

tions through applied intelligence and effort. This was the dream of Abraham Lincoln and his heirs. A similar emphasis on applied intelligence and effort also animated the Dream of Home Ownership, which typically required investments of many kinds—money, time, labor, among others—in order to yield a domestic dividend.

There is one other Dream of the Good Life, however, that is decidedly different from these other two. For the most part, it is insistently secular (though there are times when the fervent desire for mortal goals such as wealth, fame, looks, or health becomes so ardent as to assume a kind of religiosity). This dream does not celebrate the idea of hard work, instead enshrining effortless attainment as the essence of its appeal. Which is not necessarily to say that applied intelligence and effort don't play a role. Very often they do, sometimes far more than these dreamers would like to acknowledge to themselves, let alone anyone else. But it's the rewards that are least strenuously earned that are the most savored, and even those that *are* strenuously earned tend to be discussed in ways that suggest they aren't.

One might say that the difference between this dream and that of upward mobility is more quantitative than qualitative. After all, there are few Americans who object to the idea of getting rich, and the rising value of a home is one of the things that contributes to the sense of security that inheres in it. But at some point—it's hard to say exactly where—a line gets crossed. A lot of people work hard for their money, but in what sense does one ever really *earn*, say, a million dollars a year, never mind ten million or a hundred million? In any event, very little of the wealth of rich people comes from their salaries; instead, it comes from investments whose value lies precisely in the way they produce income *without* labor on the part of the shareholder. Yet to focus too rigidly on accumulating wealth finally misses the point of this particular American Dream. It's less about accumulating riches than about living off their fruits, and its symbolic location is not the bank but the beach.

The American Dream is very much a national, even global, phenomenon, but some dreams have a strong geographic orientation. The Puritan dream, of course, was grounded in New England, though Puritan values ultimately stretched across the continent. Similarly, the Dream of Equality appeals broadly but owes its deepest resonances to the South, where inequality was most obvious and resistance to it most heroic. The Dream of Upward Mobility has a strong midwestern

accent, as suggested, for example, by the strength of the region's state university systems, which have served as vessels of the American Dream. Abraham Lincoln may have been a national figure, but the Land of Lincoln, as the license plates remind us, is Illinois. And like the Dream of Home Ownership, the dream I'm talking about here has a strong western orientation. It is a dream with roots in the South (specifically colonial Virginia) and one that traverses the mines, wheatfields, and deserts of the West. But its apotheosis is California. This American Dream is finally the dream of the Coast.

... the serene confidence which a Christian feels in four ages.

—Mark Twain, letter to *The Golden Era* (San Francisco),  
May 22, 1864

It's not easy to get something for nothing. Even the most highly leveraged speculator usually has to come up with some collateral, and in those cases where there isn't a lot of money at stake, there may be other things that count at least as much: time, energy, reputation, a sense of hope. Gains demand gambles.

America itself—in the broadest sense of that term—is a world built on gambling. Christopher Columbus, Hernan Cortés, Sir Francis Drake: these men were nothing if not gamblers. Ponce de Leon must have known that the Fountain of Youth was a long shot; Henry Hudson had far more confidence than his men did that he'd find the Northwest Passage; a normally cautious Montcalm went for broke and personally led the attack on the Plains of Abraham in the struggle for Quebec. All these men and countless others—among them the Indians who tried to stop this New World from emerging—took their chances. Naturally, because the odds were against them, most lost. But they felt there was no way they'd ever get (or keep) anything worth having here unless they made their wagers.

There's no need to be metaphorical about this. Those who fret about government-sponsored gambling may be surprised to learn that lotteries were among the most important financial instruments in building colonial North America—not only in raising funds for initial settlement but also for homes, schools, and other community institutions. Queen Elizabeth I authorized the first official raffle in 1566 to finance

spoils of the Franciscan missions. Two years later, California became a (free) state as part of the Compromise of 1850, though its native, Mexican, and Chinese populations would work in ways all too similar to those of southern slaves and tenant farmers.

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had not even been signed when an unexpected event transformed California—and the American Dream. In 1839, the Mexican government, seeking to check American expansion, made a huge land grant to a Swiss immigrant, John Sutter, who established a large ranch near Sacramento. Sutter needed lumber and turned to his American partner, James Marshall, to build him a sawmill on the South Fork of the American River. On January 24, 1848, Marshall was inspecting the construction site when he picked up a yellow nugget: gold. Marshall and Sutter tried to keep the discovery quiet, but it was no use. The gold rush was on. In 1848 there were twelve thousand émigrés in California; six years later there were three hundred thousand. In the century between 1860 and 1960, the state's population would double every twenty years.

The California gold rush is the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in American history. The notion that transformative riches were literally at your feet, there for the taking, cast a deep and lasting spell on the American imagination. Paradoxically, the prospect of seemingly effortless riches led Americans to move mountains in pursuit of this dream. It goes without saying that most failed. Sutter, for his part, died bankrupt; Marshall drank himself to death. Yet even when the promise of the gold rush proved illusory—except for the mining companies, which quickly gobbled up the land and created a large-scale industry—it continued to have enormous metaphorical power for generations of Americans, for whom California (a.k.a. "the Golden State") offered the potential for riches of many kinds.

One of these was railroads. As in so many other ways, California's experience was much like the rest of the country's, only more so. Shrewd speculators were given vast tracts of land by the federal government, which they then used to finance the railroads by selling off pieces of it at an exorbitant profit. The first railroad within the state, a twenty-two-mile line between Sacramento and Folsom, was completed in 1855. Two railroad companies built the first transcontinental railroad: the Union Pacific Railway laid tracks west from Omaha, and the Central Pacific Railroad, under the leadership of Sacramento business-

men Iceland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, and Mark Hopkins, laid track east from Sacramento. The two lines were joined at Promontory, near Ogden, Utah, on May 10, 1869. In 1876 the Central Pacific was extended southward, reaching Los Angeles. Railroads became major players in the California economy, dictating the commercial and political development of the state and who would prosper in it. Men like Stanford and Huntington became rich—obscenely rich, in the eyes of some—while others paid the price for lacking their luck, timing, or social connections.

But it wasn't only modern industries like mining and railroads that dangled the prospect of the Good Life before a lucky few. Farming, perhaps all the more alluring because it was familiar to most Americans, also played a role. In the 1860s and 1870s California became the nation's breadbasket, as farmers depleted the soil at an extremely rapid rate, sometimes planting two or three crops a season. This was not the work of small homesteaders tilling dreams of upward mobility; it was agribusinessmen like Dr. Hugh Glenn, who owned sixty thousand acres and employed six hundred workers (one of whom murdered Glenn after he was fired for drinking, suggesting the frustration and violence that often accompanied the quest for the American Dream). The advent of refrigerated rail cars in the 1880s made it possible to ship perishables like fruit over long distances, transforming California's agricultural economy. In 1904 the advertising agency for the California Fruit Growers Exchange created a new trademark, Sunkist, to market individually wrapped oranges. Millions of Americans became devotees of a fruit most had never seen a few years earlier.

In a sense, they became even more devoted to the *image* that Sunkist promoted. Crates containing the oranges were illustrated with vivid, idyllic lithographs of Southern California landscapes. One, "Sea Side," from 1919, showed a family at the beach; another, "Suburban," from 1915, depicted a bungalow in an orange grove. The name of yet another illustration, this one of two peacocks in a grove near a castle, made explicit what was really being presented in these images. It was called "California Dream."

Indeed, to focus too much on the broad economic transformation of California runs the risk of losing sight of its deeply personal appeal in ways that were as much psychological as material. Eastern journalist Charles Nordhoff's best-selling book *California for Health, Wealth, and*

*Residence* (1872) was only one well-known example of a large literature promoting the good life to be found there. "I think nothing can be more delightful than the life of a farmer of sheep or cattle in Southern California," Nordhoff reported. "The weather is almost always fine; neither heat nor cold ever goes to extremes; you ride everywhere across country, for there are no fences; game is abundant in the seasons; and to one who has been accustomed to the busy life of a great city like New York, the work of a sheep or cattle *ranchero* seems to be mere play." More than the prospect of great riches *per se*, it was the idea of easy living that captured the national imagination. You would happily let the industrial barons divide the world among themselves if you could just simply enjoy yourself back at the (economically self-sufficient) ranch.

By the turn of the twentieth century, California, north and south, had established itself as a kind of American Mediterranean—a haven of sorts from the hard-driving tenor of much of the rest of national life. San Francisco in particular enjoyed a reputation as a cosmopolitan entrepôt, notable for quality restaurants, its arts community, and ethnic diversity, while Los Angeles grew rapidly as railroads, the oil industry, and the completion of its new harbor in 1910 allowed its population to triple over the course of the decade. Not even earthquakes, frontier violence, or racism stopped newcomers, who often found themselves facing daunting odds. For few were the odds more daunting than for the Japanese, whose triumph over such obstacles in accumulating land so infuriated Anglo-Californians that state legislators made it illegal for them to do so. Yet none of this displaced the sunny visage California presented to the outside world.

That sunny visage in what was still a remote location could also prove quite practical for some enterprises. The first decade of the twentieth century was pivotal in the new industry of motion pictures, which had rapidly developed from an arcade attraction to be viewed through a peephole-like device called the kinetoscope to a mass medium projected onto screens in nickelodeons. Much, though not all, of the early movie industry was concentrated in metropolitan New York, the stomping grounds of inventor—and speculator—Thomas Edison, whose trust-controlled key patents on projectors and demanded royalties from filmmakers. (The idea that you could make something once in a fixed period of time and earn income from it continuously thereafter without further effort is one of the most cherished scenarios in the Dream of

the Coast.) Edison believed that the key to mastery of the movie industry lay in controlling the means of production. A group of Jewish immigrants with names like Fox and Warner, however, realized the money really lay in content, that is, in making movies that people truly wanted to see. (Edison regarded films themselves as a virtual afterthought, something he'd let someone else do—as long as he was paid.) Over the long run, the future would belong to these people, who proved much better at making sure *they* were paid.

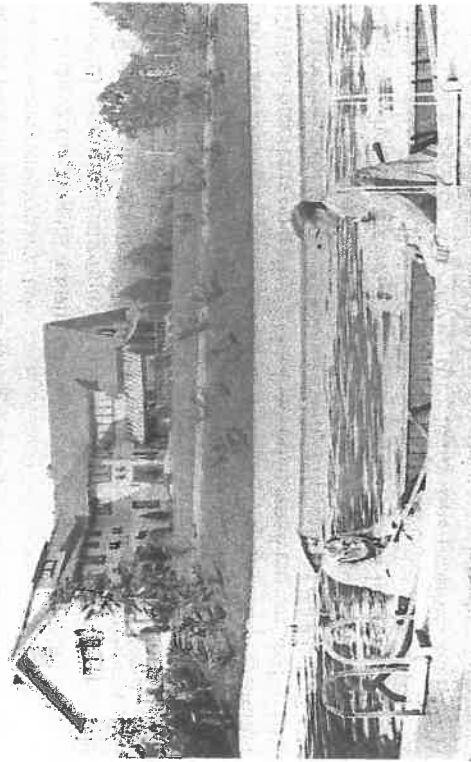
In the winter of 1907, a director named Francis Boggs and his cameraman, Thomas Persons, had finished shooting the interior scenes for their film *The Count of Monte Cristo* in Chicago. They needed good weather to shoot the exterior scenes, but it was overcast in the Windy City, so they went to Los Angeles. A steady stream of filmmakers followed, lured not only by the weather and the lack of strong unions but also because Southern California was generally beyond the reach of Edison's lawyers, who served subpoenas to those they suspected of evading his trust (which was declared an illegal restraint of trade in 1915). In the event of legal problems, it was useful for filmmakers to simply pick up and move their operations across the border to Mexico, which some occasionally did.

In 1910 the hugely ambitious actor/writer/director David Wark Griffith began making regular trips to Southern California to make films that would culminate in the epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), widely regarded as the first major feature film. He brought with him a troupe of actors, among them a seventeen-year-old girl named Mary Pickford, whom he deployed in a series of movies, which he shot with the consummate skill of a genius inventing an entirely new artistic grammar. Griffith based his operation in Hollywood, a small city created in 1888 by Horace and Daeida Wilcot, a wealthy midwestern couple bereaved by the loss of a child. A small, sober-minded community that did not allow alcohol—or movie theaters—Hollywood was in some ways an unlikely site for an international capital of popular culture. But its absorption by Los Angeles in 1910 made this possible, and D. W. Griffith (himself soon to be left behind) became a founding father of a shimmering new American Dream.

At its most compelling, California could be a moral premise, a prescription of what America could and should be. At its most trivial, it was a cluster of shallow dreams, venial hamperings which mistook laziness for leisure, selfishness for individualism, laxity for liberation, evasion and cheap escape for redemption and a solid second chance.

—Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream*, 1973

It was, if you were to believe the newspapers, magazines, radio, and newsreels, the most fabulous house in America. The two-story colonial had an L-shape, its varied rooms a mélange of Frederic Remington paintings, Oriental carpets, and hand-carved Italian chairs. Outside, one could find kennels, stables, a tennis court, a miniature golf course, a swimming pool, and a bathhouse fitted with swimsuits of all sizes. The estate's fifteen servants had their own dormitory (the majordomo,



COASTING Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford at Pickfair in the mid-1920s. The couple's marital merger was one of the first, and most alluring, examples of modern celebrity culture. (Photo Collection/Los Angeles Public Library)

Albert, had his own cottage). Located in the hamlet of Beverly Hills—which, like nearby Hollywood, had recently become part of Los Angeles—the house became a mecca for a new breed of people who were settling the frontier of American entertainment.

The house was called "Pickfair" in honor of its residents—Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Pickford, the premier movie star of the 1910s and 1920s, was known as "America's Sweetheart" (which, in typical fashion, her handlers would revise to "the World's Sweetheart"). While seductresses like Theda Bara and Greta Garbo played the role of vamp, Pickford was cast as the eternal child in films like *Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917), *Daddy-Long-Legs* (1919), and *Pollyanna* (1920). Fairbanks, who went to Harvard not as a student but to socialize with people who were actually enrolled, was renowned for his grace and sex appeal in films like *The Mark of Zorro* (1920), *The Three Musketeers* (1921), and *Robin Hood* (1922). In 1919 Fairbanks and Pickford teamed up with D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin to form United Artists, their own movie studio. Chaplin, a frequent guest at Pickfair, had his own room there, even though he owned a house a block away.

Pickford and Fairbanks's marital merger was a little more difficult to execute than their business partnership. Both had been married prior to their 1920 wedding. The two, along with Chaplin, had generated much good will in their Liberty Bond fundraising drive in support of World War I, but divorce carried a strong social stigma, particularly for women. When the Catholic Pickford stretched Nevada's already lax divorce laws by leaving the state almost immediately upon procuring a settlement, marrying Fairbanks the same month after openly insisting she had no plans to do so, and having a Baptist minister perform the ceremony, she provoked the wrath of the Church, the Nevada Attorney General, her former husband, and a good deal of the public. But lawyers, money, and a European honeymoon largely defused the furor. The leading fan magazine of the period, *Photoplay*, reflected the new consensus when it published a telegram that ended **COME HOME ALL IS FORGIVEN**. The couple returned to the house Fairbanks owned before the marriage, renaming it "Pickfair."

By 1922, according to one biographer, Pickfair had become a kind of collective dream house, a place fans felt they instinctively knew even if they had never actually been there. "No one much cared about how Mrs. Harding or Mrs. Coolidge ran 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, but Mary's boudoir, her servant problems, the table she set, her scheme of

interior decoration—these were fascinating topics for the American public, and the papers kept readers informed of each new development at Pickfair,” explained one biographer. Albert Einstein, Babe Ruth, and Lord and Lady Mountbatten were typically atypical guests; the dinner table was automatically set for fifteen and was usually full each evening.

Yet great care was taken at Pickfair not to suggest anything resembling decadence. This was a real concern in the Hollywood of Fairbanks and Pickford, which had seen its share of squalor. In 1920 Pickford's sister-in-law Olive Thomas, a former showgirl, and rising actress celebrated for her beauty, poisoned herself in a Paris hotel room. (Her husband, Pickford's brother Jack, also an actor, was reputed to have a heroin habit.) A year after Thomas's death, another actress, Virginia Rappe, also died in a hotel room, this one north of San Francisco, after a party hosted by the famed comic actor Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle. Arbuckle, arrested on charges of first degree murder, was ultimately acquitted, but his career was nevertheless in shreds. Incidents like these—and there were many—led the new movie moguls to hire a powerful Washington lawyer, William Harrison Hays, who gave up his position as postmaster general of the Harding administration to orchestrate the public relations of the film industry through an internal censorship operation known as the “Hays Office.” His help wasn't needed at Pickfair, however. No liquor was served there (at least officially—these were the days of Prohibition), and the movie screenings that followed dinner always ended by ten P.M. so that Fairbanks and Pickford would arrive fresh on the set by six the next morning. In short, Doug and Mary were nice young people.

They were also *forever* young people. Writing in 1973, movie critic Richard Schickel marveled at the durable power of Fairbanks's image: “No one has quite recaptured the freshness, the sense of perpetually innocent, perpetually adolescent narcissism that Douglas Fairbanks brought to the screen.” Pickford, for her part, was cherished as an eternal child; well into her thirties she was playing characters in golden curls and frilly dresses in what were popularly known as “Mary pictures.”

One might say that Fairbanks and Pickford lived out a dazzling American Dream, but to leave it at that would obscure the way their lives reflected new currents in the Dream that have shaped it ever since. Some versions of the American Dream stressed the value of hard work for its own sake; others recognized it as a necessary evil, but one that afforded the promise of a leisurely life of many happy returns on profitable investments. In an important sense, however, the appeal of Doug

and Mary rested less on what they did or what they acquired than on playing themselves. Simply being Doug and Mary was in *itself* perceived to be desirable (and profitable). To be sure, these were people with real talent, but exercising that talent was something that presumably came naturally, something that simply happened in the course of a normal day. To put it another way: the American Dreams of Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Andrew Carnegie rested on a sense of *character*; those of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford rested on *personality*. They were celebrities, people whose fame rested not on talent, however defined, but on simply being famous. One of the strangest paradoxes of subsequent American history would be the histories of other Americans, among them Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, who emerged from highly particular cultural communities possessing enormous talent and yet who trivialized, even discarded, their gifts in a desperate desire to live the Dream of the Coast.

The contrast between an older American Dream rooted in character and its replacement, a Dream rooted in personality, is vividly apparent in the 1916 film *His Picture in the Papers*. Fairbanks plays a young man who works for his father, a cereal manufacturer. He is a quiet rebel against parental strictures, dutifully bringing a bag lunch to work only to pull out a martini mixer to drink on the job. (He also defies his family's vegetarianism by eating steaks at restaurants.) In his free time, he goes slumming among immigrants, distinguishing himself in Irish boxing matches. But if such activities bring him censure at home, they pay clear dividends elsewhere: he is a magnet for the attention of women and has the necessary manliness to rescue a fellow businessman when thugs attack him. When reporters ask him the secret of his strength, he answers with “Pringle Products,” the food made by his father. Overnight, Pringle's cereal becomes a hotter commodity than it had ever been, advertised as a means to build strong bodies and sex appeal rather than as a sensible vegetarian staple. A charismatic personality makes and breaks his own rules, succeeding in business without really trying.

The key to his success is *lifestyle*, a term that, like “the American Dream,” entered common parlance surprisingly recently.\* The world

\* According to *The Facts on File Dictionary of Cliché* (2001), the term “life style” was coined by psychologist Alfred Adler in 1929 to describe the psychological profile of an individual as defined in childhood. But according to *Brewer's Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Phrase and Fable* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), use of the term to denote attitudes, values, and styles of consumption did not become commonplace until the 1980s.

of Pickfair was not about wealth or achievement but physical beauty, grace, fun. For the Beautiful People, a work ethic does not mean deferred gratification, but rather gratification through novel and exciting work—work that can be talked about on talk shows or in magazine stories, or work notwithstanding to a clock the way most American jobs are. To be sure, Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Carnegie were famous in their own right (as indeed they wished to be), and they lived in a style that could be considered analogous to that of Pickfair. But neither celebrated—in fact, they explicitly condemned—the values celebrated in *His Picture in the Papers*.

Even from the heights of hypocrisy, they did so for good reason: the values embodied in Pickfair are a fraud, and we all know it. Fairbanks and Pickford did not live happily ever after in a storybook romance; in fact they divorced in 1935, years after their marriage had become a sham. The economic and personal freedom they won was paid for, especially by Pickford, with a cult of youth and beauty that was not only oppressive but would inevitably leave them behind. Their accomplishments, real as they may have been, were not only fleeting but outstripped by ambitions that would be forever beyond them—movies unmade, roles unrealized, a studio that never quite attained the height of its rivals. Franklin and Carnegie left behind libraries that remain with us; the principal legacy of Pickford and Fairbanks is made of deteriorating celluloid, fading pictures of a world that never was.

And yet that world continues to exert an enormous allure that has only grown more powerful. Doug and Mary were replaced by Clark and Carole, Liz and Dick, Tom and Nicole; the newsreel has been replaced by the website; the stars have their own production companies rather than serving at the convenience of studio chiefs who paid them fixed salaries. While Hollywood remains their home, their values seem to have taken root in other dream capitals, from Washington, D.C., to the Harvard Fairbanks could only pretend to attend.

I know I sound a little skeptical, even dismissive, when I write about people like Douglas Fairbanks. That's hardly surprising coming from someone who began this book by admitting his affection for the Puritans. But I, too, feel the undertow of the Coast. Most of us do. Indeed, a longing for a life of leisure has virtually universal appeal, and given the grind of exertion and duty that has characterized everyday existence for most of human history, it's not hard to understand why.

Nor can I entirely dismiss such longings, which Americans seem to

have an uncanny ability to capture, package, and distribute, as superficial. Despite the enormous gap between what the creators of Pickfair portrayed and what their audience lived, their dream world has a paradoxical immediacy and accessibility that make it a democracy of desire. We have fun watching them have fun, and we almost believe they really do represent us. In a crude way, the box office is a kind of voting booth—one rife with corruption, certainly, and yet the repository of a collective hope that I can't help but feel has not only a kind of reality but also a kind of tattered validity. I know the beautiful figure I see on a screen has no life beyond it, and that character, if real, would have no truck with the likes of me (nor should I with her). I know the fable of abundance depicted on the page of a magazine is a marketing ploy, but the magic it appropriates has a life that cannot be wholly contained by a slogan, an image, a bill of goods. I know that the culture of consumption that is finally at the heart of the Dream of the Coast preys on my worst impulses—greed, lust, gluttony. But every once in a while there is good to be seized among the goods. The smell of the paper in a freshly printed book; the sound of an electric guitar that emanates from the radio; the grace of an actress, now dead, in a movie on television; so much senseless beauty. Amid all the striving, some worthwhile and some appalling, the American Dream is most fully realized in works of art.

I'LL BEGIN TO END this discussion of the Coast, and this book generally, by heading back east for one final tale of the American Dream. It's a fairly simple story. James Gatz (or "Jimmy," as his father calls him) is born sometime around 1890 in North Dakota. After attending St. Olaf's College in southern Minnesota for two weeks, the seventeen-year-old boy drifts to Lake Superior, where he works digging clams, fishing for salmon, and holding other odd jobs. While there, Gatz meets Dan Cody, a millionaire copper magnate who hires him to serve as a steward-mate-skipper for his yacht. For the next five years, Gatz sails the world with Cody, who adopts the boy as a protégé and trusts him to keep tabs on him when he drinks too much. When Cody dies in 1912, he leaves Gatz twenty-five thousand dollars, but Gatz never receives the money because of the machinations of Cody's mistress.

Gatz's whereabouts are unknown between 1912 and 1917, at which point he appears in Louisville, Kentucky, as a lieutenant in the U.S.