

# *The* JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

---

---

VOLUME XVIII

JUNE 1955

NUMBER 2

---

---

## AMERICAN HERITAGE

BY WALTER E. BEZANSON

WALTER E. BEZANSON, *Associate Professor and Director of the undergraduate major in American Civilization at Rutgers, is one of the founders of the American Studies Association, a national society for advancing inter-departmental study of American culture.*

IT IS HARD to say which shock is the greater—to find a magazine without advertising, or to discover historical scholars writing for the general public in an entertaining and even witty style. Both occur in *American Heritage*, one of the happiest ventures in publishing in a long time. Two handsome issues of this unique new hard-cover magazine, devoted to the American story, are now in the Rutgers Library and on the reading tables of subscribers who could muster ten dollars for the six issues per year. They unfold a fascinating panorama of light-to-serious reading and portraiture of “the things that the ordinary folk of America have done and thought and dreamed since first they began to live here,” to quote editor Bruce Catton. “Our beat, in other words,” and the idiom here is just right, “is anything that ever happened in America.” For *American Heritage* is essentially a stream-lined job of fast, varied reporting in the modern manner, cut to fit the moods of a public nostalgic about a past of which it is often shockingly ignorant. It blends sentimental yearnings for the days of lace valentines and the odorous country store with vivid accounts of portentous events. It is thus, as it should be, a thoroughly American blend of soft-heartedness and hard-headedness, by and large avoiding the scrambling by which so much popularization ends up with soft-headedness.

The first issue leads off with a nostalgic recollection of the palatial old side-wheelers of the Fall River Line, with 14 fine illustrations,



ANONYMOUS PAINTING "BUFFALO HUNTER" REPRODUCED FROM AMERICAN HERITAGE

then abruptly moves into "Investigation: 1862," an account of the victimizing of General Stone during the Civil War. Another trip down memory lane follows, this time to the old country store, redolent with "ripe cheese and sauerkraut, sweet pickles, the smell of bright paint on new toys, kerosene, lard and molasses, old onions and potatoes, poultry feed, gun oil, rubber boots, calico, dried fish, coffee, and 'kept' eggs. Kept eggs meant—well, it was sort of a technical term. It meant eggs that should have been shipped off to the city some time ago but weren't." Gerald Carson, who is drawing here from his recent best-seller, *The Old Country Store*, is a retired New York advertising agency executive. This same pattern of contradictions reappears in the antiquarianism of Henry Ford, about whom Allan Nevins writes in another piece. Nevins, chiefly trying for a character structure large enough to hold the "labyrinthine complications" of a man like Ford, decides that Ford's mechanical genius, social primitivism, and volatile temperament can best be understood as aspects of the artistic temperament. The interesting question of why, then, Ford did not become an artist, is not gone into. In the same issue we get a long, colorful letter of Teddy Roosevelt's on the funeral of Edward VII, a journalist's report on "The Day They Burned the Capitol," and a very bright commentary on the famous New York social clubs—such as the Union League and the Century Club—by Cleveland Amory. We have pieces on "Panamint: Suburb of Hell," a silver-lode ghost town, and Acadia in the bayou country. Just as we are wondering if this is *Holiday* magazine, with the clock turned back, D. W. Brogan enters with a quick but penetrating analysis of the differences in attitude toward history found in Britain and America. The issue concludes with a rather extraordinary bit of Realpolitik from the Columbia Oral History Project, "The Personal Reminiscences of Albert Lasker," advertising tycoon of the past generation, and a flowing narrative from Paul Horgan's new two-volume study of the Rio Grande Valley, *Great River*. Thus episodes from the Lucky Strike campaign and the epic of the Southwest lie side by side.

The anonymous painting "Buffalo Hunter" (see frontispiece) from the 1840's makes a striking cover for the first issue. Even in reproduction its formal organization and concentrated symbolic force tempt one to commentary, since the volume offers none. The sub-

ject matters—Indian, horse, buffalo, and prairie—are traditional and historically valid; the painter's projection of them, however, is vividly stylized and non-literal. The white mustang's thinned head is dramatized by a dark mane blowing wildly (from terror rather than wind, for the prairie grass bends the other way). His powerful chest descends to deer-like legs, and the slim rump makes a formal pattern with the streaming white tail. There is a quality here that reminds one of a passage in *Moby-Dick* (1851): "Most famous in our Western annals and Indian traditions is that of the White Steed of the Prairies; a magnificent milk-white charger, large-eyed, small-headed, bluff-chested. . . . The flashing cascade of his mane, the curving comet of his tail. . . . A most imperial and archangelical apparition of that unfallen, western world, which to the eyes of the old trappers and hunters revived the glories of those primeval times when Adam walked majestic as a god, bluff-browed and fearless as this mighty steed." (Chap. 42) It seems probable that in "Buffalo Hunter" we have a version of this mythical White Steed of the Prairies (recently documented by J. Frank Dobie in *Mustangs and Cow Horses*). Here we see him, not leading "vast herds of wild horses," but as an unsubdued servant of an etherealized Red Man, who has turned gracefully on his scarlet blanket, his delicate European bow drawn to the feather in a dance-like act of ritual slaughter. The lurching buffalo hangs unreally poised, his massive forequarters down in submission, delicate hindquarters against the yellow sky. It is a re-vision of an ancient legendary scene, in which the horned dark beast with saucer eyes goes down before the mythically white-mounted hero. The beast lacks only a breath of fire from his nostrils to make his origins clear. The almost transparent buffalo skin which flies against the sky from the Indian's shoulders, predicts the known outcome of the slaughter, and serves the hero as a charmed cloak. The literal-historical base of the picture is obvious: the Plains Indian, whose weapon was the bow, whose transportation was the captured wild horses that had escaped into the Plains from Mexico, here enacts his primary scene—killing the buffalo, who provides him food, clothing, shelter, fuel, and artifacts. In its simplicity and severe design, the painting also gracefully suggests that central myth and fact of the New World—the renewal of power, the pre-Adamic

sense of recovered power and innocence which has long haunted the American imagination.

The second issue of *American Heritage* is more boldly historical. An eyewitness account of the hanging of John Brown, previously unpublished, is followed by a solid contribution on the port of Salem by the curator of Maritime History at the Peabody Museum; the colored illustrations of wharves, ships, and merchant flags are superb. A pleasant little bouquet of old valentines and a group of old-fashioned tongue-twisters, a slightly risqué account of the visit to New York of King Ludwig's girl friend, and a rousing narrative by an Army Lieutenant Colonel of the capture in 1745 of Fort Louisburg, keep the pace warm, amusing, and exciting. There are two solid source pieces of social-political history: records on the legal circuit in Lincoln's Illinois, and the fascinating memoirs of Admiral Brown, Naval Adviser to Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt, and Truman. This latter view through Navy binoculars of White House doings from the time when Calvin glumly capitulated to seasickness aboard the presidential yacht *Mayflower* through the days when Franklin confessed his yearnings to be an Admiral, provides several memorable closeups; details on FDR's crippled condition are moving, and the first-hand data on the exhausting performance at Yalta are important.

Perhaps one of the most thoughtful articles in either issue is James Flexner's incisive study of the cult of the primitives. Seen from Flexner's point of view, some of the parochial Americanism of other articles on American arts and crafts could stand reevaluation. The American heritage has been so deeply interwoven with the events and values of the Western world-community from the very beginning, that there will be serious distortion if this larger context is not kept firmly in mind by the editors. Hence one criticism of *American Heritage* is the way in which it minimizes, so far, the rich interchange of ideas and people between Europe and America. A related criticism should also be made of the way in which many articles skillfully evade the history of ideas, when they are central to the subject matter. In spite of the difficulties of presenting intellectual history to a general reading audience, the problem must be met. The life of the mind is never secondary in the history of a people, and without it even the most attractive presentation of what Americans "have done

and thought and dreamed” becomes in the last analysis only another trunkful of lavendered memories.

*American Heritage* merits an accolade for originality of conception and solidity of achievement, with the exceptions noted. The effect of all but the lightest pieces is one of historical density, a prime attribute of good social history. The format, subject matter, lavish illustrations, and flowing narrative style all commend the magazine to a wide public. Credit is due James Parton, publisher, Bruce Catton, Pulitzer-prize-winning historian and editor, and Allan Nevins, chairman of an advisory board which includes Rutgers’ historian Richard P. McCormick. Back of the new magazine lie the resources of two major historical groups: The American Association for State & Local History, and The Society of American Historians. With such rich resources, *American Heritage* should become a storehouse of pictorial delight, information, and ideas for readers from ages twelve to one hundred twelve.