

# American Sense of Community: *Circling the Square or Hitting the Road*

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No term is closer to the center of our sentiments than *community*, especially for the folklorist. In our profession the terms folklore and community are intimately paired, for our sense of American history—indeed the story of humanity—is bound up with people getting together out of some notion of belonging to a place, a family, a work group, a region. Folklore consists of the traditional ways in which community people work and play together, and their customary forms of entertaining and instructing each other. Community is composed of people meeting regularly who have inherited or developed ways of celebrating their sense of coming together. The idea of the ideal life lived within a community has been and is still central to our values from the beginnings of our country. Even the most alienated among us feels a great yearning for living in community, even if we don't define that term in the sense of a small town, a neighborhood, or a commune.

Community differs from culture and society in many ways. It is not a disembodied conceptual term so much as one that is associated with the simplest of shapes and experiences in common, many of which, like the courthouse square, like square dancing or quilting, have become part of our national cultural inventory of symbolic forms. Nothing more clearly captures the essence of the folksense of community than quilting, though we don't give much thought as to why. Certainly a large part of the answer would lie in the social organization by which quilts were and are made—at *bees* or in quilting clubs—in coopera-



*Quilts are often made by several women working together. Clara Meldrum from Utah and her daughters proudly display an intricately designed quilt that they have stitched of their family tree.*

*Photo by James Pickerell for the Smithsonian.*

tive groups that work on a useful and decorative object together. Sitting around a frame or working individually on squares, all participants bring their materials and equipment to the encounter, and the occasion becomes one of involvement in a common enterprise. Perhaps more important is the quilt itself, for its form is so perfectly symbolic of the well-ordered: pieces carefully fitted together in squares, all add up to a giant (not-quite) square.

The point could be made in any of those numbers of ways in which the good life lived in common in communities is immediately suggested through the circled square—images of the small towns found throughout

the United States, those county seats in which the town is organized around the central square with its courthouse or commons, the park with its pond and bandstand. This was the small-town enclosure from which the generation of runaways sought to escape early in the century, and to which so many are returning in one way or another today. Or, to go to an even earlier and more utopian time, it is the earthly city on the hill in New England centering on the meeting house in the commons, itself an imposingly spare statement of virtue through equality and election.

Or one more moving image of this life and its values: the square dance, or the play party, as it was called in those places in which dancing and playing string instruments were regarded as cavorting with the Devil. This perfect image of community engages eight people in couples facing the center, dancing in place for a time and then leaving home in order to do the figures that circle the square—their point of reference and destination throughout: *back home*. This depiction of vitality and form invokes the facing inward of the whole group, the engagement of moving together in ensemble effects, being guided by outside calls reacted to within the group as a means of coordination as well as individualization—for the dancers find themselves on their own and away from home, but with a learned sense of where and how they are going and approximately where they will all end up.

This squared-world-within-the-circle is not just an ideal image we brought with us from the Old World; it also provided the basic models for what the farm and the plantation should look like. It is a vision that remains tied to the land, to farming and related occupations, and to the passage of the seasons as experienced by gardening peoples. The plantation,

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*The folksense of community is captured by Festival visitors and participants joining together in dance.*

*Photo by Sam Sweezy for the Smithsonian.*

whether in its New England or southern form, was the utopian attempt to construct the perfect community on the model of the enclosed garden. Both forms looked for a hill in which a view could be found that commanded the surrounding area. In New England, the meeting house and the commons would be put on this spot, surrounded by the houses of the faithful. By facing on the place of meeting and on the common ground, they might run their own affairs by congregation within the family. The southern plantation, too, was based on similar square principles, with its great house at the center, the works surrounding it, then the fields, and in the distance (nevertheless usually visible from the verandah), the wilderness out of which this new garden had been rescued.

But from the inception of this utopian adventure, another community, another sense of the virtuous life, was projected—that of the pilgrim-stranger, cast onto the road of life to seek his way to the city. This gathering

of fugitives produced the fellowship of the road and—from the squared-up social world's point of view—all too often the community of the damned. To be sure we are a nation of farmers in our first conception of ourselves, but farmers already tied to the idea of producing surplus crops for the folks in the city. Thus, even in the most successful of the utopian farming enterprises, there had to be go-betweens, the traders and factors, and with them the drifters and wharf-rats that inevitably accompany the movement of goods and people.

In our sentimental wish to recapture our agrarian ideals through a return to the country and to harmonize ourselves through the rhythm of the seasons, we forget this other community that has been as important a source of our national iconography as the farm and the small town. The lore which grew out of the crossroads, the harbor roads, the rivers and canals, and the turnpikes remains with us in the figures of the cowboy, the railroad engineer, the trucker and the outlaw bikers (motorcyclists). Just as the square forms reflect the rhythms and engagement with the earth in all its seasons, the straight forms of the road

and the turnpike, the highway and now the skyway remind us that another enduring image of the life well-lived endures. This one emphasizes the individual rather than the group, to be sure, but the lure of the hobo and the candler, as well as the railroadman, the trucker and the airline attendant reminds us that these, too, are communities, groups who share the conditions of being on the move all of the time.

It is this special blend of the straight and the square, the individual on the move and the community always ready to make welcome that seems most characteristic of the American Experience. Community, then, is the gathering of the like-minded, but always leaves the choice of moving on to the next gathering. If technological developments have made it possible to move on more regularly and to keep on the go even while maintaining one's sense of a need for rootedness, our ideals of community remain the same. Communities continue to spring up all over the country, in marinas and country clubs and mobile home parks, always guided by the same desires and lodged in some version of the same basic images.