

A palimpsest within this *Palimpsest* . . .

or how to use an unusual word
a dozen times
in one conversation

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK me what the word “palimpsest” means. (As readers of the magazine, perhaps you’ve fielded this question, too.) After I give a quick explanation of the word and how it applies to history, I direct the individual to the inside front cover of each issue.

There we reprint the definition as it appeared in the first issue of *The Palimpsest* in 1920: “A palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

“The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations,” the definition continues. “To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.”

It’s an interesting word, though not easy to explain — or pronounce (accent on the first syllable, PAL). For those of us who like to build

our vocabulary by using a new word ten times in one week, “palimpsest” will never be easy to work into a casual conversation. In books and articles I occasionally run across the word used in a figurative sense, rather than a literal sense. In fact, this issue of the magazine contains a compelling example of a figurative “palimpsest.” Let me explain.

In the article titled “Between Science and Art,” scholar Kenneth Haltman writes about nineteenth-century artist Titian Ramsay Peale. Peale was on the Stephen Long Expedition, which camped near the area then known as “council bluff” along the Missouri River in 1819/20. As natural history illustrator for the expedition, Peale produced an enormous amount of artwork — both preliminary field sketches and revised, composite watercolors. In the article, Haltman compares and interprets Peale’s *earlier and later versions* of the same subject matter. We might say, then, that Titian’s Ramsay Peale’s artwork is a “palimpsest.”

Granted, it is not a palimpsest in the literal sense: Peale did not reuse the same sheet of paper by erasing or drawing on top of an existing sketch. But in a figurative sense, the entire

body of Peale's expeditionary work is a palimpsest. His more deliberately composed revisions for the public have obscured his preparatory sketches, which often convey quite different information and meanings.

ACTUALLY, perhaps much of the historical art and illustrations produced for public consumption are palimpsests in this figurative sense. In *Transforming Visions of the American West*, Martha A. Sandweiss reminds us that in the nineteenth century, a drawing or painting was often reproduced for the public as a print. "This meant reliance on draftsmen, lithographers or engravers, and publishers," she writes, "any one of whom could dramatically alter the appearance of an image."

Furthermore, publishers often pirated prints and lithographs from one publication to use in their own. In redrawing the images, they sometimes added, deleted, or changed elements on the picture. By the time an image reached a particular audience, it may have been changed in minor or major ways, by intention or accident, by the original artist or other individuals. Layers of change — and meaning — had accumulated, creating a palimpsest.

The earliest layer of imposed meaning is probably the perspective of the original creator. Suppose, for instance, that I'm on a family vacation in Rocky Mountain National Park. Happy to be away from urban life and awed by the scenery, I whip out my camera to show my co-workers back home that I really did take a vacation. I carefully focus on the mountain lake edged in pines — but I ignore the jammed parking lot that's right behind me.

Both the sparkling mountain lake and the concrete parking lot are there, but my perspective selects and documents only one view of the area. A journalist documenting the effect of carbon monoxide on alpine meadows might deliberately photograph the parking lot as part of the story. Who has created the more accurate image? Which image will tell Americans in

a hundred years what our national parks looked like?

Both images are accurate *pieces* of historical evidence. The more pieces we have, the greater the variety of evidence and diversity of experience, the closer we get to understanding what the past was really like.

But historical pieces don't always jibe. For instance, in one of our articles this month, an eastern minister complains about the harsh, slovenly life in Dubuque in 1864. Yet the accompanying images show elegant homes and orderly streets. Who's correct — the minister or the artists?

Probably everyone is — to a degree. Early photographs of Dubuque show large, fashionable homes, so we know that those buildings existed in 1860s Iowa, just as they did in the reverend's beloved New England. But the color lithographs may not be entirely accurate in depicting architectural details and the surrounding streets and landscaping.

Mass-produced lithographs and engravings often depicted western towns as bustling, prosperous, and pristine so that East Coast and European investors and immigrants would move west. Newcomers to Iowa (such as our New England minister) sent equally subjective written descriptions back east. Their perspective was based on what they hoped to find in a new home, and on what they missed from their old home.

LIKE MANY a pleasurable conversation, this one has strayed from the original topic — how Titian Ramsay Peale's work is a palimpsest. I hope you find the following group of articles as thought-provoking as I have. You'll see Iowa from the viewpoint of a young natural history illustrator in the 1820s, a frontier priest in the 1840s, an indecisive minister in the 1860s, and a four-year-old child in 1910 — as well as from the viewpoints of the nineteenth-century artists, engravers, lithographers, and photographers who documented Iowa through paintbrush, printing plates, and camera.

The Editor