The Front Porch

Chester McCovey

Chester McCovey’s observing essay illustrates how one can use an observation as a point of contact and then, through analysis, explore why the observation matters. McCovey makes a simple observation: that people don’t sit out on their front porches like they did when he was a kid. Then he explores and determines that the loss of the front porch equals a loss of community. Through analysis, he goes from a specific observation (about garages and porches) to a general insight (about a loss of community).

If you walk through my neighborhood, you won’t see many porches, at least not the kind people sit on in the evenings. Those days are gone where I live, and likely where you live, too.

The front porch has been replaced—by the two-car garage. Both sets of my grandparents, who lived in the same small town, had big front porches, and summer visits often meant sitting on the porch, talking, and watching cars and people out walking. After a while someone might have suggested getting some ice cream. The adult conversation was often dull, sometimes painfully so for a child, but sometimes it was interesting. The everyday people a child sees in church or at the Little League field in a small town have a few years behind them, and what person who has lived a little doesn’t have a story to tell—or a story to be told about them? Sometimes those stories would come out and bring to life a previously uninteresting Frank or Gretchen. Small towns are full of life’s everyday dramas. A child hears and figures out many things on a place like a front porch on a thing like a warm summer night.

My grandparents’ garages were small, just enough for one car and a few tools—not much of a garage for today’s homeowner. In those days the garage kept a car and a small lawnmower, some rakes, and so on. The garage today must keep much more. One can see, then, how the exchange occurred. Like an old-fashioned trade in baseball, gone is the home team’s beloved front porch, replaced by a big, new garage. Of course the trade is much more interesting than that. And a look at how it occurred enlightens us a little about the world in which we live. More importantly, it tells us not so much about how life is now but about how it came to be. And, I would argue, it shows us the way in which things will continue to change.

From Chester McCovey, “The Front Porch.” Reprinted with permission of the author.
Back then, our own garage held two cars, a riding lawn-mower, a push mower, bicycles, and lots of tools. We had a front porch and sat on it, but mostly just when we had company. Our house, then, represents the transition between two generations: my grandparents’ generation that traveled less, received only three television stations (sans remote control), and didn’t have air conditioning and my own generation that is more likely to be on the go (driving from one place to another) or sitting inside, on the computer or watching TV.

The front porch fell victim to its two natural enemies: the internal-combustion engine (automobiles) and electricity (air conditioning, lights, and TV). Now, instead of gathering on our front porch as our grandparents did, we are either gone somewhere thanks to our transportation or we are at home but indoors.

how life must have splashed
out of the cup
on warm summer nights
before the cool air
of electricity
urged us all to relax
in the fluttering glow
of color tv

We have traded sitting on the front porch for sitting in traffic, or to be more positive about it, for sitting in our automobile as we speed along to some very important place to be. The shift from porch to garage is beautifully simple. It goes like this: I need a place to park my transportation machine (car, truck, SUV) and I don’t need a large, outdoor room for sitting. The reasoning (the reality of the situation) is just as simple: There’s not as much action on the sidewalk as there once was (the neighbors are indoors or driving somewhere) and I don’t need to sit outdoors to stay cool on muggy nights (the air conditioning indoors takes care of that). So, a need or desire—to stay cool, to be entertained, to keep up with what’s going on—is replaced not by a different need or desire but instead by a new way of meeting it.

Need or Desire—To Stay Cool
Previously met by evening breeze; now
met by air conditioning

Need or Desire—To Be Entertained

Because of automobiles and electricity, we spend more time driving alone or watching TV than we do talking with our friends and neighbors. Is this a problem? A loss of community?
Previously met by conversation with neighbors; now met by TV, computer, shopping at the mall, conversation with friends who we drive to see
Need or Desire—To Keep Up with What’s Going On
Previously met by discussion with neighbors and friends; now met through national media (TV and Internet)

I am not saying there are no front porches. Obviously there are. And I am not saying everyone has a two-car garage instead. In my neighborhood, small garages not connected to the house still reign. But obviously, their days are numbered. The new houses sometimes look as much like a house attached to a garage as a garage attached to a house. Today’s garage often dominates the house.

Finally, the careful reader is insisting that I deal with the backyard patio deck. What about it? When we do sit outdoors, we choose to do it out back, away from the rest of the world. This is interesting. We need a break, I would suggest, from the hustle and bustle of daily life, so we retreat to our own backyard to be left alone with our families. But that hustle and bustle is mostly the hustle and bustle of traffic, radio, television, and a few quick transactions with total strangers. Of course another reason for opting to relax in the backyard is that, as previously mentioned, there just isn’t that much going on out front these days. (If there were, I wonder if we would sit on the front porch and watch it... and contribute to it.) I am arguing that we lose something very basic—very fundamental—when we lose the front porch culture.

On Sunday drives through the country, I see big new houses with big new porches. As Americans we can have it all—the house with the big front porch and the big garage. But I never (I am tempted to qualify this statement and say “almost never” or “rarely” but I have been thinking about it and I do mean “never”)—I never see anyone out sitting on those porches. I am not prepared here to argue that we are a civilization in deep trouble because of this, though it does seem to me appropriate that we should lament, at least a little, the loss of the front porch.

Imagine: Being entertained by sitting on a porch and talking.

The back deck takes us out back, away from community.

Sunday drives in the country bring to mind an earlier time, when people hung out on the front porch talking with neighbors.

Ironically, McCovey is driving around.

Where do people talk like they used to on a front porch: the kitchen table, the student lounge, Facebook, Twitter?
Writing Strategies

1. What is the essay's thesis?
2. What details help the reader value the thesis and why?
3. In a paragraph, summarize McCovey’s explanation of how the shift from porch to garage occurred and why it matters.
4. Why is it important that McCovey writes about the backyard patio deck? How does this paragraph help the reader accept the main claim?
5. Where does McCovey use a metaphor or simile (comparing two unlike things: The clerk was a bear [metaphor]; The clerk was like a bear [simile])? Where else does he use figurative language?

Ideas for Writing

1. Besides the move from porch to garage, what other change has taken place? How has that change impacted everyday life?
2. Observe some difference in a way of living, whether it be the result of time (your grandparents and you, for example) or location (Southern Californians and Midwesterners). Do not be afraid to generalize, as long as you do it thoughtfully and are mindful of exceptions.

If responding to one of these ideas, go to the Analysis section of this chapter to begin developing ideas for your essay.

Exploring Ideas

1. Based on this essay, what does McCovey value? To what degree do you value the same thing?
2. In your own words, summarize McCovey’s main idea. Then share your summary with several classmates who have also read the essay. Discuss your understanding of McCovey’s main idea, and then reread his essay and revise your summary as necessary.
3. To further explore this issue, share your summary with people of various age groups, asking them to respond to McCovey’s ideas. Describe how their views are similar to or different from McCovey’s.
4. Think of a metaphor or simile of your own that might work well in this essay.