

When is a house a home?

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Everybody from Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz to E.T. wants to go home after being on the road for a while.

Home, whether high or low, is where we anchor ourselves in both senses of the word. Home is a place where we have belonged.

Struggling to return home is a basic plot structure in fiction, starting with “The Odyssey” of Homer. Writers understand that no hero should have an easy go of coming back.

Of course, once you’re home, you may not want to stay very long, because it’s too familiar and often uncomfortable—the very reasons why you left in the first place.

We have homeroom, homecoming, home again jiggety-jig, homeward bound, Home Depot, home plate and home cooking (a puzzling boast made by commercial restaurants).

Home motivates people to defend “The Homeland” from invaders, no matter how miserable their lives. Family values are rooted in the idea of home. Each of us tries to protect and preserve “The Home Place.”

American John Howard Payne idealized home in his 1823 lyrics for the one song for which he is remembered:

*Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.*

Payne’s collaborator, English composer Sir Henry Bishop, unhumly hijacked the melody of an Italian folk song for “Home! Sweet Home!”

At some point in our lives, home usually takes two forms: our memory of a childhood place and our present tense, which we hope is not. Central to both is the house where events happen, love is expressed, fights are fought, mistakes are made and things are remembered.

For many, if not most of us these days, our childhood place is not where we live as adults. If memories of our childhood home are better than the feelings we have for our current lives, we grow nostalgic and feel short-changed.

Home is bigger than house, though house is a big part of what home is. When we've left home but the house remains, we tend to squeeze what we remember into what's tangible and still visible.

Innocent bricks and mortar bear the burden of remembered family. Decades after I sold the house where I was raised, I park at the curb every few years to cue up memories.

On the few occasions when I've driven my daughter past places I've lived, she summons the same perfunctory level of interest in my ghosts as I do when I visit my wife's Charlotte house that's abuzz with hers. House ghosts are like those jokes that you had to be there then to get them now.

One rite of passage that many of us grind through is selling the house that was our childhood home.

I've discovered over the years that hard decisions are not very hard when you have no choices. But when you do, it's easy to postpone them as long as you can.

Dithering about the fate of his family's summer home is the subject of George Howe Colt's, The Big House. It's the story of his very extended Boston Brahmin family spending 100 summers in a 1903 Rubik's Cube of a four-story Victorian on 13 Cape Cod acres.

The house reflected his family in many ways. It was a white elephant, sacred cow and lame duck.

The Big House had quirky charms—nonsensical spaces created by additions, materials that provided sacred habitat for squirrels, sitting furniture that had barely supported four generations of family bottoms and the smell of saltwater, mildew and slow decay.

The family's generations, which extended horizontally in many directions, loved their summer home. They treasured its familiar size, inhospitable rocky beach and ubiquitous poison ivy. A daily dose of summer pins and needles was expected. It was who they were.

The Big House had become their home place as they moved from house to house around the country. It was the setting for what emotions they rationed to themselves in their marriages, divorces, conceptions, embarrassments, rituals and plain old battiness.

As much as anything, the family was captive to its history, which they recounted in the past perfect. Their neck of land on Buzzards Bay had been purchased by a syndicate of Boston families of "the right sort." They established a closed summer life of sailing Herreshoff twelves, patching their patched dinghies, swatting tennis balls at each other, drinking too much, talking too little and spurning small conveniences. The world that

made this possible is largely gone. The Big House was the last piece of it. It gave life to their ghosts.

By the early 2000s, its needs were overwhelming a family that was no longer rich. Making a decision about what to do with it was their existential dilemma. They came to understand that not deciding was not a solution.

Some of the five principals and their supporting casts reluctantly wanted to sell, because they couldn't afford their share of its expenses or wanted their piece of the \$1 million it would fetch. Some considered finagling to keep it, but had lost their Yankee ability to finagle. Some hated the idea of a developer -- their best money -- tearing down the house and lotting out the land. Some found distasteful the inevitability of new money buying out old money, or more precisely, big money buying out small money.

All seemed to hate the idea of change of any kind, and particularly the kind forced on them by something as unattractive as a lack of cash. After several years with no offers, the principals became resigned to selling for less than they wanted, and even to a developer who would demolish the treasured house.

But, at the last minute, Colt's family stumbled and bumbled into an arrangement whereby a prosperous cousin who worked for a hedge fund bought nine acres and remodeled the house. The remaining four acres were sold to an outsider. This family-based solution materialized only after they had signed a sales offer with a buyer who then "withdrew" his contract upon becoming aware of pollution from nearby Otis Air Force Base.

This is a nook-and-cranny kind of house, and this is a nook-and-cranny kind of book. Little cubbies of history are tucked here and unpainted chests of confession are positioned there. Colt waves goodbye to the old insular and incestuous ways, but he acknowledges that he's benefited from them and even adapted some to his own life.

Out here, farm families have been wrestling with the house-and-home questions that arise from money problems and the lure of high dollars for family land that can't support itself.

Endings here are generally less happy. Small grazing farms that supported large families for 175 years are no longer economically viable.

Farm land is now priced for its vistas and prettiness, not for its agricultural productivity. Acreage that has an intrinsic value of less than \$1,000 an acre as tillable field or pasture is now priced at \$3,000 to \$7,500, because that's what second-homers and retirees are able and willing to pay.

There's no going back I fear.

Families rarely feel good about selling their home place. The money counts less once it's in hand.

Selling the home place is one of those hard things that may just need to be done.

It's also one of those things that can't be undone.

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