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IMAGINE yourself an embroiderer for a moment. You are about to make a sampler of small-town America, and the picture you come up with is likely to resemble Flemington: an orderly main street of 19th-century storefronts, houses, churches, even the mandatory Civil War monument.

The images all suggest that the kindly doctor, the town character and the ol' swimmin' hole are nearby. Small-town America, that is how we like to see ourselves.

But wait. Something is threatening to unsew our sampler. Over on the courthouse steps, a woman with a bullhorn is gathering a crowd around. They are coming off a large tour bus - too large, it seems, for the scale of our picture. She is announcing:

"This is the courthouse where the Bruno Hauptmann-Lindbergh baby trial took place in 1935. Across the street is the Union Hotel, where journalists stayed ..."

She gives out maps and wishes everyone a good day of shopping. On Saturdays, shoppers descend on Flemington, which markets itself in an appeal to our search for that sampler of small-town America. But where is this "simpler America" when 75 percent of the nation is urban, shops at malls, seldom goes to church and spends more time in the car than with neighbors?

Pressed in by three malls, Flemington has sold its quaintness in an effort to survive. The affliction is not Flemington's alone. It's a familiar pattern. A quiet town is consumed by the city, or its outreaching suburban fingers. It loses its old economic function - Flemington was always known as a center of agriculture - and so it goes on to the next stage to survive.

The town celebrates its quaintness, struts its charms on the stage for gain. Instead of striving to be like its big-city cousins, as in the old days, it emphasizes the small, townly, neighborly aspects.

Colonial facades are added. Stores are careful to include the word "towne," village or country. The more the town recedes, the more it is celebrated.

When something is no longer around us, we have to make believe. Boutiques spring up, and stores are renamed "Antiques n' Things" or "Expressions in Hair" (nee Joe's Barbershop). It's no longer the butcher shop, but "The Meat Experience" or "Flanks n' Things."

Hang a few ferns in the window, a few Tiffany-style lamps over the meat counter or install track lighting, chrome furniture and mirrors. Flemington is no longer a town. It is a stage for visitors, an amusement park whose theme is small-town America. It sells quaintness the way that a shopping mall sells convenience.

A mall contrives an atmosphere, takes on a theme. The town holds a mirror to itself and becomes "old fashioned," becomes that Norman Rockwell sampler that it probably never was.

Every weekend, shoppers come to Flemington with a sense of determination to comb through acres of cut-glass and pottery. Most of those who arrive by bus are of retirement age, and they usually move in packs of four: two women toting bags that, by day's end, are drooping down like a trick-or-treater's and - trailing behind - two men.

The women are shopping. The men are enduring. A big red bus from Schenck Tours waits. It has come from Floral Park, L.I., nearly a two-hour drive from a place that has no shortage of stores.

Its passengers have been lured to Flemington by advertising that promotes the town as being better than many malls. One supplement refers to "Historic Flemington" and its "period-piece" architecture and says:

"Much of the stress that normally accompanies shopping expeditions is reduced by easy-to-look-at surroundings." "The buildings that house the retail shops," it continues, "are a combination of former homes, old warehouses and well-crafted Colonial reproductions."

Flemington is marketing its history. Unlike other theme parks that sell a specific era, Flemington is selling the feeling of history, the sense of place. The 19th-century Main Street Look is salable.

But they are selling an image of a town that is no longer there. Only the fragrance remains. "We have a smokeless industry called tourism," says Councilwoman Barbara Hill, who is a co-owner of Flemington Cut Glass. It's easier to live with the gift shop than a fast-food outlet or gritty industry, but everything has its price. What is Flemington paying?

"When I moved to Flemington almost a year and a half ago, I never dreamed I'd be living in a shopping mall," Chuck Gysi wrote recently in a New Jersey daily.

Mr. Gysi was complaining about the \$60,000 worth of brightly colored directories that are being put up around town, directories similar to those in malls like Woodbridge Center.

Residents have other complaints. They despise the traffic on Main Street, the lack of parking. Most visit few of the stores, drawing a distinction between "downtown" and the tourist quarters.

As always, the alchemy of tourism takes effect: what the tourists have come to see has been transformed by their presence. Everyone wants to live in the country; it becomes suburbia. Everyone wants to walk down a forest path; it becomes a trail, and then a road. Everyone wants to live in a small town. It, too, transforms itself just out of reach of the poor weekend visitor. It ceases to function as a town.

There are few stores for locals to run their errands (like Higgins News Agency or Orville's Barbershop). The rest are boutiques and factory outlets.

The "townies" become visitors in their own town. The tourist industry has divided Flemington into the "locals' town" and the theme park. That is the way in every tourist city and seaside resort. Locals and tourists take different paths and cross only - if they can help it - where money is exchanged.

In Flemington, residents will cite the courthouse as the dividing line, although some new stores are trying to pull tourists over the "line."

"Most people living in Flemington have never been in Flemington Cut Glass or Turntable Junction," says one resident. Turntable Junction is an imitation town of old buildings that have been hauled in from someplace else to house unicorn-and-rainbow shops around a small Green. Instant history, instant theme. Just add a few plaques.

Two other theme areas also cash in on the small-town image - Paul Bunyan Village and Liberty Village, a recreation of an 18th-century town designed to provide, in the words of one travel guide, "nostalgic entertainment."

But Flemington's problems are those of success. Like any successful product, it has sold us something we want. All theme parks, from Main Street USA in Disneyland to Williamsburg, prettify the past (or future) and tell us a story we wish to believe about ourselves.

We continue to chase after the image of the town because we want to go home again to that America advertised on cereal boxes - the America on "The Waltons," the friendly Main Street of Mayberry, the rough-and-ready democracy of the Town Meeting. If you can sell flour with a hometown image, why not an entire town?

We want desperately to hold on to that image of America as a nation of small towns. A Gallup Poll taken in the early 70's showed that "six in 10 Americans pined for the rural life." And a Lou Harris Survey done for Life magazine reported:

"Americans paint an almost Jeffersonian picture of their aspirations: green grass and trees, friendly neighborhoods, churches, schools and good stores nearby."

We want to meet our neighbor over the white picket fence. We want our children to play in the safety of some idyllic Winslow Homer scene.

We want to belong. As long as we yearn to go home again to some mythic past, towns like Flemington will serve the function of a funhouse mirror. They will alter the picture of ourselves until we are, for one afternoon, townsfolk going down well-worn streets and past houses with honored family names, old houses with long histories that we can pretend to know.

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