



Off the Wall Thoughts

New England's stone fences tell stories

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM McCUNE

They're just a pile of rocks," one of my friends said. Nonsense. The stone walls of New England are just a pile of rocks like a book is just a collection of words.

Neatly arranged, sometimes so intricately you would have thought the stones were engineered to fit exactly as they were standing, these walls are monuments dating back to colonial times.

They tell stories and outline maps. Who was here? Did these people leave any other marks on the land? Did they know these walls of stone, neat and complex as they are, would be their legacy?

Long ago, some farmer pulled these stones from the ground and wrote the book of the land around him. At times, all that might have seemed to grow in the land was stone. Pulling rock after rock could easily become tiresome work. I imagine the frustration of a tired farmer, plowing a field, pulling up its stones, planting and harvesting his crop only to find more stones under his plow the next year.

He carefully put each stone in place. Some walls were property borders; some were orderly corrals for livestock. All were pieces of a puzzle, an intricately woven family tapestry for the farmer's children and his children's children. This was before the term "privacy" was keyed by some hardware store, back when a "neighbor" was more than someone who lived next door to you.

That's not to say there weren't disputes. I can pull off any quiet country road in New England to stare at these stone walls and see much more than the sum of their parts. I can see farmers arguing over where the rocks would be placed. I can see a man built like my grandfather, sinewy and strong, pulling these stones to make way for corn or wheat, and placing them just so. I can see an old wagon being pulled, or a plow stabbing into the earth and a man toiling behind it.

I can see Steinbeck's Trask brothers, Adam and Charles, toiling with the rotten, stone-laden earth of their Connecticut farm in *East of Eden* before

Adam gave up and moved West for, among other things, more fertile land. There is dignity in what Charles Trask did. He stayed and fought the land, a true New Englander by anyone's definition, if only for his farming.

Today, there's an emulation of these old walls. People cutely pile up rocks near the roads at their property line. Some are paying their respects to the craftsmanship of their ancestors. Some are in it for the style. Now, the new-wall cousins of those old stone walls are more a symbol of providence than of purpose. Some of those old stone walls have been moved or abandoned, the movers having committed sins against the land and its history in the name of progress.

Either way, the walls built today represent a bridge to the past. Those stones are alive, cold-blooded beasts that warm in the summer sun and cool during autumn's gradual chill. We have a choice in whether the walls stay or are gone forever. I hope they stay, because they are always far more than just a pile of rocks. 🌻