U.S. 40 TODAY

Thirty Years of Landscape Change in America

THOMAS R. VALE and GERALDINE R. VALE

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Preface

In 1953, Professor of English George R. Stewart published *U.S. 40,* in which he presented ninety-two scenes that he had photographed along the route of U.S. Highway 40 from Atlantic City to San Francisco as a "cross section of the United States of America." He selected views which he felt represented typical landscapes along the route, rather than ones that were necessarily scenic or otherwise attractive. For each photograph Stewart wrote a short interpretive essay in which he discussed why the landscapes had the features that they did. Stewart concerned himself with both natural and cultural characteristics, and often stressed the genesis of those characteristics, including human history wherever he felt that it helped mold the personality of the place. His book remains a fine example of landscape portrayal and interpretation.

What held the photos together, and gave the book its unity, was the highway. But although Stewart was obviously intrigued by asphalt pavements, steel bridges, and street signs, he was concerned with much more than the mere physical structure of the road:

> We must consider all that it means to the man who drives along it. It must be not only what can be seen, but also what can be felt and heard and smelled. We must concern ourselves with the land that lies beside it and the clouds that float above it and the streams that flow beneath its bridges . . . the people who pass along it and those others who passed that way in the former years. . . . Only by considering it all, as we drive from the east or from the west, shall we come to know in cross section, the United States of America.

Stewart, then, saw his book as exploring two separate subjects, the highway and the route it followed.

In Stewart's day U.S. 40 was a major transcontinental highway bisecting the country. A traveler could follow its familiar black-on-white shield for 3,000 miles from coast to coast. Today the longest stretch for which one can follow the U.S. 40 emblem uncompromised by any competing interstate insignias is for the 440 miles between Denver and Salt Lake City. In other places it shares recognition with the newer designations of Interstate 70 or 80. In still other places it has become a secondary regional or local highway or even a frontage road. In fact, for its entire length in Nevada and California, U.S. 40 has yielded its identity as a marked highway to Intersate 80; there its shield hangs only in the few spots where it has escaped the notice of highway crews, as it apparently has on at least one side street in Reno, where it formerly directed lost tourists back onto the route west. But whether U.S. 40 exists officially today as a transcontinental highway or not, its route can still be followed. Moreover, the viewpoints from which Stewart snapped his shutter are not only traceable today, but may be relocatable for many years to come.

The idea of tracking down the sites of Stewart's photographs has occurred, we

are sure, to many persons who have enjoyed *U.S. 40*. But, as far as we know (and Mr. Stewart confirmed our suspicion), by 1979 no one had systematically retraced his tire tracks and footsteps across the continent. We decided to meet that challenge, to rephotograph the scenes, and to use the resulting photo pairs as the basis of a study in the changing landscapes of America. The idea that a photograph captures only one static view of a constantly changing landscape is a notion that was also apparent to Stewart: "In describing some of the pictures, I have mentioned the imminence of change, but a continual repetition would become monotonous, and on the whole it seems better merely to write a general warning: 'Thus it was when I passed by, in my time.'" Observing and writing about the evidence, rather than merely the imminence, of change, we experienced an excitement quite remote from monotony. This book, *U.S. 40 Today,* enables the reader to see not only how it was when Stewart passed by, but also how it was, a generation later, when we passed by.

In the pages that follow, we have included seventy-two of Stewart's scenes, the others omitted for a variety of reasons. For example, several of Stewart's photos feature people rather than landscapes, and thus do not suit our purposes for *U.S. 40 Today.* In addition, some views seem repetitive and offer little that is not found in the photos we have used. We were also hesitant to climb over a KEEP OFF sign and up a precarious ladder on a tall water tower. Finally, the negative for one scene is apparently unavailable. For each view we have chosen, Stewart's photograph appears at the top of the page and ours at the bottom. Accompanying the pairs of pictures are short essays which discuss the changes that have occurred in the scenes and their environs since Stewart's time. We have tried to evaluate changes both conspicuous and subtle, both natural and cultural, both "attractive" and "unattractive." The photographic scenes represent changes of differing scales, some ephemeral or local, others persistent or widespread. They illustrate not only changes arising from conscious human attempts to alter conditions, but also changes that are the unanticipated results of human activities. Some of the scenes reveal only minor changes, and a few show essentially no change. All encourage reflection on attitudes toward landscape change.

How well does *U.S. 40* provide the basis for a study of landscape change? As a group, Stewart's photographs portray a variety of subjects that make the photo comparisons more informative, and more interesting, than if they were predominantly scenic vistas or historic buildings. Nonetheless, we feel that Stewart treated a few topics unevenly. For example, in parts of the East he seemed most concerned with human history, occasionally using pictures of historic places that opened a door to the past but prompted little or no commentary on the present. For these pictures, Stewart simply related stories of historic events or persons. In Nevada, on the other hand, Stewart seemed preoccupied with the vast vistas of the Nevada landscape. He ignored other interesting subjects, such as highway crossings of the Humboldt River, and offered no intimate looks at small towns. Given the choice, we might have in-

cluded, for example, U.S. 40 crossing the Missouri River in central Missouri, the first view of the Rocky Mountains from the High Plains, a street scene in the railroad town of Battle Mountain, Nevada, or the orchard district near Fairfield, California.

On the other hand, in general, Stewart did not underrepresent the small American town, as some critics have suggested, or the large city, as Stewart himself alleged. We randomly located ninety-two points along the route of U.S. 40 of 1950, and landed in towns and cities only eleven times. Stewart had twice as many scenes, twenty-two, in such settings. Stewart's disproportionate attention to towns and cities is not inappropriate, given their importance to people and human history. His generally good choice of subjects in terms of their geographic and demographic importance helped to produce a book that is a fine basis for a study of landscape change.

We have adopted some conventions. Stewart took most of his photographs in two coast-to-coast highway trips in 1949 and 1950, although the date of any particular photo cannot be easily determined; for simplicity's sake, we refer to all of his photos as taken in 1950. Similarly, we describe our own pictures as representing 1980, even though many in the western states were taken in 1979 and a few in 1978. We made great efforts to find as exactly as possible the very spots where Stewart had stood with his camera, and we were surprisingly successful. However, if a precise duplication of his view had become obstructed by vegetation or obliterated by dynamite, or if it omitted something of interest, we felt free to move a few steps or use a lens with a wider field of vision; in these cases we refer in the text to the differences. Moreover, cropping and printing requirements sometimes prevented the presentation of precise duplication of Stewart's views. Furthermore, our purpose is to assess landscape change over the last thirty years, and not to duplicate Stewart's objective of interpreting the characteristics and origins of features more generally. Thus, many things which Stewart discussed we do not, and vice versa. Our book is different, and stands alone. Yet, we are particularly interested in comparing Stewart's impressions of places with our own, and in evaluating his predictions about what was for him the future. Therefore, we quote freely from *U.S. 40,* and quotations otherwise unidentified are taken from that book. We also retain the titles of the photos which Stewart used. Moreover, as Stewart often included personal reflections on what he experienced, we too comment about the happenings along our way. This book, then, is not simply an objective record of physical change. It is also a journal that chronicles the experiences of two travelers as they come to know better the America of 1980 through the perspective made possible by a most astute sojourner of 1950, and the stories that the photographs unfold are varied, rich, and full of land and life.

We thank the American Philosophical Society, which aided the 1980 field work with a grant from the Penrose Fund. Mrs. George R. Stewart kindly granted permission for our extensive quotation from *U.S. 40*. Prints of most of the Stewart photo-

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"The American city, east and west, is highly standardized," lamented Stewart in his introduction, "and a picture of one city stands pretty well for a picture of another." Thus, although in 1950 U.S. 40 passed through eight of the thirty largest cities in the United States, Stewart chose to include urban street scenes of only two of them, San Francisco, at the western terminus of the highway, and Baltimore, shown here at Fayette Avenue near Carrollton Street.

Steward did not choose this scene *despite* standardization. Rather, he selected it *because* of the standardization it shows—not of cities, but of Baltimore "row" houses. This monotony characteristic of older urban centers near the eastern seaboard prompted the self-consciously tactful comment about Baltimore in the American Guide Series book on Maryland: "Baltimore may be an ugly city; nevertheless it is charmingly picturesque in its ugliness."[3] Stewart observed more objectively: "Baltimoreans take [row houses] for granted. Visitors are amused or horrified."

Stewart, however, unequivocally admired the row houses in his photo: "Much can be said for the warm reds of their honest brickwork, for their simple doorways . . . and for the generally fine proportions of their facades. Moreover, they represent a real architectural tradition, developing out of a way of life that endured with much stability and homogeneity over several generations. We may contrast the more recently built districts of many cities where a dozen rootless imported styles of imported architecture clash in the same block."

The 1980 view displays that "clashing" of styles which Stewart deplored. The row houses on the south side of the street remain, but those on the north side have been torn down and replaced with the high-rise rectangular box of a public housing project. Contributing further to the variety of architectural styles is the complex of modern design in the background, which partially blocks our view of the old tall buildings in the heart of the downtown area.

Stewart also speculated that this neighborhood in 1950 was "on the downward path," as evidenced by "the littered street and the garbage can." While he identified features that were only superficial, his assessment of the trend of the neighborhood was correct, judging by conditions in 1980. The first two buildings, reached from the street by the closest pair of steps, are abandoned, gutted, and without windowpanes. Accumulations of bottles, cans, and scrap paper cover the basements and the first floors. The notice placed by a heating-plumbing contractor suggests that internal reconstruction is under way, although we could see no evidence of such work inside. Weeds are growing between the steps and within cracks in the sidewalk, and a small ailanthus tree, rooted in the stairwell to the basement, emerges above the sidewalk. The walls of these abandoned buildings, however, seem solid, and free of holes or fractures. Even the marble steps, which Stewart described as "scrubbed every morning," appear as clean and firm as they were in 1950, even though they no longer enjoy daily washing.

The second pair of steps leads to two buildings which are inhabited. From our present vantage the buildings look much the same as the closer structures, although the doorside porch lights, the stair railings, and the light color of the recently washed front brick wall suggest that people live within. A closer look would reveal curtained windows with potted begonias on the inside sills to confirm that suggestion.

Beyond the residences, the building with arched doorways and buttressed walls is a church, as it was in Stewart's day. After considerable driving amid the Baltimore rows, in fact, we were convinced by this landmark that we had finally found the photo site. Still farther down the avenue other row houses have been replaced with a low modern building.

Fayette Avenue in 1980 is no longer a major urban thoroughfare, as suggested by the lack of traffic and by the parking along the curb, which, in Stewart's time,was not allowed. The neighborhood through which it passes seems as quiet and undistinguished in 1980 as in 1950, even though the changes in the physical landscape are considerable. As it did for Stewart, the view for us may be taken as typical of a certain sort of urban scene: an old residential area in the inner city with vacant and gutted homes, tall unadorned project housing, and, in early morning hours at least, streets empty of moving vehicles or pedestrians.

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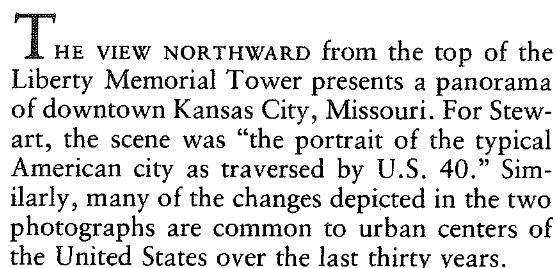
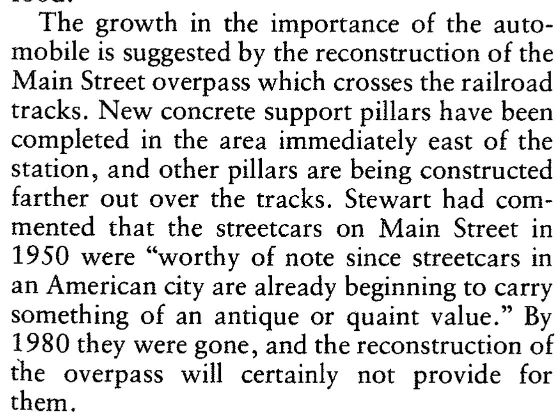


The view northward from the top of the Liberty Memorial Tower presents a panorama of downtown Kansas City, Missouri. For Stewart, the scene was "the portrait of the typical American city as traversed by U.S. 40." Similarly, many of the changes depicted in the two photographs are common to urban centers of the United States over the last thirty years.

The massive Union Railroad Station remains, although its functions have, in part, changed. In 1950, Stewart commented that "the parking spaces and lines of taxis in front of the station may be taken as symbolic of the present-day dependence of railroads upon motors." By 1980, the decline of the railroad and rise of the automobile was even more complete, as ironically indicated by the emptiness of the parking lot and the complete lack of taxis. The long coverings over the passenger walkways beside the tracks are visible in Stewart's photograph to the right of the station but are gone in the 1980 photo, also suggesting the decline in rail traffic. Like railroad stations elsewhere, this one now houses other businesses, although it continues to serve the occasional railroad traveler. Among the new businesses are two restaurants with bills-of-fare typical of such railroad station eateries: steaks and seafood.



The growth in the importance of the automobile is suggested by the reconstruction of the Main Street overpass which crosses the railroad tracks. New concrete support pillars have been completed in the area immediately east of the station, and other pillars are being constructed farther out over the tracks. Stewart had commented that the streetcars on Main Street in 1950 were "worthy of note since streetcars in an American city are already beginning to carry something of an antique or quaint value." By 1980 they were gone, and the reconstruction of the overpass will certainly not provide for them.

New buildings diversify the skyline of the downtown. Most of the new structures house commercial services, offices, and residences, often together in the same building. These are functions of the new rectangular structure east of the railroad station, which, unfortunately but perhaps characteristically of some American cities, has been built in what was formerly the open space of a park.

The "secondary business district," lying between the downtown and the railroad station, appears little changed. The red brick buildings, which Stewart accurately described as "architecturally utilitarian . . . flat-topped, almost cubical, boxes of commerce and industry," remain mostly functional and well maintained. We noticed some boarded windows within the district, but only a few buildings seemed abandoned or run-down.

Stewart decried the presence of the billboards in the vacant lot at the lower right corner of his photograph. In 1980 they were not only gone but actually replaced by lawn, trees, and walkways of a park. This parkland is the edge of a great residential-hotel complex which occupies the same hillslope that helps to give the Liberty Memorial Tower such a fine view of Kansas City.