TO BOYCOTT THE BILLBOARD: THE RIGHT OF THE CITIZEN TO AN UNPOSTED LANDSCAPE: BY CLINTON ROGERS WOODRUFF

H, YOU’RE from Pittsburgh. I stopped in Pittsburg once for a few hours when I had to wait for a train. It’s such a funny ugly city, all covered with the queerest wooden fences with great big advertisements printed on them. That’s all I remember about Pittsburgh—its billboards and its hills.” This, Carolyn Prescott tells us, is a sample of conversation handed out to Pittsburghers, who live in the home of the celebrated Carnegie Art Institute. This same authority declares that there are billboards, billboards everywhere. Billboards on top of tall buildings. Billboards creeping over the high hills, winding their sinuous length like so many bizarre serpents. Billboards stuck up in front of houses and gardens. Billboards at the entrances of the parks. Billboards even defacing the cemeteries. We are so nauseated with the billboards that by the time we have reached our destination we have become so disgusted with what we have seen and read (for we can’t help reading them) that we wouldn’t patronize those firms who advertise on billboards if we had to do without the articles.

I wonder how many Carnegie Art Institutes it will take to offset such a condition of affairs! The one Pittsburgh possesses, with all its millions of endowment and beautiful collections, is not able to prevent the erection of a billboard, one hundred and forty feet long and twenty feet high, directly opposite to the Institute itself. Nor has its presence prevented the desecration of its own beautiful pictures. La Fouche’s canvas entitled “The Bath,” which received first prize from the International Art Exhibition at the Institute last spring, has been utilized as a subject “to inspire enthusiasm in modern plumbing!” This particular instance seems to be too much even for long-suffering, or shall I say indifferent, Pittsburgh, and ways and means are now being discussed for the curtailment of the evil. It may or may not be an art center. I am not going to discuss that question, but if it is, then it is the art of the few, not that of the people.

How can we make our cities in themselves works of art, if we permit the profanation of the sky-line and the elimination of dignity through the unrestrained and unregulated use of the billboard? Cities spend tens and hundreds of thousands for beautiful public buildings, for parks and parkways and playgrounds, and then allow
the billposter to use them as a background for his flaming advertisements. Is it right, is it fair, to those who get all their conceptions of beauty and art through public means, to have the poster placed on a parity with such undertakings? And yet, what other conclusion can the untutored mind reach than that both are equally artistic, both are equally desirable, or why should they be permitted to continue in this juxtaposition? Have we any right to talk of taking expensive measures to make our cities beautiful as long as we allow the unrestrained poster in our streets and suburbs?

This evil blight attacks the country as well as the city. It leaves no part untouched. Nothing is sacred. If the sky-line of the city is disfigured, so is that of the countryside. The billboards flaunt their loud color, their ugly vulgarity, their frequently suggestive or indecent pictures and stupid caricatures in the face of every passerby on city street and country lane, and beside the railroad which skirts the substantial farm or lovely country seat.

The billposter, to quote an indignant Cincinnati observer who has been aroused by the vigorous campaign inaugurated there by the wide-awake Business Men’s Club, “has disfigured and concealed the natural and the artificial beauty of the landscape—and there is no other landscape comparable with that which the billposter is striving to hide from Cincinnati with large degree of success. He has affixed his disfigurements on trees, fences, gateways and walls so as to affect the amenities of public parks, promenades, streets and avenues. He has sought the neighborhood of churches and of schoolhouses. He has scores of miles of disfigurements and blotches in Cincinnati and he goes scot-free of taxation on his exceedingly remunerative investment in billboards.”

In Great Britain, where the campaign against objectionable advertisements has been carried on for fifteen years, success is about to crown the patient efforts of a group of public-spirited men of which Mr. Richardson Evans has long been the leader. In the discussion of the bill now pending in the House of Commons, the Earl of Balcarras declared, while the measure was on passage through the House of Lords: “What we claim is that the landscape does not belong to the man who chooses to pay a few shillings for it per annum, but is an asset of the people at large. The same principle applies to open spaces and places. The sky sign is a most objectionable form of advertising. There is the flash sky sign which dominates the whole of the Embankment. A well-known hotel has a big illumin-
TO BOYCOTT THE BILLBOARD

ated sign which flashes down the Mall into the very windows of the sovereign in his palace. Such advertisements are merely seizing the opportunities of the taxpayers' expenditure on space and utilizing it."

This English measure has three objects in view: First, the regulation and control of hoardings and similar structures used for the purpose of advertising, when they exceed twelve feet in height. Second, the regulating, restricting, or preventing of the exhibition of advertisements in such manner or by such means as to affect injuriously the amenities of a public park or pleasure promenade, or to disfigure the natural beauty of the landscape. Third, preventing the affixing or otherwise exhibiting of advertisements upon any wall, tree, fence, gate or elsewhere on private property without the consent of either the owner or occupier, previously given in writing. This is certainly not a very drastic law, but it establishes a precedent. It is a recognition of the need of legislation. It is an official effort to curb the evil. It is an important and effective opening wedge.

It is indeed time that there was inaugurated a general anti-billboard crusade throughout the country, and the American Civic Association is to be encouraged and supported in its efforts to coordinate the numerous local campaigns, and in its active campaign of education and legislative work. As a step toward arousing a widespread interest in this campaign, and as a natural corollary of its campaigns for the preservation of Niagara and for a more beautiful America, the Association has secured the consent of the commissioners of the State Reservation at Niagara to distribute at the Falls a circular asking the traveling public to indicate in writing its opinion of the advertising signs as a disfigurement to the scenery.

IF THERE is no other way to reach these offenders, let every one who sees the boards or hears about them, register a vow never to patronize the advertiser who uses such means to give publicity to his wares. This is the remedy which the North End Improvement Society of Tacoma is using with telling effect. If an offending advertiser fails to respond to the courteous suggestions of an abatement of the nuisance, then the members solemnly pledge themselves to refrain from purchasing the articles so advertised. Such a remedy is most effective, as the dealer is not anxious to have his goods boycotted at the very time he is spending his good money to give them publicity.
TO BOYCOTT THE BILLBOARD

"I never patronize a firm that advertises on billboards or on theater drop curtains," declares one Tacoma city official. "I see the 'ads.', you can't blind yourself to them, but you can refuse to patronize the firms. As a matter of fact, I put down in my mental note book every name I see on such an 'ad.', and I refuse to buy a thing of that firm. I consider it an outrage to mar the scenery of our city with billboards, and I consider it an insult to theater patrons to compel them to look upon a great poster of business 'ads.' after they have paid good money to get in the house. You may think I am humoring my prejudices too much, but I have stayed away from many a good show in the best theaters in Tacoma for no other reason than that I would not have those advertisements flung in my face. No one was more pleased than I to learn that the Tacoma theater people had at last discarded their advertisement curtain."

May the tribe of such determined men increase, and the billboard offences will decrease in proportion—nay, faster, because the modern advertiser seeks to please, not alienate. When he realizes that his course is unpopular, he will be the first to change his tactics, and when people fail to follow the brazen suggestions of the billboards, the latter will disappear.

I must confess to a liking for the boycott remedy. It has a very practical advantage—there are no provoking or perplexing delays, no court proceedings, no injunctions, no appeals. It is neat, clean, unmistakable to the one who knows best, and effective. Not that I underestimate the value of the prohibitive ordinance and act of assembly, or the great influence of the taxing power—because I believe in using every legitimate weapon in attacking an enemy; but the boycott is always at hand, and can be applied without delay and without any thought as to its legality. All that is necessary is to make up your mind that this one thing I will not do—I will not deal with anyone or use any article that resorts to objectionable advertising.

The methods of the "minister militant" of Blandford, Massachusetts (the Reverend S. G. Wood) also appeal powerfully to me. Armed with an axe and aided by his son, a college graduate, while the fight of Blandford against the invasion of billposters was at its height, he set out each morning with a team, scouring the town for advertising signs and tearing down all he could find, whether upon the highways or upon private property. When the advertising agents discovered what was happening to the signs they had so industriously put up, they sought Mr. Wood and expostulated with him, but all to
no purpose, as he calmly pointed out that what he had done was within the law.

Many measures were employed to defeat him in his attempt to keep the town beautiful; some were successful for a time, but in the end it was the minister who came off with flying colors. To outwit him in his crusade, permission was sought from owners of private property to put up signs, and wherever it was obtained the signs went up in large numbers. This was supposed to put an end to the minister’s destructive methods, but knowing the property owners better than the advertisers did, he prevailed upon them to allow the signs to be removed, and as he did the work of taking them down himself, they disappeared quickly.

Then Mr. Wood’s foes built high in the trees along the country roads little wooden signs which announced the value of a certain yeast. No sooner did the minister learn of this than, hitching up his team, he took to the warpath. True, he was fifty-two and a little too old to be climbing trees, but then he had his son, who was an athlete, so that what the father failed to do the son found but child’s play. Now it is said that every time his horse sees an advertising sign he stops and refuses to go again until it has been torn down.

Mr. WOOD tells of his meeting with an agent who had been most persistent in using fences and trees as a medium for telling of the wonderful value of a certain yeast: “Just as I was going out before breakfast one morning,” he said, “a man with a bag swung over his shoulder entered and placed a package within my front doorway. It did not occur to me that it was my friend, the enemy, but there on the floor lay a yeast cake. This is a perfectly legitimate way of advertising and I find no objection to it, but unhappy visions of placarded roadsides came to me, and I determined to make my business of the morning to lay for this man. Several trips to store and hotel, a breakfast interrupted in the middle, and a final settling down in a chair on the hotel piazza in waiting attitude, brought at last the desired interview. Immediately upon the agent’s emerging from the house I accosted him and proceeded to present my case, which I announced as a request that would doubtless be unconvincing to him, but which I was there to present; namely, that he would henceforth refrain from using our town highways as a vehicle for his advertising; it was obnoxious to citizens of good taste; we had cleared the roads once by an organized campaign, and we desired that the cleaning be permanent.
TO BOYCOTT THE BILLBOARD

"He suggested that I had better write to the company. I assured him that I would certainly do so, but meantime I wanted him to stop. He answered that he would not do it. He did not seem to comprehend, so I added that it would do no good for him to continue; he was wasting his time and the company's time. I had already destroyed hundreds of his 'ads.' He did not ask me who I was and I did not tell him. 'Do you mean to say that you are going right to Westfield this morning putting up those things in the face of all I have said to you?' I asked. 'Yes,' he said. 'Then I shall follow you and take them down as fast as you can put them up.' At this we parted, I in coolness, he in anger, with the remark that this was a pretty kind of a place, or something of the sort, and as a parting fling posting one of his labels on the store front nearby. I gave him the solace of a blessing on that, as it was the one legitimate place in town where it belonged."

St. Paul has taken a forward step, albeit a somewhat short one. By a vote of six to one the local assembly passed, at the request of the Park Board, an ordinance prohibiting the erection of any bill or signboards within one hundred and fifty feet of any park or parkway. One member of the Assembly brought up the time-honored argument that in many places a billboard served to obscure unsightly places, overlooking the fact that the way to get rid of such sights was to clean them up and put them in decent order! No doubt billboards do cover a multitude of sins of omission and commission, but it can scarcely be considered sound morals to advocate increasing the supply of sin-covering rather than the elimination of the sins. Fortunately, this assemblyman was in a lonely minority of one, and affirmative action was taken at once, as it was pointed out that the ordinance did not interfere with any boards already erected, and that any delay in its passage would have the effect of causing the billposters to put up all the boards they could before the measure should become a law.

This St. Paul effort, therefore, has two important lessons. It points the way to an effective measure of prevention and it teaches the wisdom of taking time by the forelock. Too often legislative action comes after the evil has been done, and then the offenders are given a chance to plead vested rights, although I do not believe such a plea, even now quite effective, will long avail. Public sentiment is fortunately forming along sound lines, and to the end that no nuisance can be allowed to become a vested right.