Fortune

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Vanishing Backyards

Mrs. Rockefeller and the garbage collector join hands with the birth rate to pick up the country. Mr. Burchfield and Mr. Steiner record the American scene which is passing.

IT is the nature of youth to be wasteful. A child, quietly playing with his toys, feels within himself the sudden, irrepressible surge of his abundant energy and smashes the playthings. Indifferently, then, he leaves the broken toys, the waste he has created, scattered over his nursery . . .

It is the nature of age to be tidy. Patiently the child's nurse gathers the scattered pieces, commits them neatly to the wastepaper basket . . .

Age knows, of course, what youth ignores—knows that if the pieces were not picked up, by the next day the litter would be deeper, and by the following day deeper still, until in time the child could find no place to sit on the floor, until at last the litter mounted to the ceiling and engulfed the house.

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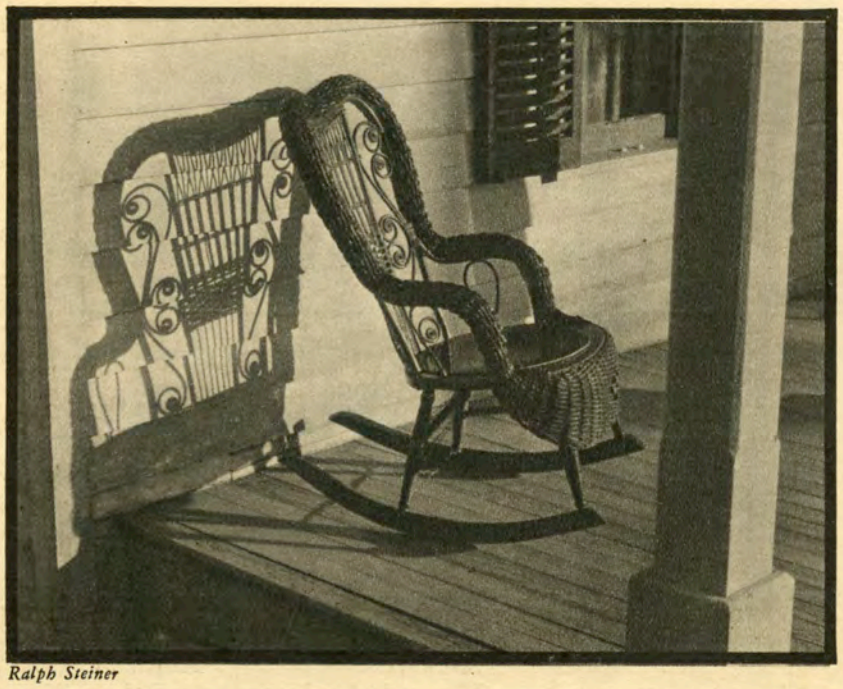
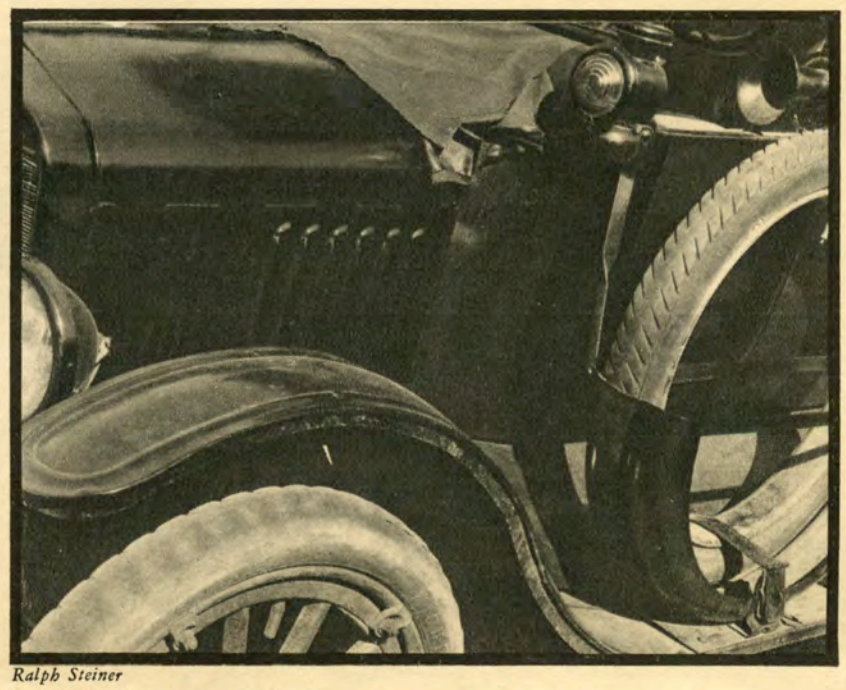
Recklessly, like a child, America hurls its refuse out the window, and doesn't care how high are piled the tin cans in its backyard. Because its backyard is so big. Almost indefinitely it seems to stretch beyond the horizons of the cities.

Courtesy Rehn Galleries

"CIVIC IMPROVEMENT"—*BY CHARLES BURCHFIELD*



Ralph Steiner



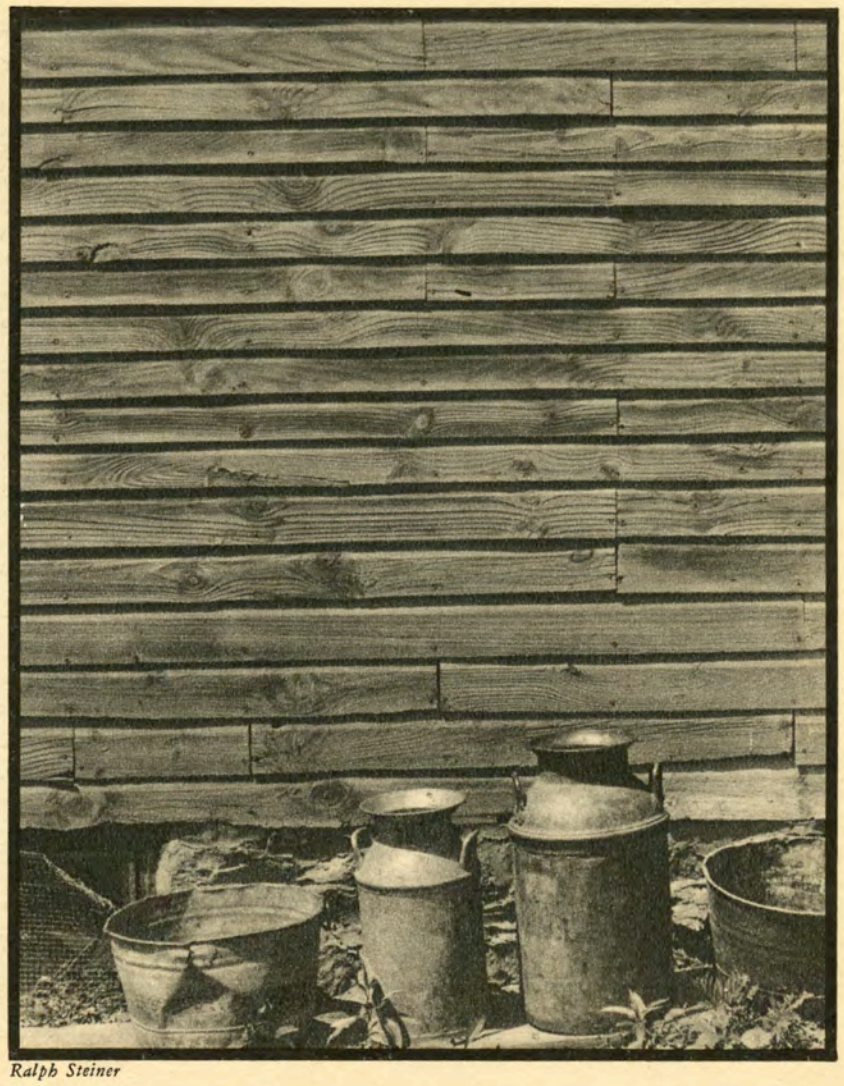
Ralph Steiner

If, suddenly, the new church and the new school and the new apartment house spring up beside the tin cans, it is easy to cart them down the road a mile or so. Or across the river. Or down by the railroad tracks. Back go the fringes of the city, the deadlines of order. Back into the open country where fields are dedicated by billboards to liver pills or pop or hotels with rooms at $1.50 and up. Here one may make a mess. No one cares.

Thus young America. But England, like a nurse or a mother, prudently tidies up. Neat are the rosebushes and the cabbage patches in her back yards, and infinitely neat the hedges which bound them. The fringes of her cities recede into an ordered countryside. It is a sign of age and forethought and caution.

Essentially, the English scene is sad and the American scene is happy. It is smelly, but it is also exuberant and vigorous to strew the country with things worn out and left over. Every garbage dump, every row of ramshackle houses lining the railroad track, is evidence of our boundless wealth. This is space we do not need. We have so much. Actually,

Ralph Steiner



Ralph Steiner

we have about 3,000,000 square miles in which our cities are swallowed up. England has about one-sixtieth as much and a population almost one-third as large. Thus upon a square mile of English earth must live in amity and cleanliness seven hundred persons, but within a square United States mile only thirty-nine need be confined. Throw a tin can from an English back door, and it is apt to land in a neighbor's yard. The next-door neighbor in Kansas or Oregon or Georgia or Vermont is so far away that it is easier to write him a letter than it is to pay him a visit.

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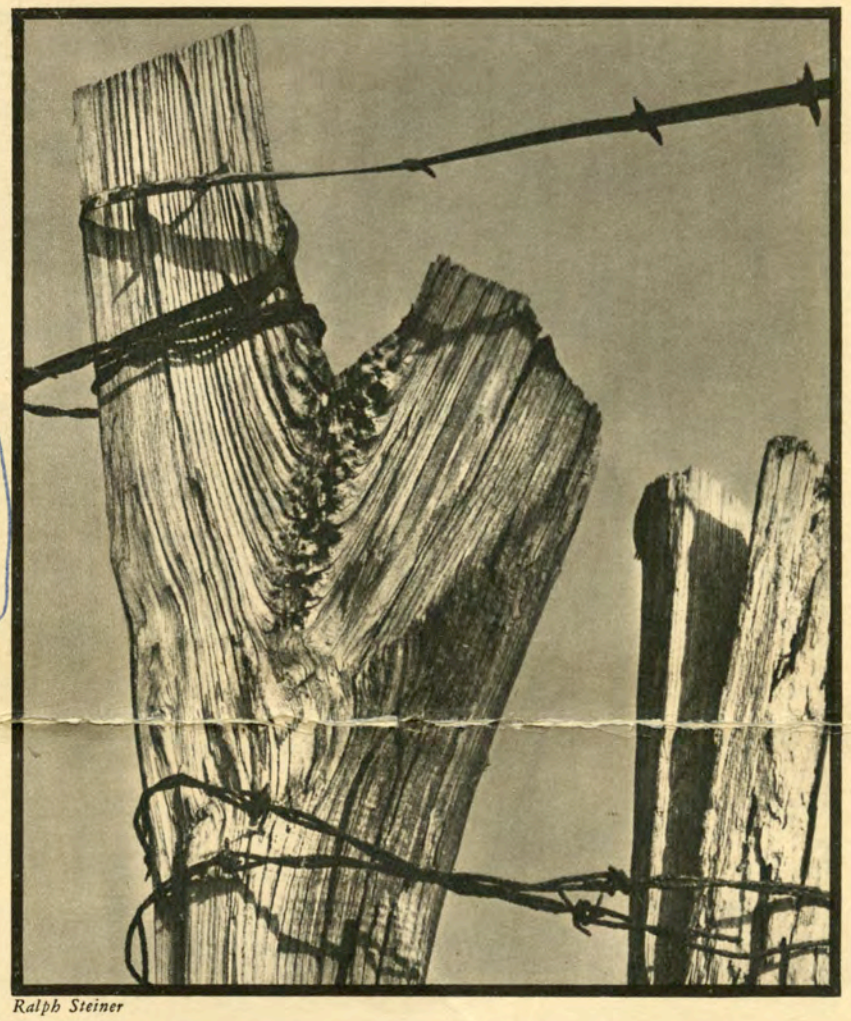
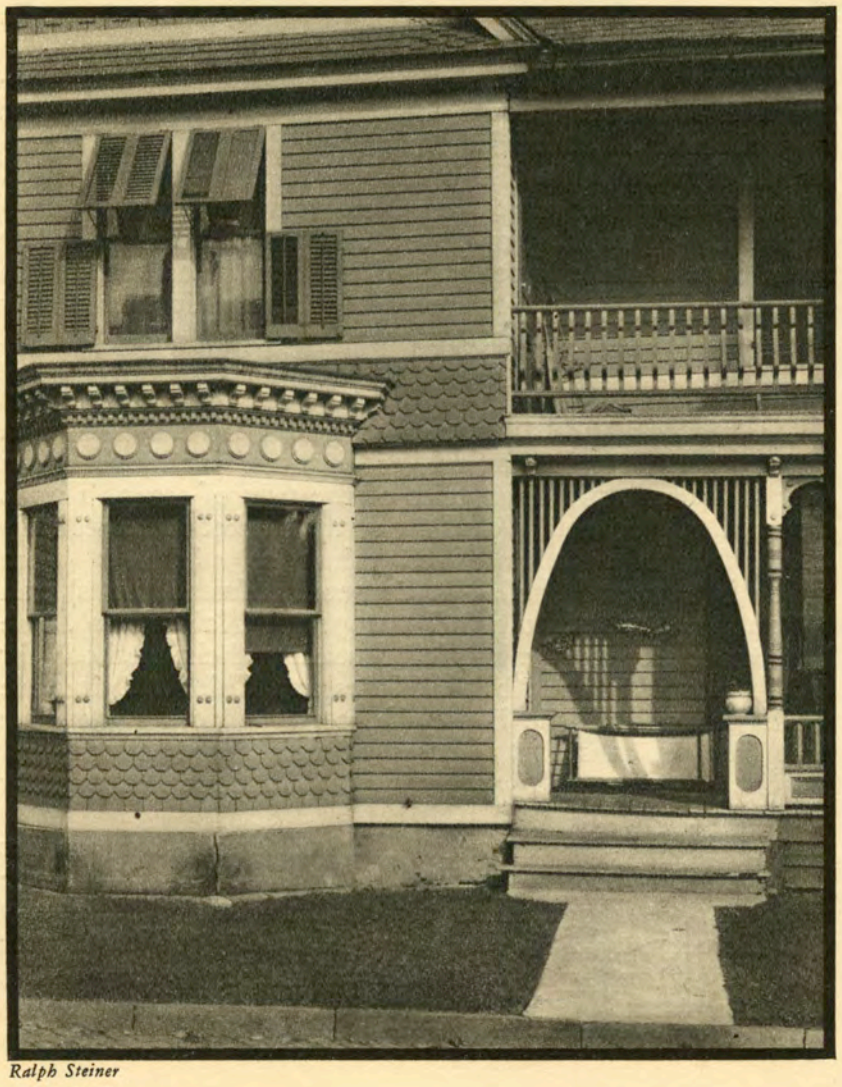
On these pages, FORTUNE prints a portfolio of the work of Messrs. Charles Burchfield and Ralph Steiner. Each has concerned himself with the American scene. Each has rejected artificial drama and the excitement of the accidental. Together they have assembled a record—not of the new America, its skyscrapers, its airplanes, its dynamos—but of the America which remains unregenerate, its back porches and backyards, its ugliness and its waste.

Such a panorama America can afford, yet this is a record of things which are passing. Some, like the rocking-chair, the curious architecture of the small town, give way to new, modern, and possibly improved schools of taste. Others, like the absurd, hideous posters which are plastered across the country, like the tree-choppers denuding a street in the name of boulevard lights, give way to more general agreement as to what constitutes progress. Still others—the streets of mud and the littered fringes of the cities—will move farther and farther into the hinterland until finally they disappear. Year after year more people must cluster within the square United States mile. By the year 2000 we expect a population of



Ralph Steiner



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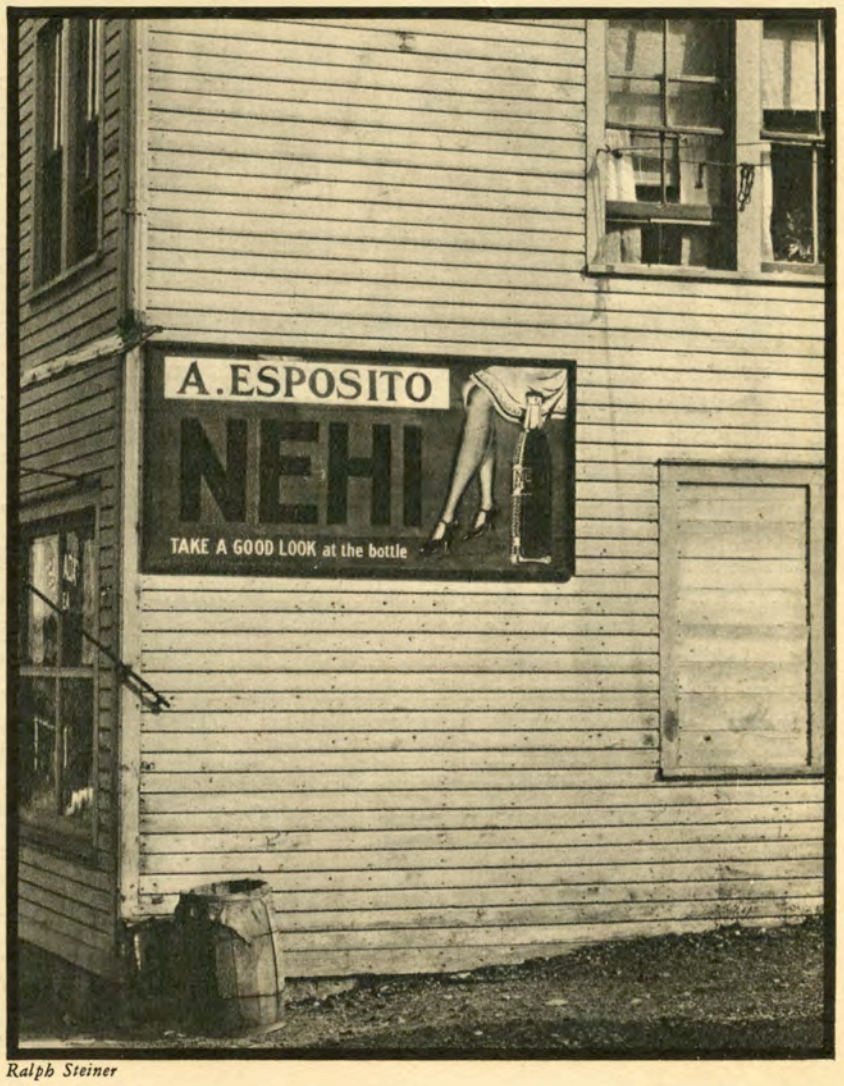

Ralph Steiner

Courtesy the Brooklyn Museum

"FEBRUARY THAW"—*BY CHARLES BURCHFIELD*

185,000,000, and 225,000,000 a century later. Steadily the next-door neighbor moves closer and the tin can becomes more offensive. Neatness is forced upon us, not because we like it, but because of the vigilance of our neighbors and the policeman around the corner.

Hence we must commend Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Mrs. Henry Ford, whether or no we regret the passing of our days of reckless plenty. These are the vanguard of a great army which will shortly be picking up behind our feet and under our noses. Mrs. Rockefeller thinks hot dog stands ugly stains on a green countryside and moves energetically to replace them with neater, prettier kiosks. Mrs. Ford conceived that clean, shiny booths would sell more apples and soft drinks than dilapidated booths and, to prove her point, she herself operated a clean, shiny booth near Dearborn. Sears, Roebuck thought to turn an honest penny out of Mrs. Ford's theory, and is prepared to distribute any one of three ready-cut wayside refreshment stands. The designs of these three buildings, undoubtedly pleasing, were the result of an art competition. The National Committee for Restriction of Outdoor Advertising (Mrs. W. L. Lawton, chairman) has succeeded in making 258 national advertisers restrict their heretofore ubiquitous billboards. Others in this kitchen police force are the Woman's National Farm and Garden Association and the National Council for Protection of Roadside Beauty.

Here is the esthetic appeal. Mr. Ivy Lee, the most distinguished of all public relations counsels, has an immediate, practical reason for urging neatness. On the window of every subway car of the I. R. T. system is displayed, now and again, a poster called the *Subway Sun.* Inasmuch as the subways carry approximately 3,000,000 persons each week day, and inasmuch as Mr. Lee's office is the editorial room of the *Sun*, he might be said to be the publisher of the journal with the world's largest circulation. In this journal Mr. Lee has often pleaded with subway passengers to keep New York clean, not to throw papers about, or skins, or peels . . . Sadly he computes that seven tons of waste paper and other litter are collected from subway cars and platforms every single day. It costs money to clean up such a mess. And the mess is unhealthy.

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One highly important aspect of picking up is typical of a country becoming increasingly economical. Each year brings new and profitable discoveries of the uses of scrap. This is true not only of metals (and the scrap market is exceedingly keen), but of such unrelated things as stiff hats (from which is extracted shellac at Somerset, Massachusetts) and cotton rags (made into bread wrappers in Kalamazoo). The tire companies are jealous of revealing their methods for reclaiming old rubber, but in Korea and China old tires are made into shoes. The housewife, perhaps, does not realize that the tin cans she disposes of will be reclaimed and remelted to form sash weights for her windows and toys for her children.

The list is long and varied. Not to be forgotten are the garbage removers, who point out that in Manhattan alone rubbish and garbage, ashes and dead animals could, at any rate theoretically, be utilized to a gross of $5,000,000 a year (the very quantity of the refuse and the immediacy which health laws demand in its destruction has, however, thus far prevented authorities from much probing of this curious

mine of wealth). Nevertheless, in the United States garbage reduction plants produce $8,250,000 worth of grease annually and of fertilizing tankage, $2,500,000 worth. In some American cities the municipal government actually makes money from its garbage. During five years a Manhattan company paid the city $487,500 for garbage delivered to certain parts of the water front; the Melrose Paper Stock Company has a monopoly on Manhattan's waste paper and pays $1,053 a month for it; Carrizo and Izzo pay $536.99 a week for reclamation of bottles (the price of cast-away bottles has exactly doubled since the Eighteenth Amendment); the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company, Inc. pays $4,000 a month for its pick of ashes. Dead animals are particularly valuable. Broken down chemically, they yield grease and glycerine, valuable in the manufacture of soap; the hoofs give glue; the intestines are sold to meat packers for sausage casings; the bones are utilized in fertilizer or lampblack according to market demand; the hides are sold separately, not a few of them ending up as coats. Nor, though one does not often see them, are cities lacking in dead animals. In Chicago, in one year, a private contractor collected 50 sheep, 1,949 horses, 49,504 dogs, 980 cats, and 39 other animals which he was content to call "miscellaneous."

Garbage, like most general nouns, is a relative term. You eat your cake and like it and it is good food. But leave it half finished and what you have left of a sudden becomes garbage. Thus, perhaps, to a trained eye a pile of garbage might indeed be a thing of beauty. Such trained eyes are, however, notoriously rare. Certain cities, aware of the rarity of this quality, have tried to beautify their garbage disposal plants. In Nuremberg, Germany, the plant is embowered with fruit trees and flowers. Visitors pick strawberries, and cavalier garbage men twirl red roses in their teeth as they work. In Sausalito, California, there is Garbage Park. Here, surrounded by the fragrance of flowers, Oakland's garbage, like the pale, unloved Elaine, puts out to sea from a burgeoning shore.

All too rare, one regrets, is this delicate and lovely approach to garbage. Only in cities like Sausalito or Nuremberg where esthetic municipal directors exist. But gradually we shall become more crowded, and our need for order will increase. And with that increase will come greater and more exquisitely fragrant Garbage Parks, and backyards that are neater and more cheerful. Mrs. Rockefeller could not accomplish it alone, nor Ivy Lee, nor public health authorities, nor the garbage removers. But together they will weld esthetics and sanitation and economics into an irresistible force on the side of tidiness. Already, [illegible] beginning to pick up. The child grows older.

Lent by Mr. A. C. Goodyear to the Museum of Modern Art Exhibition "Nineteen Americans"

"THE PROMENADE"—*BY CHARLES BURCHFIELD*