Where the Frontier Ends. Dot-Com Cities in the New America

by David Adler '14

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The real work, the heavy lifting, starts where the frontier ends. The pioneers drew their index fingers to the West and moved forward ho. Then, when it was all mapped and named, Neil Armstrong looked to the moon and said, upward. Even after that, we squirmed around, followed the empire's imperative-out, go, spread. But today's America doesn't want to walk on the moon, and it doesn't want a new war. Are we settled now? Is this it?

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Mayor James Thompson of Sugar Land, Texas wants you to know that his city is not for sale. Which, at first, is not surprising at all, because usually towns are not for sale. This was in February 2013, after SugarDaddie.com, a website that helps older men connect to younger women, offered four and a half million dollars to Sugar Land, Texas for the town to change its name to SugarDaddie.com, Texas.

"Really, it was never even a consideration of the mayor," councilman Joe Zimmerman tells me over the phone. "All of us in Sugar Land are very passionate and proud of our history." In city hall, a plaque hangs on the wall, with pictures and little blurbs that tell the story of this sugar plantation town. Back in 1843, Samuel May Williams founded the Imperial Sugar company here, which has been headquartered in Sugar Land ever since. It was a company town-Imperial housed its workers, built schools for the children and hospitals for the sick. It was self-sufficient that way, and the railroads only helped Imperial to keep its little town happy and well fed.

The Imperial Sugar factory is no longer in service, now just a big brick landmark off the highway. Still, Zimmerman notes, "we are very protective of our past, recognizing that we have moved well beyond a sugar town." Asked if there were an offer to be made right here, right now that would persuade Sugar Land otherwise, he belts a hearty chuckle that rings through the phone. Names are names, and places are places, and especially in Texas, tradition is tradition. Geography, Joe is telling me, is not a commodity.

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In 2005, the five members of the Santa, Idaho town commission vote unanimously to rename the town SecretSanta.com in exchange for at least $20,000 from the gift-sharing website. The company is allowed to erect signs all over the town, though the town post office keeps its name so that there will be no disappointment when thousands of children, as do and have done for decades, send their annual letters to Santa's Idaho address come December.

Five years earlier, after an offer of $110,000 and twenty new computers for the school computer lab, Halfway, Oregon becomes Half.com, *America's First Dot-Com City,* according to the signs. Nothing, of course, is Dot-Com-y about it; Halfway is a small town along a main road, sitting in a vast, barren valley beside Oregon's snowtips. Beautiful, to be sure, but offering little more to the website than publicity. "We literally put the brand on the map," Half.com vice president Mark Hughes announces.

The same year: Clark, Texas, a little town in Denton County with a population of just about 200, becomes DISH, Texas. EchoStar Communication Corporation offers the residents of DISH, Texas free cable for ten years; Mayor Bill Merritt is happy to oblige. "We really look at this as kind of a rebirth for our community."

Topeka, Kansas becomes Google, Kansas on March 1, 2010 in a bid to help persuade Google to invest its fiber optic technology in the city. They hold the name for a month as a push to attract Google's "Fiber for Communities" program, which offers to install its new Internet technology in a handful of locations.

There is something unsettling here, something that makes me want to laugh in the same way that Joe Zimmerman and the council of Sugar Land, TX laughed when they encountered a bid from SugarDaddie.com. First, on a very immediate, superficial level: we would never want our children growing up in a hometown named after the venerable tradition of online dating. Or, more specifically, we would never want to explain to our sons and daughters-as we would surely one day have to explain-what a SugarDaddie really is, a jowly man wiping crumbs from the corners of his mouth, bathing in the glow of his Dell desktop computer.

Yet there is also a larger discomfort here, one that extends far beyond the name itself. In SugarDaddie.com, we confront a pattern as uncomfortable as it is familiar: corporations target those facets of our lives that we thought to be off-limits, and then they claim them as their own.

Companies like Red Bull now hire an army of young people to distribute their product in backyard parties across the globe. Start-ups pay college students to plaster their logos on dorms and libraries and bathroom stalls across town. Ad content streams below, behind, and through our Internet. A recent pop-up window: "How to Tattoo a company's Brand

Name or Logo and how to Get Paid from Them." Meanwhile, Google's launches its Glass project, a headset that integrates our in-the-world vision with our on-the-web one. We would, with Glass, wake up to Google, although most of us already do.

In this sense, the investment in geography appears to be the next step in the corporate empire. First, the consumable, then the corporeal, now the country itself. The Corporate America-a formal, legal, explicit one, where all public space is claimed as private, each little house on the prairie.com-is around the corner. We have only to adjust to its arrival.

It's a dystopian vision, the nation divided into its Company Towns. In his book *Company Towns,* Hardy Green writes, "To those who like to think of the United States as a sweet land of liberty, the very words sound un-American." If Americans are free, they cannot be beholden to the corporation, who might, in this dystopian vision, administer where people live and what they eat and whom they worship.

"It's true," Green writes. "Company towns are un-American-and they are the essence of America."

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In 1903, Milton Hershey purchased 1,200 acres of barren land in Derry Church, Pennsylvania. He was moving away from New York City, where his candy shop had recently closed, looking to expand on his line of five-cent Hershey's Milk Chocolate Bars.

He hired surveyors to map out the plot, and an architect to begin developing blueprints for his Hershey's Chocolate factory and the town that would grow around it. "Such a place," Hershey dreamed, "would serve as a standing advertisement for the Hershey Co., its wholesome values, and its products," Green writes. There would be, in Hershey's own words, "no poverty, no nuisances, no evil."

And Hershey was right. His town had zoos and parks, schools and hospitals, pools and trolleys. Hershey workers received all of the benefits of the company town, with housing and medicine and retirement included. There was a junior college with free tuition; town churches received $20,000 endowment. Hershey's wife Kitty developed the Hershey Industrial School inside the town, housing and educating young orphans and providing them with $100 upon graduation in addition to helping them personally to find a job or college scholarship. And, of course, there were no funeral homes or cemeteries allowed in the town; mortality and candy are unprofitable, albeit natural, bedfellows.

Milton Hershey-who would act as the self-appointed mayor of his Pennsylvania Disneyland-was remaking the American city in chocolate. "The village had become such a sensation that little other marketing was needed-and the company ceased its print advertising," Hardy writes.

Hershey, Pennsylvania would thrive in the following decades. Expanded production, new amenities, healthy-hearth-and-home. This was a town based on the same mutual promise of exchange as Dot-Com cities of our decade: big business offers services to town residents; residents offer control of their public space. Half.com offers a new computer lab to the school; Hershey offers a new school completely. This was how the West was formed, industry first, people second, leapfrogging the frontier across the continent.

George Pullman developed his own model town in the 1880s. In four years, he transformed 4,000 acres of Illinois swampland into a large-scale manufacturing town of 8,000 residents. In the city of Pullman, cable car factories loomed over an elegant residential neighborhood of tree-lined streets and brick homes with running water and functioning gas.

Green's list is long: Firestone Park, Ohio of the Firestone Tire & Rubber Company; Alcoa, Tennessee of the aluminum producer Alcoa; Kohler Village, Wisconsin of the Kohler Co. All the way through the '40s, when war-time production sprouted insta-cities throughout the West, and into the '60s. Valencia, California, for example, was planned by the Newhall Land and Farming Company, separated into little villages with landscaped boulevards that snake along schools and shopping malls and community centers and golf courses. "Built as Promised," Valencia's catchphrase. "Awesometown," its unofficial brand name.

Of course, the recognition of this history-of America as the land of the Big Business buy-and-build rather than the Lewis and Clark see-and-settle-is not a recommendation. Pullman's Illinois model town famously erupted in labor unrest; Hershey's, much later, the same way. All throughout the company towns of the early twentieth century-mining and coal, oil and steel-workers were exploited heavily by the company benefactor.

Yet the Company Town reminds us, against Joe's Zimmerman's hearty chuckle, that geography has always been a commodity in this country. After all, cities are *incorporated,* not founded. And states, too, were economic entities before they were patriotic ones. California, in 1850, had its gold; Hawaii, the 50th shining star, had its sugar plantations. Castle & Cooke, Alexander & Baldwin, C. Brewer & Co., American Factors, and Theo H. Davies & Co.-these were the Big Five corporate giants that dominated Hawaii's sugarcane industry and gobbled up its countryside. They colluded, formed monopolies, manipulated Hawaiian politics from behind the scenes. These were the real pioneers, pushing the American frontier beyond the continent; Eisenhower merely signed his name. In hindsight, it is clear that we have always been confused about what is public and what is private, what belongs to the country and what belongs to its corporations, be it our cities, our politicians, or our families. There is something irksome about SugarDaddie.com, Texas, but perhaps it's a discomfort with the origins of America rather than its future. Then again, maybe it's both.

Still, Hershey was a real human, the type of flesh-and-bone human that we still recognize as our own. A few years ago, the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* did its best to blur this distinction. Here, beyond the consumable and the corporeal, the corporation acquired its own humanity, just another member of the family sitting down at the dinner table. But not even *Citizens United* can change the fact that SugarDaddie.com has nothing to do with the cute, commercial town of Sugar Land, Texas in just the same way Half.com had nothing to do with the little green hamlet of Halfway, Oregon. Hershey, on the other hand, lived in his little town in Pennsylvania, visited his factories, and ate the same chocolate that we eat today. This is the key difference between the history of the Company Town and its contemporary counterpart: one is named from within, and one from without. When someone gets on the Hershey's Kiss ride at the Hershey amusement park today, he is reminded of the *real things* that Hershey produced, the chocolate bars that were made in that now-defunct factory next door. SugarDaddie.com, Texas is instead a commemoration to a far off organization producing something fundamentally immaterial. The production used to take place within the town; now the production is the town itself.

And this is indicative of a larger trend in our cities. The *real* Company Towns of today's American industry, or at least the bulk of them, are not the mining towns of the Western frontier; they are, in fact, beyond our borders. Hershey, Pennsylvania is today nothing but an amusement park, with rollercoasters and water slides and little mascots of Reese's Butter Cups. The only chocolate here is prepackaged, sorted into rows and aisles inside the gift shops along the main drag. Instead, Hershey produces today almost exclusively in Monterrey and Guadalajara, Mexico. In 2002, they opened a new chocolate factory in S�o Roque, Brazil. We would, of course, never see Nike, Indonesia or Levi Strauss, South Africa; these are not the places that American companies want to direct our attention. So we are left with our failed Company Towns of the American West, sanitized monuments to themselves, just like the defunct Imperial Sugar factory sitting off of the highway. The council of Sugar Land, TX may claim to protect its tradition, but it is a tradition that we have already shipped elsewhere.

SugarDaddie.com is thus an important indicator that yes, we have entered a new commercial America. We do not produce those *real things* anymore. The jobs are not coming back. Even at the new Hershey factory, wrapping machines whir as spools of foil and small translucent strips of paper slurp around the sides of the little Kisses, Kisses that used to be wrapped one at a time by Pennsylvania hands. The Company Town may have relied on exploitation, but it was exploitation that felt present within the community; it was the workers versus the boss, circumscribed by the town limits. There is something about the Dot-Com ownership of America that feels far more in-the-shadows, pulling strings from an invisible skyscraper. These towns have no relationship with their owners, and there is no collective experience. That these websites are selecting cities with such similar names to their domains only serves to reinforce the perception of some sneaky sleight-of-hand. Who is SugarDaddie.com? At least we knew Hershey. He had a smile and a patch of grey hair on his head, and he liked to hold his orphans in his arms in the photographs.

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There is a part of the American Southwest, a few hundred miles east of the Rockies, that looks like an endless checkerboard from above. Clean white lines mark off squares of maroon and brown flatland, each little parcel with its own terrestrial color. Big squares and small squares fit perfectly next to each other, and not an inch is missing from the patchwork. We've done an incredible thing making this quilt out of the continent; from the plane, it looks like it could never have been any other way.

It is a scary feeling to approach the end of the frontier, where all the villages on the Amazon have been purged, every nook and cranny of the ocean discovered and plotted and TED-talked. Everything just seems to harden into place. The black squiggly borders sink further into the earth, and the fences along them rise higher into the air. The pioneering days are over, it seems; the book has been written. And while we may not like its contents-White Settlement, TX, for example, or even Hershey, PA-we are resigned to their finality.

SugarDaddie.com irks us because it reopens this book. For however long these towns change their names, they blur the borders and make flimsy the fences that guard them, and it is here that we are able to see the myth of this frontier for all its farce.

For the frontier was never really open. Manifest Destiny was never lady Columbia drifting west, the trim of her robe erecting railroads and telegraph wire as she drew light into the darkness. These were acts of acquisition, conquest, expulsion. Our beloved frontier myth has always overlooked the fact that this land was taken, not found. The Dot-Com cities of our decade merely take this logic to its terrifying extreme. As with all of our great frontiersmen, these companies look out onto the continent with a will to shape it. It may not follow such an elegant geographical pattern-westwarding ho-but they are making an internal frontier anew, faceless, nameless cowboys trotting through our towns and seizing them for themselves.

Here, we discover the other half of the myth, that the frontier was never really closed, at all. With America set still, industry slithers through our fences, ignores our borders, and continues its race to the bottom. To Vietnam! to Bangladesh! to Guatemala!-production seeps out from this country, drawing the frontier into cities far off from the American West. Whether it is virtual or physical, consumable or corporeal, internal or external, there will always be new territory to exploit. Commerce, we know, never takes a nap.

What remains when we dispose of the frontier myth is a new map entirely. Gone are the black squiggly lines that wave from either side of the interstate. Gone are the names once scribbled onto the map in permanent ink. In their place, a hazy palimpsest, the markings of past settlements just barely visible; arrows, swooshing inward and outward, past our borders and back through them; an uneven topography, showing not the undulations of our natural landscape but the mountains of commerce that have, more than anything else, shaped the geography of this country, scaling up, up, up, from the village to the town to the city to corporation.

Over the phone, Joe Zimmerman tells me he's got one final pitch for the article. "Let me tell you. We've got Texas Instruments; we've got Minute Maid. Just this last year alone, we were able to attract a hundred companies," he says. "That is what we offer here in Sugar Land."