

Arts and Culture

Criticus

Down Home in California

G.B. Tennyson

UNLESS YOU are heading up the back way to Las Vegas, in which case your mind will be fixed on baser things, you are unlikely to come upon it at all, for most of the traffic moving north out of Los Angeles on California Highway 14 is commuter traffic headed for Palmdale and Lancaster or ski traffic headed yet farther north for Mammoth Mountain and the eastern Sierra. Those suburban Toyotas and ski-bound BMWs rightly stay on the Antelope Valley Freeway and have no need for the cutoff road that slants east-northeast off the 14 a few miles before Palmdale. So most miss it. "It," of course, is the Pearblossom Highway, a survival of an earlier day within minutes of megalopolis. Though already showing the strain of its proximity to "civilization," this western-style Huck Finn of a road is still mostly itself.

So let us go then, you and I, while this road is still spread out against the endless desert sky but before it is etherised upon the table of progress and wakens as just another city street. We have about 40 miles to cover, and like the desert itself they are much more varied than they at first appear. As the English professor turned naturalist, Joseph Wood Krutch, taught us about the desert, it is painted in subtle hues, so the viewer must look sympathetically or you will not see it at all.

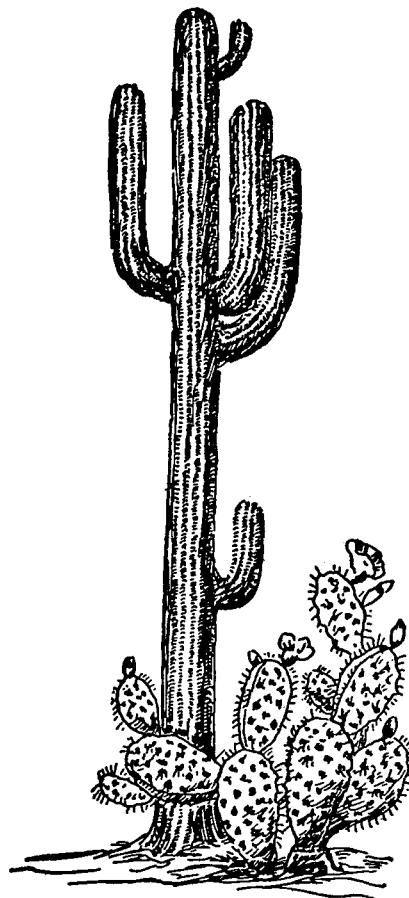
Properly speaking, the Pearblossom Highway is that portion of

California 138 stretching from Palmdale on the west to Victorville on the east, by which time it has become California 18 and is known in those parts as The Palmdale Road. For our purposes, however, the Pearblossom Highway is that portion of 138 east of Palmdale where the cutoff road meets it at a spot called Four Points and extending east-southeast-ward through the towns of Littlerock, Pearblossom, Llano, and Pinion Hills, to Mountain Top Junction, the point at which California Highway 2, the Angeles Crest Highway, moves off to the right into the San Gabriel Mountains, while 138 continues eastward to cross Interstate 15 and to lose itself in the tangle of the San Bernardino. On maps, the stretch east of Llano from the intersection with Highway 18 to Mountain Top Junction is the Antelope Highway,

the Pearblossom having veered northeast on 18 towards Victorville, but I am here talking about feeling not cartography, and feeling is the same from Four Points to Mountain Top. *This* is the Pearblossom.

We commence our tour in the west, taking the Pearblossom cutoff and skirting the High Desert Horror known as Palmdale, though it extends its malign influence to the cutoff road, much of which lies within its burgeoning city limits. Indeed the cutoff gives one a glimpse of the future of why the Pearblossom Highway is an endangered species. Even before you reach the rise that marks the point at which you cross for the first but not the last time the California Aqueduct, blue or grey as the skies dictate, your eyes confront simultaneously the past and the future. The past is the welcome sight of Joshua trees, the most conspicuous form of vegetation in the Mojave and by its very name a reminder of the state of mind of the first settlers to come this way, Mormons mostly, who saw these bizarre-looking growths (not palms as those pioneers supposed but members of the lily family) and thought of their Bible and of Joshua leading his people from the wilderness to the promised land.

THE FUTURE is the unwelcome sight of countless billboards advertising housing developments along or just off this road, some named with at least an attempt to honor their setting — Desert View, say, or Boulder Ranch — others with total disregard — Camden Place, St. Laurent, Narcissa Townhomes, where there is no town and where "Narcissa," as the presumed feminine of Narcissus, is adorned with a drawing of a daffodil as though these were desert flowers. Such de-



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velopments, some now in financial straits (hee, hee!) because of the depressed housing market, extend but a street or two into the raped landscape after which the desert takes over again.

YET ANOTHER sign of an older world on the cutoff is the presence of one of the premier eateries of the

Pearblossom Road, The Pines Cafe. This unpretentious dinery (the term is my own) lies on the north side of the road in a small grove of, what else? pines, presumably planted there by human agency as they are otherwise out of place in the desert. The wood frame building is, to put it kindly, unprepossessing, but, standing free of it in the dirt park-

ing lot, The Pines boasts one of those grand old curved arrows that lights up to point the way to refreshment for the weary pilgrim. The interior is in harmony with the exterior. Even so, The Pines has attracted the attention of fans of country cooking even to having been written up a few years back in the restaurant section of "Calendar"

WATCHFUL WORDS

PCPs vs. PIPs

AS FORETOLD in an ancient prophecy (*CPR*, Summer 1991), ye who have been afflicted by the verbal excesses of PC will be sent a comforter. And ye shall call him *Criticus*. Herewith, Lesson One in your verbal PC survival and counterattack course.

First off, know thy enemy. When it comes to language, Politically Correct Persons, hereafter PCPs, will leave no word unturned to advance their nefarious goals, which are nothing less than the total restructuring of traditional thought through an assault on language, as if to say: give me lexicography and I will make your children liberal fascists. And they will.

You laugh, of course, you Politically Incorrect Persons, hereafter PIPs. And there is much to laugh at. Take the example, and it is a true one, from a recent manual of anti-sexist language, only one of many, alas, but the sort of thing widely used as guides by PCPs in publishing, where they abound in the form of failed and/or otherwise unemployable Ph.Ds in English. Among much else, the manual in question counsels against using the term Montezuma's Revenge. Why? Because it offends Mexicans? No. Because it is *sexist*; it gives power to a *male*. One might have thought that it is just the sort of power that PCPs would like to relegate to men, but no, PCPs are urged to try an alternative, like "traveller's tummy" or "dysentery." Somehow one just knows that this schoolmarmish advice came

from a woman. Can't you just see the Marines storming out of the Halls of Montezuma saying, "I think I have contracted traveller's tummy"?

Laughter and ridicule are indeed in order, but they won't solve all problems, so back to our lesson. The first line of attack by PCPs must also be the first line of counterattack by PIPs. It is the suffix. Yes, the lowly suffix, the little particle you add to words to alter their status or part of speech. A useful, one might even think, harmless grammatical device. But in the hands of PCPs an ideological weapon of considerable power.

The Suffix of Choice

THE PCP suffix of choice is *-ism*. Finding ready to hand in the language various *-ism* words that carry negative connotations, as *-ism* words often do, e.g., that all-time favorite *racism*, PCPs have indulged in an orgy of *ismizing*. This has been going on since they misappropriated *chauvinism* for purposes of browbeating men. And one *-ism* begat others; thus was born *sexism*, *ageism*, and hosts of others, as well as the practice of using *racism* itself for every conceivable purpose. The most recent example of the latter to come to my attention was the approval expressed by PCPs of a British government decision to cease using the term "native" to describe plants and trees that had historically existed in the British Isles as opposed to those introduced in modern times, just as Americans would say that the redwood is native to the northern California coast but the azalea is not, even though both may now grow there. The decision to drop this distinction in

official writing (which is greatly to be lamented as it carried a little history lesson with it) was hailed by PCPs as a victory against, yes, "biological racism." Of course racism is already "biological." Why not botanical or horticultural racism? But best not to give them any ideas.

The First Lesson

SINCE, THEN, *-ism* is the ubiquitous suffix of PCPs, the first part of your first lesson as a consciousness-raised PIP is to treat every new PCP-sponsored word with disdain. You will easily recognize them, as they grate on the ear and are instantly taken up by network newscasters, academics, politicians, and the mournful types that attend NOW rallies. So you must resolve not to speak of *tallism* (favoring tall people over short) *ableism* (favoring the able-bodied over the disabled), or *lookism* (favoring attractive physical appearance over unattractive), and all the rest. Indeed, it is best not to have any word at all for these supposed failings. Let them eat *-isms*.

The second part of the lesson is like unto the first. It is, when all else fails, create your own *-ism* words. Try out: minorityism, homelessness, disadvantagedism, taxism. The possibilities are infinite, and each new *-ism* word will sow discord among PCPs, which is reason enough to let yourself go. Who can tell, one might even turn up on a network newscast: "President Bush today totally disavowed his previous inclination toward taxism but charged that Democrats still advocate it. Governor Clinton insisted he only advocated taxism in England."

-*Criticus*

in the Sunday *Los Angeles Times*. The bill of fare is classic Pearblossom Highway and can stand as the model for the restaurants we will pass farther down the line, the Roadrunner, the Cottonwood, Carol's, the Circle J (now offering out front a full set of acrylic nails, no less), Cactus Kate's, The Yucca Inn, and all the rest. First, there is breakfast all day long, or at least until 2 p.m., when some of the smaller restaurants close for the day, having opened as early as 5 or 6 for the truckers: eggs any style, including omelettes to order, ham, bacon, sausage, and always biscuits with gooey white, black-peppered country gravy only marginally less thick than peanut butter. For later dining, what else but chicken-fried steak and mashed potatoes with that same country gravy, peas, a leaf of lettuce with a slice or two of tomato and a dollop of thousand island dressing by way of salad, and, if you like, slices of white bread with patties of butter on the side, good for mopping up the country gravy. Sometimes there's meatloaf, sometimes liver and onions, sometimes barbecues of pork or beef, though these never rise to the heights of Kansas City, Tennessee, or Carolina. Regularly, hamburgers and fries, potato salad and cole slaw, pies and more pies for dessert.

CLEARLY THIS is no country for the Pritikin set. Indeed, one likes to imagine that when she dies and goes to Hell, Jane Fonda will spend eternity glued to a chair and eating without cease at The Pines. But now The Pines is going to

close. Development is closing in, townhomes to the right and residential estates to the left, all to be occupied if not by Pritikin freaks then by diners at fast food chain restaurants, none of which so far shows its foul face on our chosen stretch of the Pearblossom Highway, though surely they are waiting round the bend. The owners of The Pines, feeling fenced in, have

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bought a place in Montana and will light out for Big Sky country, leaving only the Silver Streak ranch ("Pigeons, Doves, Chickens") and the Antelope Valley Swap Meet as signs that this road once belonged spiritually to the Pearblossom Highway.

As for the Swap Meet, not far past The Pines, when you see sheds and playground equipment and, fluttering in the breeze, the flags of all nations, most prominently a gaggle of Confederate battle flags, you have reached the Swap Meet grounds and Four Points. Turn right and you're on the Pearblossom Highway proper. As you turn, note the recently opened, or reopened, Four Points Cafe, another home of chicken fried steak, of course, but now also advertising on an outdoor sign "Fresh Menudo." Lordy, lordy.

A few miles onward, past the old Roadrunner Cafe, now Joanie's Truck Stop, and after you pass the gift shop calling itself the "De-Zert Bi-Zarre," you come to the first of the towns through which you will pass — Littlerock, population 1,320.

A FEED COMPANY has a life-size figure of a horse up on a ledge over the door and there's a cutesily named "Old Thyme Antiques," but Littlerock is above all the fruit-stand capital of the Antelope Valley, boasting a range of stands from the small weathered and tattered ones called such things as Grand Pa's *[sic]* Fruit Stand advertising "Okra" and "Watermelon" to modern factory-like structures with roll-down metal doors and long display tables offering crates of peaches and pears. These businesses, both large and small, are closed much of the year, operating mainly in late summer and fall when true local produce is available. Some of the lesser ones stay open in other seasons, selling sacks of oranges, but these have been acquired from the same sources that provide the street corner vendors in Los Angeles, for the high desert is not citrus-growing country.

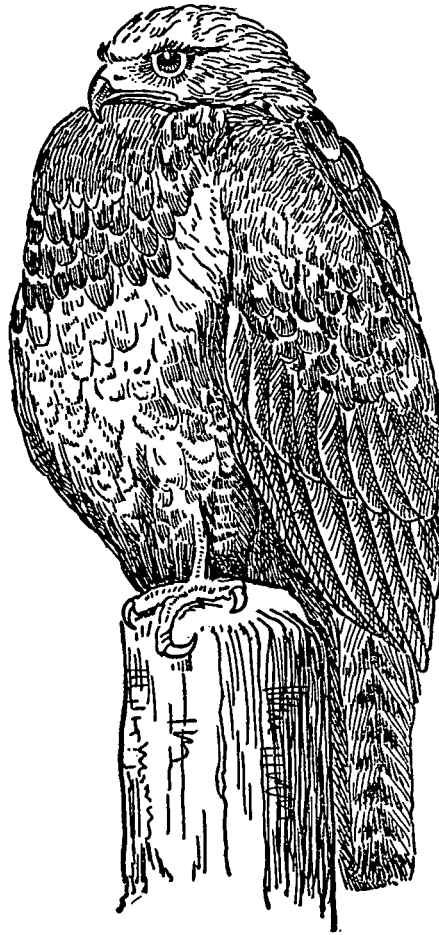
Littlerock also boasts some motels of the kind that you thought had disappeared along with Route 66 and several large all-purpose markets selling everything from pottery to knickknacks. The best known of these is Charlie Brown's Farms which advertises even wine tasting from allegedly local wines. Its real charm resides in its home-made candies, confections, nuts,

and fruits, at least 57 varieties worth, packaged in saran wrap and exceptionally good. The place is usually crowded with blue-haired ladies and large family groups, many frequenting the "Serenity Room," which offers spiritually uplifting gewgaws and publications. As a kind of reverse snobbery I have been patronizing of late the Farmer's Mart across the road, great on produce, but not above its own kind of serenity sales, i.e., bumper stickers and key chains with legends like "Beam Me Up, Jesus"; and if that doesn't make you come to fancy the place, there are also messages like "Wanted: Meaningful Overnight Relationship." I am still searching for the now retired bumper sticker seen on the Pearblossom in the mid-eighties: "Run, Jesse, Run" in large print and below it in smaller: "Affix to Front Bumper." No doubt in these parts they sold out.

THERE HAS long been a Mexican community concentrated around Littlerock, which accounts for the La Mexicana market and a Mexican laundromat, which is to say a laundromat with its name in Spanish — "*lavanderia*" — otherwise it looks like your neighborhood laundromat in the unlikely event you still have one. The numbers of Hispanics appear to be growing, though along the Pearblossom the effect seems genially southwestern rather than south central.

Of the restaurants in Littlerock the most memorable for a long time was surely the one marked by the huge sign over a building on the eastern end of town proclaiming "Valley Hungarian Sausage and Meat Company." I say "was" even though the business still flourishes,

but in the spirit that I find so threatening to the entire highway, this establishment last year saw fit to rename itself the "Smokehouse Deli." In much smaller print down on street level it still offers "Hungarian Sausages," and it has added Mexican food and menudo as well. But gone are the days when you thought your eyes playfully de-



ceived upon finding a Hungarian sausage company out in the desert. In its earlier incarnation and doubtless also today it was truly operated by Hungarians, who also spoke fluent German which reassured one that their bratwurst was the real thing. And it was. Even so, I decline to patronize any longer a restaurant on the Pearblossom Highway that

sounds like something on Pico Boulevard.

Then you head east towards Pearblossom, naturally the pearl of the Pearblossom Highway. Why have the enormous signs for "Fräulein's" Restaurant suddenly disappeared? Not another casualty of encroaching modernism? Tune in next time.

CPR

BOOKS

Schlesinger Discovers America

The Disuniting of America — Reflections on a Multicultural Society, by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., W.W. Norton, 160 pages, \$14.95, cloth.

Reviewed by Peter Hannaford

HISTORIAN BY trade, Arthur Schlesinger has, for nearly 30 years, pursued an avocation as chief cheer leader for the long-gone Kennedy Camelot, of which he was once part. He is also a frequent writer of essays and op-eds critical of whatever presidential administration has been in power at any time since (the chief fault of these being that they have not called on him to be a leading adviser).

Now, however, Schlesinger has discovered something new (to *him*, that is, not to many conservatives): the centrifugal forces that can be let loose in American society if "multiculturalism" goes too far.

In *The Disuniting of America*, he joins Richard Nixon and others in seeing the end of the cold war not as "the end of history," as Francis Fukuyama proclaimed. Instead, he says, "One set of hatreds gives way to the next." He sees the lifting of

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