

Note From The Editor

The articles this month each in their way concern forms of subculture within American society—one form perhaps overestimated, one underestimated, and one aborted or sidetracked. People who became familiar with New York and other large American cities in, say, the 1960s-70s presumed the various manifestations of Little Italy to have been long-standing phenomena sadly on the wane. On the contrary, as Donna Gabaccia demonstrates in her revised SHGAPE presidential address for 2006, even in New York “Little Italy” has always been a transient phenomenon—in *both* time and space—tied from the start to outsiders’ perceptions of transplanted Italian culture and to the possibilities for marketing that culture. Gabaccia’s essay illustrates and furthers the current tendency in research on American urban ethnic communities to stress their permeability and ephemeral character, a point of view obviously relevant to debates on both sides of the Atlantic on the extent and durability of the alleged cultural separateness of urban immigrant groups.

Meanwhile, even before the current round of tensions over the relation of religious groups to other segments of American culture, observers have wondered at the profusion of small- and mid-sized religious congregations of every imaginable sort that fill every American town, small, medium, and large. The task this profusion of congregations poses for truly understanding American urban culture is daunting: where did these buildings and their users come from? How do these people relate to one another? How do they relate to other segments of the urban populace? The editor knows of no scholar who has succeeded in mapping and analyzing the religious institutions of an American city in a comprehensive way. Jason Lanzter’s study of the early career of Reverend Edward Shumaker makes a start at such a task, by evoking the subculture within small and medium-sized Indiana towns that over a century ago produced this thoroughly dedicated campaigner for prohibition.

Finally, Kevin Armitage examines a subculture within American society that did not work out as hoped. Before the various permutations of the scouting movement took, arguably, a pronounced nationalistic and other-directed turn, it had the potential, in the view of advocates such as Ernest Thompson Seton, for nurturing resourceful, creative young individualists. As Armitage relates, before its discrediting as bogus history, anthropology, and psychology, the so-called recapitulation theory of child development

seemed to proponents to offer a blueprint for developing citizens capable of resisting “the depersonalizing drill of industrial civilization.” Advocates saw “nature study” as a device for injecting a durable element of stereotyped Indian into American boys and girls apparently drowning in dull, modern civilization.

Alan Lessoff