

teachers who thought teaching was a calling.

It also helps explain the emergence of teachers unions. When teachers see themselves as workers, administrators as management, the superintendent the CEO, the school committee the Board of Trustees, and the students the product, it is only a short step to unionization. And it is a long way from teaching as an avocation. When the avocational tie is broken, institutional loyalty is diminished or destroyed.

Second, it reveals one thing teachers' professional associations are loath to admit—public school teachers *do* know the difference between good and bad schools. That they care enough to act on that knowledge—at least where their own interest is involved—is a very good sign. Unfortunately, the logic of this position is too often lost on the

teachers themselves. Because it is so important it bears stating: What's good for the children of teachers is good for children generally. Choice, diversity, and quality *outside the public school monopoly* is not simply an ideological posture assumed by market-oriented economists.

When the *Chicago Reporter* interviewed a random sample of teachers, these teachers sounded like any other parents concerned about their children—they select private schools because they are academically more demanding, physically safer, have higher expectations for their students, and maintain an orderly learning environment. As one teacher said, "I wouldn't send my own kids to the place I teach."

Another teacher, a union delegate, is quoted as saying: "Teachers know

what is going on with the curriculum. In all fairness to my child, I don't think I would have a choice but to pull him out of public school."

Although the *Reporter's* sample was not large enough to be statistically accurate for racial categories, the paper reported that "some educators feel black teachers are a particularly discriminating group." An example is the private Ancona Montessori School that numbers so many public school teachers among its parents that the principal reports that she "schedules parent-teacher conferences on public school holidays."

One reason Chicago public school teachers are able to send their children to private schools is that they can afford to. Despite teacher organization claims that teachers have low incomes, teacher *family income* places them

squarely in the upper middle class. The sample of Chicago teachers, for example, have a family income of more than \$35,000 per year.

It is a fine bit of irony that nearly half of those who know most about Chicago's public schools—the trained adults who teach in them—would reject them for their own children. Any hypocrisy to be found in this tale, however, lies not in the decision to patronize the competition—that is, an affirmation of the importance of education and the idea that some schools are better than others. Rather, the hypocrisy is to be found in the professional teacher organizations that oppose tuition tax credits and education vouchers while a substantial number of their urban members refuse to patronize the schools in which they work. □

THE TALKIES



SOWING SALLY'S FIELD

by John Podhoretz

What is most impressive about the very impressive new movie, *Places in the Heart*, is its cool, understated evocation of a time in this country when blacks were second-class citizens. Set in Texas in 1935, the movie tells the story of Edna Spaulding (Sally Field), the wife of Royce Spaulding, the town sheriff. At the beginning of the movie Royce goes out on a routine call to pacify and bring in to the station a sweet-faced young black who has gone on a drunken tear down by the railroad tracks. The black man has a gun, and in his stupor mistakenly fires it at the sheriff, killing him.

Already in this first scene we can tell that we are not about to see the typical race-relations hysteria Hollywood always foists upon us. The black man calls the sheriff "Mistah Royce," the sheriff deals with him as he would with a tiresome child. The murder is a freak accident, not retribution for an unpleasant, criminal mistreatment of an entire race.

Similarly, when the unhappy murderer is dragged through the streets of Waxahachie, Texas tied to a pickup

truck, we do not see the cackling smiles of the evil posse, the vengeful glee of the dead sheriff's wife, or the unleashed fury of the young black's oppressed family. This may be a racist community, but its racism is only one characteristic among many, and hardly the most important.

Edna's sister Margaret curtly tells the men in the pickup truck to drive away from Edna's house. She does not express any moral disapproval of their action, but rather seems to think that stopping by Edna's place with body in tow is inappropriate, and that the sight of the dust-ridden corpse will only further upset the grieving widow. The lynch mob looks discontented and solemn, as though they have had to perform a necessary but unpleasant task. And the family of the young murderer quietly cuts him down from the tree on which he has been strung up, as though they have been through this sort of thing before. As though they have full knowledge of the fact that the whites will exact this sort of price if any of their race steps out of bounds.

We are not pounded over the head with the great injustices being perpetrated on the black people in general and the young murderer in par-

ticular. These incidents are allowed to speak for themselves. People in Waxahachie are more concerned with mortgage foreclosure, marital indiscretions, and how to make ends meet. The residents of Waxahachie, both black and white, are bound by a set of standards and rules that they simply live by. They do not rebel, they do not question. They simply try to get by. They go to church, they say grace, they struggle, they grieve. They are used to these things, to the random acts of violence and the retaliatory lynchings. No good modern liberal grafted from later decades appears here to preach integration, or to offer maudlin, self-righteous appeals to the natural brotherhood of man.

We are being taught no lessons here. Robert Benton, the writer-director whose last film was *Kramer vs. Kramer*, wishes to show us what life was like in Depression-era Texas, with all its great flaws and strengths. People can be racists, like Margaret who speaks to blacks only in a clipped, officious tone, and yet have their own troubles as well. Margaret never injures a black; she just does not like them very much. She is more concerned with her failing beauty salon and the philandering of her hand-

some, ne'er-do-well husband.

The plot of *Places in the Heart* deals with Edna's great difficulties after her husband's death. She has no money, and has never done anything other than being a wife and a mother. The town's sanctimonious bank vice-president advises her to sell her house, send her children away to relatives, and eke by on a small living. She refuses to consider this possibility, and is saved by a traveling black man with a business proposition.

Just as the racial tensions are depicted here in a quiet and detached way, so are the racial harmonies. Moze, the vagrant black, stops by Edna's house looking for some work. He says that her land would make a good cotton farm: He has been picking cotton since his childhood, he knows. Edna gives him a meal and sends him away. He steals some of her silver as he goes, and is returned a day later by the police. He has told the police that Edna has hired him on as a hand. Facing Edna, Moze is terrified and cowed, and does not look her in the eye. Edna has had time to reconsider Moze's offer, and tells the police that he does, in fact, work for her. The

police leave, Moze is obsequiously grateful. Edna will have none of it. She wants him to teach her how to farm cotton, "and if you ever steal a thing from me again," she says, "I'll kill you myself."

Edna takes Moze with her to buy cotton seeds. He keeps his eyes lowered, again obsequious, in the presence of the white men who are selling her the seeds, but whispers to her

that she has been cheated. The seeds she has been given are of inferior quality. The seed-seller eyes Moze shrewdly, and right then Moze knows that he has violated a rule of proper behavior for a subservient race. Alone that night in his makeshift room, he curses his own folly. He does not curse his fate as a black, or the unfairness of his position. He accepts his position as a given.

But as time passes, he becomes a full partner in the effort to get the cotton farm going, and feels completely comfortable in the presence of Edna and her children. Neither of them says anything about this; Edna does not say, "I never really looked at a black person before," and Moze does not say, "Thank you for treating me like a human being," as one might expect.

Benton errs only once in this rich portrait. Moze is finally run out of town by the seed-seller and a bunch of his cronies, who have decided that he is uppity and will only cause further trouble. No problem about that. But Benton dresses the seed-seller and company in the uniforms of the Ku Klux Klan.

There was no reason for this, even if the Klan had been an active presence in 1930s Texas. By bringing in the Klan, Benton turns his imaginative portrayal of the relations between the races into a standard, clichéd morality play. If the men had simply appeared in normal dress, the point Benton seeks to make—that the situation in the Spaulding household is an unusual one, and that in 1935 the time had not yet come when Moze or any black could assert himself—would have been stronger and more forcefully made.

But at least Moze is not killed by the Klansmen. Benton does not, as other directors have done, martyr his own character. Moze is saved from the Klan's noose by another boarder in Edna's house, a prickly and intelligent blind man named Mr. Will. No, Moze is only driven out of Waxahachie, which is crime enough. He has a sentimental parting from Edna, who treats him—almost—as an equal.

And even though he has made a point of showing us how unjust life in Waxahachie can be, Benton caps his extraordinary movie with an extraordinary sequence, a daring bit of magic realism. We are in Edna's church during the Sunday service, and the camera slowly pans the congregation. We reach the fourth row, and the first person we see is Moze. Immediately we are confused, since we have seen Moze leave town in the previous scene. The camera then pans to Mr. Will, to Edna's two children, and then to Edna. It pauses on her briefly, then continues on. Seated next to her is Royce, her murdered husband; next to him, the young black who murdered him.

This movie, which begins with the Spaulding family saying grace over dinner, concludes with Waxahachie in grace. It is a bit treacly, but powerfully affecting nonetheless. We have seen the town in all its guises. We have seen some of the town's residents dragging the young black man through the streets tied to the pickup truck; and later we have seen them battling a horrible tornado which guts the town and destroys their homes and livelihoods. Somehow they all survive despite their transgressions and the transgressions of nature. One of the salutary things that Benton proves again is that in the realm of religious drama, as in race drama, less is infinitely more. □

The Good Old Days Weren't

One thing about "the good old days"—they weren't. Not for most people.

The fact is, prior to the industrial revolution, all but a very few lived in excruciating poverty, misery, and hopelessness.

As Professor Leo Rosten reminds us:

"It was the factory system that saved the poor, gave them jobs and tools, produced better food and clothing and shelter, and offered unprecedented opportunities to millions.

"Those who moved into the stinking slums of English cities from the lovely English countryside moved out of stinking barns and hovels and ditches. They went to the machines to get a precious job, to live better and aspire higher. The same is true of the millions of immigrants who flocked to American sweatshops from the hunger and hopelessness of Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe.

"Capitalism replaced not (Utopia), but indescribable poverty, illiteracy, and economic doom.

"It was under 'heartless capitalism', believe it or not, that the earnings of the



masses soared. And as men became less poor, their (voices) grew louder and their... political power boomed into a force such as had not existed within any political system before."

Capitalism has not wiped out poverty, injustice, or unemployment. But neither has socialism. And in our rush to perfect the human condition, we would do well to remember the words of Winston Churchill: "The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings. The inherent virtue of socialism is the equal sharing of misery."

Fortunately, we have come a long way from that kind of equality.



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BOOK REVIEWS

In his last great book (1973) Thornton Wilder imagines a character, a young man who sets himself the formidable task of fulfilling nine life ambitions. Young Theophilus North wants to be a saint, an actor, a magician, an archaeologist, a lover, an anthropologist, and a few other things. Although the book was not autobiographical, it does catch the flavor of the many successful vocations of Wilder's own life.

The man who achieved distinction as a scholar—Wilder lectured around the world and served as Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard—was also the public servant who represented his country on numerous diplomatic and cultural occasions and the dazzling man of the world who made headlines in social columns. He frequented celebrities like Henry Luce and Albert Schweitzer, Max Reinhardt and Gertrude Stein; in 1928 he became Gene Tunney's friend and brought him along on a European tour; in 1935 Freud suggested he become his son-in-law.

Wilder was all these things in addition to being a writer—indeed, one of the best prose stylists ever to emerge in America: suave, cosmopolitan and polished. He mastered the techniques of the modern innovators and gracefully absorbed the motifs of the great Western tradition; he knew the problematics of existentialism and the dilemmas of an ambiguous universe. As a playwright, Wilder belongs to that handful of Americans—O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Albee—who have been both literate and successful. As a literary figure, Wilder belongs squarely with Joyce and Eliot, Proust and Thomas Mann, Picasso and Stravinsky in the era of high modernism, that is to say in the era of quotation and combination, ironic appropriation, relativism and multiple reference, tragicomic insecurity and cultural nostalgia. In *The Skin of Our Teeth* he freely uses Joyce's writings, in *The Eighth Day* he weaves in Iorio Alger and Mark Twain, Dostoevsky and *Little Women*, Kierkegaard and Gertrude Stein; in other works he draws from Terentius and Suetonius, Anatole France and Johann Nestroy and Mme. de Sévigné. Amazingly, he still won three Pulitzers and had a huge devoted readership. By the fifties and sixties Wilder was a

THE ENTHUSIAST: A LIFE OF THORNTON WILDER Gilbert Harrison/Ticknor and Fields/\$19.95

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public institution and often rewarded with some of the highest honors the Republic had to bestow, not to mention numerous foreign prizes and decorations.

The most important facet of Thornton Wilder, however, one dimly sensed by most everyone yet elusive to all the rather competent biographers and monographers of the last twenty years (Burbank, Papajewski, Goldstone, Linda Simon, Goldstein, and, now, Gilbert Harrison), is Wilder as an embodiment of some original, essential middle-class Puritan Americanness and of its avatars in the twentieth century. There is something in Wilder, a curious quality, beyond his merits as a writer, or his interest as a public and social figure, that makes him important in a way disproportionate to his achievement. The desperate attraction of the German public to him in the early postwar decades followed from this

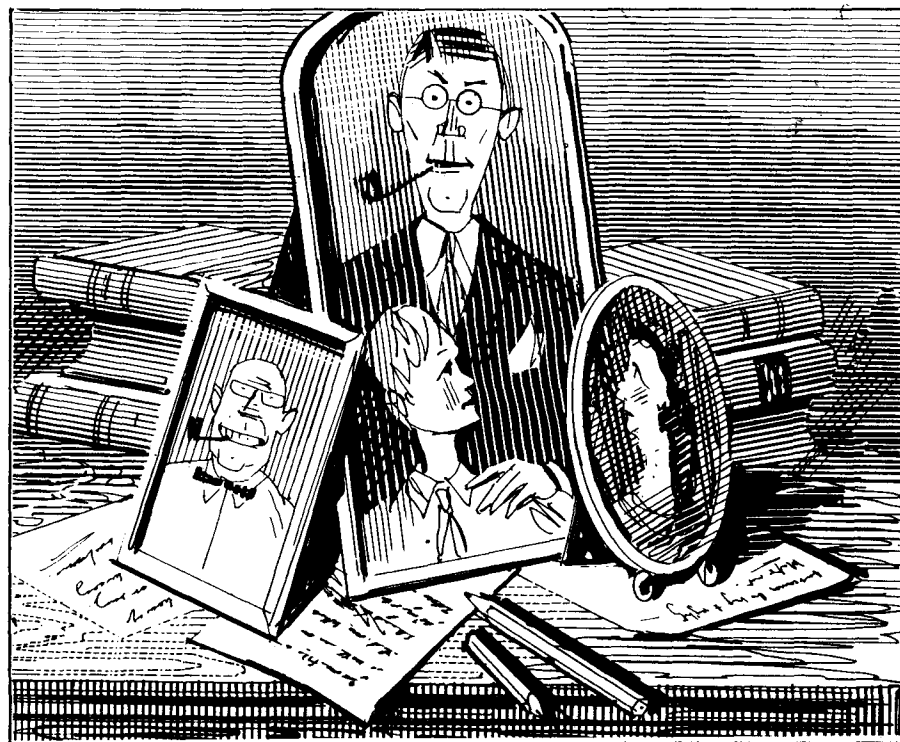
sense as did the pouting indifference of the French cultural elite. This was, I am sure, a symptom of the feelings of both toward America as a whole. And finally it is easy to notice the wariness of our own cultural authorities toward Wilder: the careful understatement of Edmund Wilson, the intense cold rage of the old proletarian Left, the adroit co-options of the newly moderate liberalism (Harrison is a former editor-in-chief of the *New Republic*), the clumsy and insecure friendliness of the rich and powerful, the spontaneous open warmth of the regular reader, the puzzled and timid approaches of the religious, the furtive and apologetic attraction of the educated. It is a rich and fascinating *tableau*, and one we seldom see: America in response to Wilder virginally, comically worried, not quite daring to look at itself naked in the mirror, yet happy that the image is not ominously deformed.

Wilder himself did not make things easy for his readers, hiding his mean-

ings under two layers: one containing the middle-brow and stingless storyline (with touches of home-grown philosophy), the other the amazingly learned web of allusions and references. The best way to approach Wilder is to read carefully *The Eighth Day*, his voluminous and ambitious late novel (1968) of which the reviewer of a distinguished New York monthly recently admitted he had never even heard. In this book Wilder sets out to do something rather astonishing: to praise alienation and to show that it is not only a good thing, but also a chief hope for mankind. This is of course a proposition that runs directly counter to the conventional wisdom of most intellectuals in the last two centuries: Existentialists or Romantics, Marxists or Catholics, they all agreed that human alienation, the breaking of the bonds of community and the loss in emotional warmth, the loneliness of the individual, the loss of a center, and the failure of meaningful labor are fearsome and evil things indeed. And so they are, no doubt, but there is another side to the coin often overlooked by such a complaining and caviling society as ours. Wilder realizes that alienation is also connected with liberty and creativity, with lack of prejudice and an almost infinite opening toward hope and the possibilities of the universe. He calmly, articulately said so. Two or three interesting things follow.

The first is that a much better understanding of the American experience is gained, since alienation and rootlessness have always been associated with the American mind and mode of life. Harrison quotes from Wilder's notes:

"The American we know—the American which we and foreigners so often laugh at and despise—the American in ourselves who is often the subject of our own despair—the joiner, the go-getter, the moralizer; the businessman with ulcers; the clubwoman who cannot remember one word of the morning lecture; the millions in the movie houses gazing at soothing lies—all, all... are very busy doing something of great importance. They don't know it and they often do it awkwardly and fall short. They are inventing a new kind of human being—a new relationship between one human being and another—a new relationship between the individual and the all. It is very occupying; it takes an immense toll in shattered lives and minds. It is not easy to be an American because the rules aren't made yet; the exemplars are not clear."



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