same process achieve a total social and physical dislocation, and a loss of a sense of its own identity. County Seat of Sheridan County? Yes; but much more important: Southwestern branch of the "American Cloak and Garment Corporation"; or the LITTLE TOWN WITH THE BIG WELCOME – 300 tourist beds which, when empty for one night out of three, threaten bankruptcy to half the town.

As of the present, Optimo remains pretty much as it has been for the last generation. The Federal Highway still bypasses the center (what a roadblock, symbolical as well as actual, that courthouse is!); so if you want to see Optimo, you had better turn off at the top of the hill near the watertower of the lunatic asylum – now called Fairview State Rest Home, and with the hideous high fence around it torn down. The dirt

road eventually becomes North Main. The old Slymaker place is still intact. The Powell mansion, galleries and all, belongs to the American Legion, and a funeral home has taken over the Hooperson house. Then comes downtown Optimo; and then the courthouse, huge and graceless, in detail and proportion more like a monstrous birdhouse than a monument. Stop here. You'll find nothing of interest in the stores, and no architectural gems down a side street. Even if there were, no one would be able to point them out. The historical society, largely in the hands of ladies, thinks of antiquity in terms of antiques, and art as anything that looks pretty on the mantelpiece.

The weather is likely to be scorching hot and dry, with a wild ineffectual breeze in the elms and sycamores. You'll find no restaurant in town with atmosphere – no chandeliers made out of wagon wheels, no wall decorations of famous brands, no bar disguised as the Hitching Rail or the Old Corral. Under a high ceiling with a two-bladed fan in the middle, you'll eat ham hock and beans, hot bread, iced tea without lemon, and like it or go without. But as compensation of sorts at the next table there will be two ranchers eating with their hats on, and discussing the affairs, public and private, of Optimo City. To hear them talk, you'd think they owned the town.

That's about all. There's the market at the foot of South Main, the Latino shacks around the overall factory, a grove of cottonwoods, and the Apache River (North Branch) trickling down a bed ten times too big; and then the open country. You may be glad to have left Optimo behind.

Or you may have liked it, and found it pleasantly old-fashioned. Perhaps it is; but it is in no danger of dying out quite yet. As we said to begin with, there is another Optimo City fifty miles farther on. The country is covered with them. Indeed they are so numerous that it sometimes seems as if Optimo and rural America were one and indivisible.