

“The Goodliest Land”

An Address by Charles Kuralt

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I'm really honored to be with you. This all started years ago when William Least Heat-Moon, who has written the best book about the back roads of America, told me how much fun he had had addressing this organization. He must not be here tonight or we would have spent all afternoon drinking together. But then Sally Oldham and Meg really got serious about their invitations to me, and I'm really glad to be here at last. I do feel a little diffident about talking to a room full of people who manifestly know more than I do about the subject.

I know a thing or two about America. I know, for example, how the country works. In the seventies, when I was trying to put two daughters through expensive eastern colleges, I took on some writing jobs on the side. The editor of Family Circle asked me to write an essay on the ten prettiest roads in America. I had just made the trip over US 212, the Beartooth Highway that goes up to Red Lodge and then Cooke City, Montana, and down into the northeast entrance of Yellowstone, I was still in awe of that experience, so I didn't hesitate to name US 212 the prettiest road in America.

The next time I went over the road I noticed that they had clipped that piece out of Family Circle and had it thumb-tacked to the little bulletin board in the grocery store in Red Lodge. The next time I went over the road, there was a huge billboard down on the interstate, the 212 Junction. It featured a big red arrow pointing up the hill and the words "prettiest Road in America" - Charles Kuralt. You wouldn't expect to find a huckster out there on the edge of the wilderness, but he was there and he did his work. The beautiful road is still there, and so, I'm afraid, is the ugly billboard which may be my monument, my permanent contribution to Scenic America.

There will always be a huckster. The very first words written from America in the English language amounted to a real estate promotion. In 1584, Sir Walter Raleigh sent Phillip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe to scout out a place for a settlement. In a vast sound behind Barrier Islands, the outer banks of North Carolina, my home state, they found the green haven of Roanoke Island. They ignored the mosquitoes and the heat and the sand spurs and the possibly hostile Indians. They emphasized the good fishing in the waters and the abundance of grapes on the land.

In their report to Queen Elizabeth, they kept coming back to those grapes. They summed up Roanoke Island by mentioning the grapes one more time and concluding, "It is withal, Madam, the Goodliest Land Under the Cope of Heaven." Except for the Elizabethan English, doesn't that sound familiar? The surveyors arrived the next year, and they started laying out the first English colony in the New World.

I have been to the place often. As you arrive from the South through the Cape Hattaras National Sea Shore Park, you see nothing but sand and surf and sea oats and water birds in great profusion and your impression is of the Goodliest Land Under the Cope of Heaven. If you arrive from the North, through Kitty Hawk and Nags Head, which is the way most people arrive, you pass through a clutter of clapboard and a forest of billboards (none of them, thank God, with my name on it) and a chaos of hotdog stands and tee-shirt shops and strip malls and amusement parks.

These two environments collide at the Mobil Station at Whalebone Junction. North of the gas station, nothing but scenic discord, which depresses people. South of it, all natural harmony, which elevates people. I think of that Mobil Station as the fulcrum upon which is balanced the worst nightmare and the best hope of all of us in this room tonight. Two Americas meet there: the ugly one and the beautiful one. And of course, Americans of their own free will created them both.

We have to believe that place by place mile by mile we can preserve scenic America and even reclaim ugly America. I haven't a doubt from all these years of wandering that Americans want to do that. And from all our history there is ample evidence that we can. I think we need a little encouragement once upon awhile. I am about to encourage you by reminding you that this 20-year-old Inner Harbor of Baltimore which has all these attractive shops, museums and hotels and the loveliest new ballpark produced in America, I think, and that Aquarium, all linked by pleasant walks and water taxis. This charms every visitor, but my earliest memories of Baltimore are of those scrubbed white steps that you used to see before the Harbor Tunnel was done and you had to go up Route 1 through town. A visitor of the late 18th century, John Adams, looking at this harbor from up here on the hill just about where we are meeting wrote in his diary, "This is the dirtiest place in the world."

But it really wasn't. Think of Chicago today with its expansive parks along the lake. I think you could make the argument that it is our prettiest American waterfront. [Yet, Frank Lloyd Wright, 100 years ago] wrote, "It is a dreary, dim and smoky city. To stop and think in the midst of this would be to give way to terror. The gray soiled river with its mist of steam and smoke was the only beauty, and that smelled to high heaven." H. G. Wells on Chicago: "It is bleak and ugly and squalid, a dark smear under the sky. Kipling on Chicago: "Its air is dirt. Having seen it I urgently desire never to see it again." Kipling on New York: "A long narrow pig trough."

Oh, and speaking of pigs - I know there is an Ohio delegation here - Mrs. Trollope on Cincinnati, which I think of as one of our most agreeable cities: "I'm sure I would have liked Cincinnati much better if the people had not dealt too very largely in hogs. We found a brook we had to cross red with the streams from the pig slaughter house while our noses were greeted with odors which I will not describe and which I heartily hope my readers cannot imagine." We cannot argue that Baltimore or Chicago or New York have been turned in into Eden, but they all look better than they used to and Cincinnati demonstrably smells better than it used to.

On my ten-foot shelf of traveler's tales, which I really enjoyed looking through in preparation for this, I found appalling descriptions of nearly all American places. The most wonderful is Mark Twain's remark on Arkansas City, Arkansas, on the Mississippi: "We asked a passenger who belonged there what sort of place it was. 'Well,' he said, after considering, and with the air of one who wished to take time and be accurate, 'It's a hell of a place,' a description which was photographic for exactness."

I can remember myself when you had to change your shirt in Pittsburgh before you went to dinner because the shirt you wore during the day was all covered with soot by nightfall. I can remember when downtown Philadelphia was boring by day and dangerous by night. And Cleveland was a joke, and Savannah was a swamp. I can remember when the San Francisco waterfront was ugly and uninteresting, and the San Antonio River was a smelly urban stream with one or two cheap shops and a tired café or two. Have you been to San Antonio recently? You can sit under the trees and sidewalk cafes and dance on the Riverwalk and catch a boat to the public library.

I know that everywhere in America we are still tearing down the familiar and erecting the monstrous. I know most of our cities still are, as John Steinbeck described them 35 years ago, "like

badger holes ringed with trash.ö I have been to the ugliest parts of Los Angeles, so I know what is prevalent, and I have been to Senator Jeffords' state, too, and I know what is possible, therefore. Those of us who care about this ö I've already said I don't know too much about it, but I do care about it ö and I know we can't afford to be cynical. If we believe nothing is ever going to change, nothing ever will. But Scenic America and its allies, I think, can find much in our recent past, just in the years that I've been a reporter and noticing our country, I think we can find a lot to be confident about and reassured about. And now more than ever that a crowd like this could gather and try to change our country for the better.

Thirty years ago I went up to Maine where Pete Seeger, the folk singer, was overseeing the construction of a magnificent Hudson River sloop ö a distinctive wooden boat which had long banished from the river with a boom that stretched yards past the stern and an enormous gaff-rigged mainsail, a vessel, to make your eyes pop. Pete's notion, which I regarded then as pure romance, was to sail the Clearwater to every river port, carrying the gospel of reviving the Hudson. In fact, he found friends everywhere as we all will in the cause of Scenic America. He found the friends he expected to find: fishermen and towns folk and sailors and self-taught naturalists. And some he didn't expect: state legislatures who really did pass a one-billion dollar pure water bond act and members of Congress who passed the federal Clean Water Act back in 1972.

Thirty years ago when I watched the Clearwater being built in Gamage's shipyard, the Hudson was not much more than a 300-mile-long sewer. Today, thanks to new laws and private gifts and sewage treatment plants and closed factories and dumps and landfills and thanks to hundreds of unpaid volunteer river keepers, the Hudson is beginning to run clear. It flows a few hundred years from where I live, and I keep an eye on it.

Last summer, swimming beaches were opened on the river again for the first time in half a century. In 1966, they figured that 250,000 striped bass entered the river to spawn. Some of them died of suffocation before they reached their spawning ground. This year, they reckoned the number of striped bass in the river at close to two million, a result of the ban on commercial bass fishing and the re-oxygenation of the river. This spring, for the first time in more than 30 years, I had a dinner of Hudson river shad and roe. Regional planning and urban renewal are taking hold along the Hudson's banks. Towns are turning themselves toward the water and having celebrations on the water and that dying river of 30 years ago has become a pretty inviting waterway. People are falling in love with the Hudson again, celebrating it again. And the sloop Clearwater is still sailing.

I know the difficulties. I know how hard so many people have worked on this Chesapeake Bay and how determined they are and how difficult it is. I believe we are going to see this Bay come back because people love it. I think the extravagantly polluted Elizabeth River down at the other end of the Bay is going to be revived because so many people want to do so and have banded together, just in the last year or two, to do so.

And on to the south, in my own North Carolina., my friend Rolfe Neill, the publisher of the Charlotte Observer, wrote a piece in the paper yesterday about those mountains down there. Nobody has ever consented to any form of zoning or anything of that sort in the North Carolina mountains. It's the curse of the independent mountaineer. But Rolfe pointed out that they cut down all the trees there between 1880 and 1920, just left a bunch of stumps. I have a photograph at home of one of those stumps of an ancient chestnut tree which four squares of square dancers are dancing on the stump. But in those years, virtually every tree worth a dollar was cut down, with nightmarish results. Wildlife and plant habitats were butchered, erosion resulted, filling the streams with sediment, ruining them for a

couple of generations. The visual blight was just enormous. Families had to leave that country, go off to the cities to find work.

I think we've grown smarter. I believe we are going to see the mountain billboards fall and the vistas of the Blue Ridge Parkway newly protected and new initiatives taken against the acid rain from the west that is the new threat to the trees and lakes. It's given the soil on the top of Mount Mitchell, our highest hill and the highest one east of the Mississippi, it's given that soil a pH halfway between lemon juice and battery acid. I think that's going to change. Never again will an ugly condominium be built on one of the mountain ridges — because now, it's against state law.

One could go on and on, listing the determined efforts going on in a hundred, a thousand American places. We do need legislation. But the way it's going to have to be done place by place, and one place after another by the people who live there. After traveling over all these years to every corner of every state over and over again, I see — we all see — of course, what Thackeray saw in his American journey of 1856: "A triumphant sort of barbarism," he wrote. "A sordid greed everywhere and an extravagance equally astounding. All profits of all businesses immensely high." We all know what he meant, but American does not belong to the franchisers and the developers and spoilers who do not give a damn about their country. The land is ours.

Ordinary Americans, I am persuaded of this with all my heart, ordinary Americans want a beautiful country. We are proud of the amber waves of grain and the purple mountains majesties. And we are not powerless. We can have, we really can, the land Amadas and Barlowe had seen -- the Goodliest Land Under the Cope of Heaven. Thank you very much.