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Getting grounded in the post-hometown world

By Hedley Burrell, David E. Drew / August 22, 2005 at 12:08 pm EDT

SARASOTA, FLA., AND CLAREMONT, CALIF.

Remember when Americans had hometowns? "Where are you from?" we'd ask one another.

And the answer would come back: New York City. St. Joseph, Mo. Atlanta. Santa Barbara, Calif. Chattanooga, Tenn.

But odds are that now we'd get a more complicated response. It'd go something like this: "Well, I was born in Atlanta but we moved to Baltimore when I was 11 and in my junior year of high school, we went out to L.A. I've been in Chicago for a year."

And even this might not be quite accurate. The speaker may have been born in an Atlanta exurb and have moved with her parents to a Baltimore suburb and subsequently to a town some miles outside Los Angeles before migrating to a community close to but not in Chicago.

So where should one consider her from? All over, maybe? Which raises the question: does this erosion of a sense of place matter? Yes, it does. For throughout history, people have derived their identity in part from where they lived. Now, every year an estimated 45 million Americans move.

During World War II, to boost citizens' spirits, Look magazine ran "Hometown USA," a two-part series focused on Glens Falls, N.Y., a small, tree-lined city in the foothills of the Adirondacks. Today, it's hard to imagine a national magazine profiling any hometown.

The construction of the interstate highway system during the 1950s struck a deathblow to many American hometowns. Huge shopping malls appeared near the interstate exit while the town center decayed. Gradually, national chains edged out local businesses. And, with the information age replacing the industrial age, industrial cities and towns struggled to diversify as residents departed. Downtowns lost their centrality, though some bounced back, thanks to an affluent few.

A few years ago, the Niagara Falls Reporter printed a front-page photo of a

bustling, vibrant Niagara Falls, N.Y., from the early 1950s. Downtown, it said, "will never look like that again."

And last year, during an election roadtrip, a BBC reporter made a telling observation. "We wanted some place that would give us a sense of place," he said on a Florida leg of the trip. It took "miles of searching," he explained, to find the Lake City pharmacy with its old-style soda fountain and lunch counter where he interviewed locals.

As strip development makes one location much like another, the Internet, the chance to work at home, and home entertainment centers have all increased the amount of time we spend by ourselves, further fragmenting communities.

But does all this matter?

Yes, because people certainly need structure, predictability, and a stable environment where they can count on seeing friends and neighbors.

In short, people need a sense of place, as information scientist Thomas A. Horan says in his book, "Digital Places: Building Our City of Bits." Technology, he adds, should help satisfy this need and enhance the effectiveness of schools, libraries, community centers, and the like.

So what does the future hold? Will our transience and the sameness and sprawl of communities kill our sense of place?

As we deal with our rootlessness, we can perhaps take heart from the fact that many past predictions have failed to materialize. It was said, for example, that movies and broadcasting would eliminate regional accents. No way. It was said that the telephone would so broaden our contacts that neighbors would become strangers.

That didn't happen, either. Did it?

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