

All Loyalty is Local

As a boy, I lived in Hampden-Sydney, a small college town in Virginia, where my family had lived for generations. H-S was the Old South of idyllic imagination.

Georgian buildings stood on rolling green laws shaded by ancient oaks. Quiet reigned. At night, stars shone and crickets creaked. In the woods nearby, a stream splashed and chortled over Slippery Rock, where you could slide bare-bottomed into a welcoming pool. People were socially conservative, literate, friendly, living in houses they had lived in forever. Many were professors, stately men of great learning.

Seven miles away in Farmville, the county seat, lovely old houses lined High Street, not far from the statue of the Confederate soldier. On Main Street were stores where people had known each other for generations. A Southern mannerliness prevailed.

When the wind was right, the rich sweet smell of tobacco came peppery from the ancient processing floors at the end of town. There was a sense of permanence, of locality. Farmville, like Hampden-Sydney, like Athens, Alabama in 1957, like New Orleans once, like so many towns, was its own place, shaped by the people who lived there. You could feel a loyalty to it. I did.

Perhaps all loyalty is essentially local. America was once a sprawling tapestry of locality. Boone, North Carolina wasn't Barstow, and Barstow wasn't Bluefield, and Bluefield wasn't Amarillo, but they were all what they were and had their distinctiveness and dignity, their quirky idiosyncrasy.

It didn't last. It doesn't last. Sooner or later, the shopping mall comes to the outskirts. With it come Gap, Penny's, McDonald's, Hecht's, Wal-Mart, Sam's,

Office Depot, Staples, Wendy's. Main Street dies because Wal-Mart is cheaper. People no longer stroll down Main saying hello to friends. They drive to the mall and park.

Ruby Tuesday arrives, mass cheer designed at corporate headquarters. Red's Rib Pit dies. Red's belonged where it was, with the stuffed buck's head and the deer rifle under it on a rack made of antlers. Ruby Tuesday glittered more and had a better menu.

A man has a certain dignity when he stands in his own farm or when he owns his store and talks politics with customers. When he becomes a salaried warehouseman for a remote office in Milwaukee, he doesn't.

The localness that made towns memorable withers further under the onslaught of television. Regional accents vanish. Across the continent people gawk in electronic synchronicity at sitcoms devised in Hollywood and New York. These carefully, deliberately, gnaw away at local views of things and replace them with Appropriate Values. People no longer raise their children. The box does. Their schooling is determined by texts written far off, designed to instill the politics of elsewhere.

Music is the soul of a locality. Zydeco is Louisiana, *los mariachis* are Mexico, Presley was the small-town South. New York now determines our music. Everything is decided from afar. Everything moves toward uniformity. And toward degradation. We suffer under a plague of rappers, human cockroaches scuttling across the sores of a necrotic civiliza-

tion. People in the Bible Belt don't want to hear someone shouting profanity from the CD player, don't want their children exposed to it, but New York says they must. The Supreme Court says they must. How much loyalty do I owe to profits at Warner Brothers? To nine presumptuous apparitions in black robes who care nothing about me?

And how much attachment should I feel toward the government? Washington once seemed benign. It was the capital of a magnificent country that had promulgated freedom and defeated the Nazis and was defending the world from communism. Not all of this stood up to analysis, but at least Washington wasn't the enemy. It managed diplomacy and the military and ran the post office. Otherwise it pretty much left people alone.

Not now. People no longer live as they like, by standards and habits that seem right to them, within reasonable laws. We live as Washington tells us. The government tells us whom to hire, whom to sell our houses to, whether we can have the Ten Commandments on a courthouse wall or a Christmas display in the town square, what names we can call each other without going to jail, how far off the floor toilet seats have to be in factories.

Today the government regards me if not as an enemy, then as a suspect. Once at airports I got a smile and a "Welcome back." Now, going or coming, I encounter unfriendly police, semi-strip searches. I must be watched. Everywhere the cameras go in, the databases breed, the FBI reads my e-mail. Yes, I know it's because of terrorism. Yes, I know they are just doing their jobs. I don't care.

I can obey, or I can leave. I cannot like it. That is beyond me. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*A Day Without A Mexican*]

Dude, Where's My Carwash?

By Steve Sailer

CURRENTLY PLAYING mostly in Hispanic neighborhoods in California, "*A Day Without a Mexican*" is a fairly amusing cross between a "Twilight Zone" parable and one of Christopher Guest's satirical mockumentaries. It depicts what might happen if one sunny morning, all 12 million Latinos in the Golden State suddenly vanish into a purple haze, leaving inept gringos behind to paint their own houses (bunglingly), wash their own cars, and scrub their own toilets.

One upside is immediately clear: the non-Hispanics left behind can now commute to work at 95 mph on the empty San Diego Freeway. After awhile, though, California's whites, blacks, and Asians realize that not only are they tired of trying (and failing) to take care of themselves but that they actually miss their old Latino neighbors—maybe they wouldn't have gone if we hadn't taken them for granted. Even the film's WASP villain, the Pete Wilson look-alike governor, starts a crash project to bring the Mexicans back from the Purple Dimension.

The state's hopes are pinned on television reporter Lila Rodriguez, the last person left in California whose name ends in a "z." She nobly donates herself to play lab rat in a half-mad Japanese scientist's search for the ineffable "Latino Factor" in her genes. There, she

learns the shocking truth about herself: her real parents were immigrants from Armenia. When she was orphaned as a baby, the warm-hearted Mexican family next door adopted her. She sobs, "But my heart is Mexican!" ... and instantly disappears.

Latino audiences hoping to see a movie starring people like themselves will be stymied by the unavoidable problem that "*A Day Without a Mexican*" is, as promised, frequently a movie without a Mexican.

In case you were wondering, the Mexican screenwriters employ a definition of "Mexican" so expansive that even the Los Angeles Opera's general director, Spanish tenor Plácido Domingo, evaporates. To cover up their Mexican imperialism toward their southern neighbors, the filmmakers repeatedly joke that whites call all Hispanics "Mexicans."

The movie is unlikely to strike a nerve among non-Hispanics in the immense regions of the country where Americans take for granted that they must do all those jobs that upper-middle-class Californians assume "Americans just won't do." Nor will the movie convince the general public that Los Angeles is actually better off for having been inundated with illegal immigrants. The film metaphorically asks: What would LA look like if the federal government had been serious about enforcing the law? Like Seattle with sunshine?

"*A Day Without a Mexican*" is an obvious allegory about how a general strike among nationalistic Latinos could someday bring California to its knees. As a comedy, it's nothing special, but precisely because movies about Mexican-Americans are so rare, it offers a unique perspective on the debate over Latino separatism kicked off by Harvard professor Samuel Huntington's book *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*.

In contrast to Huntington, the filmmakers are dismayed by how little impact the 38 million resident Hispanics are having on America's national identity. "How do you make the invisible visible?" they ask in frustration. "You take it away."

Although the press regularly twitters about the "vibrant contributions of Mexican-American culture," the hard truth is that California's main creative industries—Hollywood and Silicon Valley—pay almost no attention to Chicanos. This film's director and three screenwriters, for example, are not Mexican-Americans but famous names in Mexico City's artistic elite.

Hispanic culture thrives in Miami, the dream destination of Latin America's wealthy; but surprisingly few Mexican institutions besides churches and soccer teams prosper in LA, the first stop for the poor.

Perhaps the most insightful objection to Huntington's worries about future separatism is that the immigrants, bringing with them from Mexico bitter lessons that you can't trust anybody outside the family, do not seem able to get themselves organized enough, not the way American immigrants in 19th-century California and Texas could come together to secede from Mexico.

Today, wealthy white Californians see Mexicans as a docile and content supply of cheap servants, unlike those surly, dangerous, and ungrateful African-Americans. Yet, a race can tire of servility. Recall that just 50 years ago, whites complacently assumed that blacks would be pleased to be their cooks and gardeners forever.

We may someday look back on this little film as the first faint harbinger of a sea change in Mexican political consciousness. ■

Rated R for language and brief sexuality.