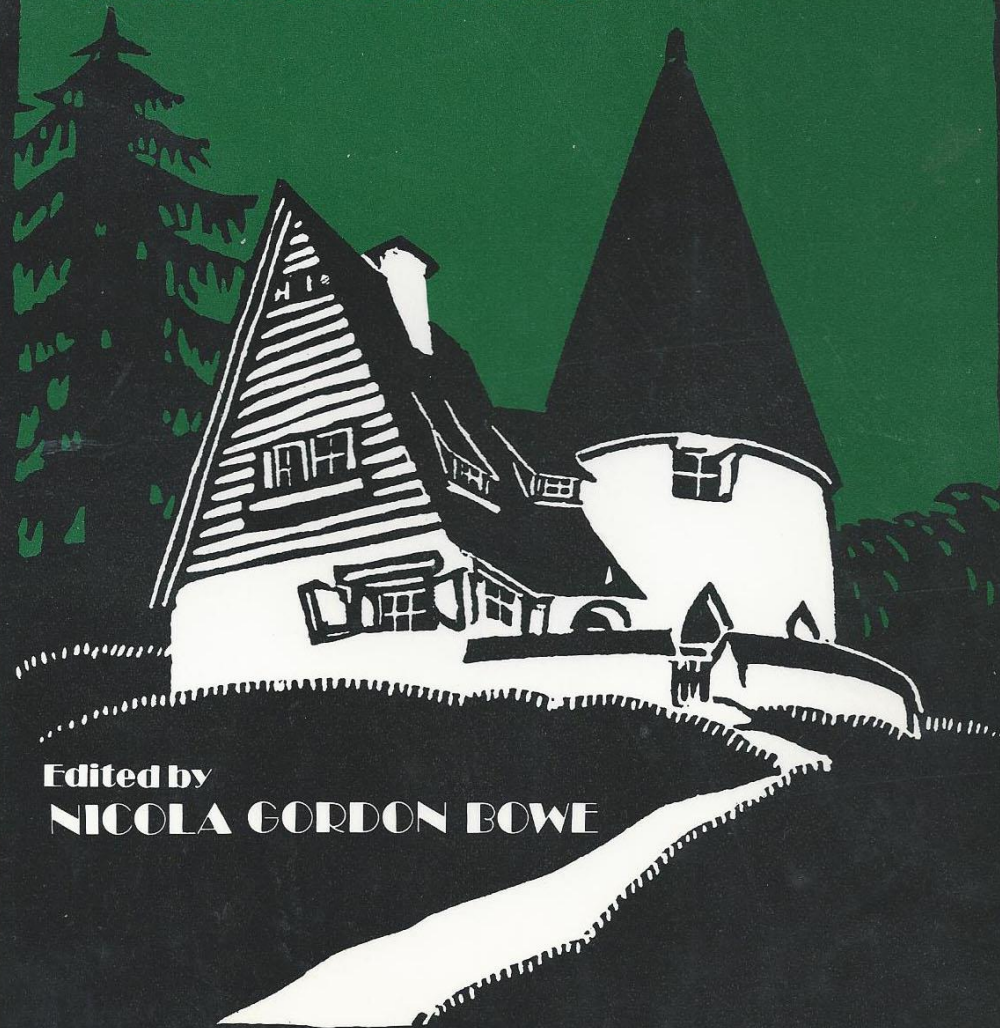


ART AND THE NATIONAL DREAM

THE SEARCH FOR VERNACULAR EXPRESSION
IN TURN-OF-THE CENTURY DESIGN



Edited by
NICOLA GORDON BOWE

THE SEARCH FOR A NORTHWEST VERNACULAR: KIRTLAND CUTTER AND THE RUSTIC PICTURESQUE

Henry
Matthews

1888-1920

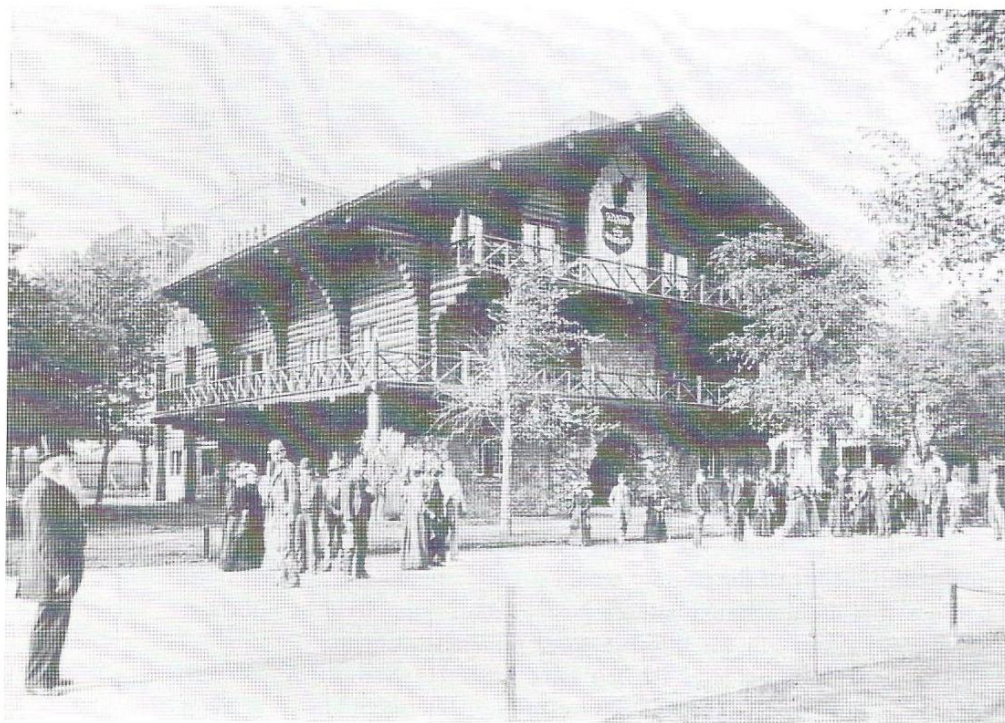
In many cultures, the architecture of the social elite has been rooted in the vernacular building of the region. Over the centuries, simple structural types and symbolic features of folk origin have evolved into elements of high style architecture and contributed to national traditions.

However, in the case of the American Northwest, there was in the minds of settlers no indigenous architecture from which to draw. The dwellings of Indian tribes did not provide acceptable models for them to follow; these were dismissed as the curious creations of pagan savages. Likewise, the pioneer cabin offered no inspiration. Though a log hut may originally have been a source of pride to its builders, it was only a first stage on the road to success.

The early colonists on the east coast had brought with them the building methods and spatial house types of their own countries and developed them to meet the climatic conditions they encountered.¹ Then, in the 18th century the upper classes embraced new and fashionable styles from Europe. Eager to prove that they were not lagging behind culturally, they had studied engravings in pattern books by prestigious architects and soon abandoned vernacular types. As later generations moved west, they took with them the house styles that symbolised the triumph of their civilisation.

It was not until the late 19th century, when Americans were closer to achieving the conquest of the wilderness that they could see the pioneer cabin as a romantic source for their own architecture. As early as 1845, Thomas Cole painted *The Hunter's Return*² (fig. 1), a picturesque landscape with a view to a distant peak framed by tall trees, and in the foreground, a rustic cabin of sturdy logs. Asher B. Durand's *The First Harvest in the Wilderness*³ (1855) presented a similar image of the virtuous pioneer, active in his task of civilising the savage land. While such paintings that romanticised the life of the frontier were extremely popular, it was not until the 1870s that architects exploited a rustic picturesque style of building, evocative of pioneer life, for the enjoyment of wealthy clients.

At the very time when H.H. Richardson designed the seminal Ames Gate Lodge at North Easton, Massachusetts out of huge glacial boulders,⁴ William West Durant was constructing camps in the Adirondacks as wilderness



retreats for New York millionaires.⁵ But despite the writings of Emerson and Thoreau exhorting Americans to commune with nature, the Adirondack camps remained an isolated phenomenon occurring in few other places.

The main stream of American architecture was flowing at that time in a very different direction: towards a revival of the classics. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago as a showcase of American cultural achievement. The Court of Honour, laid out under the direction of Daniel Burnham, was lined with grandiose neo-classical buildings as grand in scale as the imperial architecture at the height of the Roman Empire. To the chagrin of Louis Sullivan and John Root, who had striven for a decade to develop a truly American architecture, the "White City" represented a betrayal of their ideals. Perhaps, in retrospect, the Court of Honour was more like a Hollywood set for an epic film on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire than an evocation of the American land or a demonstration of American uniqueness.

In contrast to the principal government buildings, the state pavilions at the fair reflected the eclecticism of the age. The architectural critic, Montgomery Schuyler, offended by their arbitrary diversity, commented:

A Grecian temple, a Californian mission, an Italian villa, a Swiss chalet, a Colonial mansion—how can anything but higgledy-piggledy result from an aggregation of these, strewn about promiscuously and without reference to each other, no matter how plausibly each of them may be done.⁶

Two of the state buildings stood out from the others in the stylistic confusion. The California building by Page Brown was constructed to resemble whitewashed adobe in the newly revived Mission Style. It celebrated both the southerly climate and the Hispanic heritage of California.⁷ The Idaho building by Kirtland Cutter (fig. 2) conveyed a glorious image of the Frontier. Built of massive logs and raised up on a high base of volcanic rock, it evoked not only the mountains and forests of the inland Northwest, but also the pioneer spirit of the region's inhabitants. The deeply overhanging eaves of the low-pitched roof were carried on magnificent brackets of corbelled logs. Around it ran balconies on similar supports, fronted by rustic balustrades. The entry was through an arch in the base of the monumental stone chimney. Although clearly derived from the chalets of the Bernese Oberland of Switzerland⁸ it spoke eloquently of the rugged nature of Idaho, where miners and trappers survived by their own resourcefulness; indeed, it seemed far removed from the neat and orderly settlements of the Swiss Alps.

The visitors to the fair were enthusiastic about Cutter's design, and members of the press eulogised it. The *American Architect and Building News* declared that "Idaho's building is not excelled by that of any state

¹ Thomas Cole: *The Hunter's Return*, 1845

² Idaho Building, World's Columbian Exposition 1893, *Shepp's World's Fair*, photographed 1893



3 F. Rockwood
Moore House,
Spokane, 1889

structure in the artistic application of the characteristics and features of the state. . .".⁹

The *Scandinavian American* stated:

It was primitive, signifying undeveloped resources . . . ; at the same time artistic beauty and harmony were reflected in its rustic appearance.¹⁰

The official judges at the Exposition echoed the public acclaim; they awarded Cutter's firm the prize "for a type of architecture and construction which expresses the character of the state erecting it".¹¹ Clearly, Cutter was the architect of a regionalist building, a rare phenomenon in 1893; furthermore, he received praise for it.

Kirtland Kelsey Cutter, born in Cleveland in 1860 and educated as an artist in New York and Europe, came to Spokane in 1886 shortly after the discovery of gold in the nearby Coeur d'Alene mountains.¹² Among his first commissions was a mansion for a local business man, F. Rockwood Moore (fig. 3), that stood in sharp contrast to the typical houses of the era. While these were generally vertical in composition and pretentiously designed in the Second Empire or Queen Anne styles, the Moore house had its roots in vernacular architecture. Cutter's design was long and low; it had the look of a rambling English county house that had grown gradually over the years; but it also responded to the place where it was built. Its lower walls were of basalt, the very rock that broke out in unruly heaps upon the site; the upper walls were mostly shingled. The house gave the impression of growing



naturally out of the hill on which it stood.¹³

For his own house in Spokane, begun in 1888, Cutter looked to another vernacular type: the Swiss chalet (fig. 4). Indeed, this design authentically based on a Swiss prototype, was a first essay in the type he was to exploit at the Exposition in Chicago. With huge corbelled brackets under the eaves and rocks of the roof, it surpassed the weak prettiness of former American chalets and exhibited a rugged character that seemed appropriate on the frontier.¹⁴

While the chalet imported from Switzerland provided inspiration for the architect's own house and the Idaho building, Cutter continued to respond to the materials of the region in structures of other types. In a little chapel at Fairmount Cemetery, Spokane (fig. 5), he expressed the belief, central to the Arts and Crafts Movement, that there is inherent beauty in natural materials and the simple construction characteristic of the vernacular. The walls of rough basalt, heavily buttressed at the corners, proclaim the quality of the volcanic rock as it is found nearby on the cliff faces and outcroppings of the Spokane River Canyon. The shingle roof shows the lightness of split cedar as well as its ability to conform to the shape of the roof framing. Over the bold arch at the entry, the shingles on the gable end lift in a little wave; the roof slope sweeps up to the bases of the lanterns, each capped with a pyramidal roof. While the massive walls are earth bound, there is something almost playful about the roof.¹⁵

This rustic chapel was followed in 1898 by a church on the shores of

4 Chalet
Hohenstein,
Cutter's own
home, Spokane,
Washington, 1889



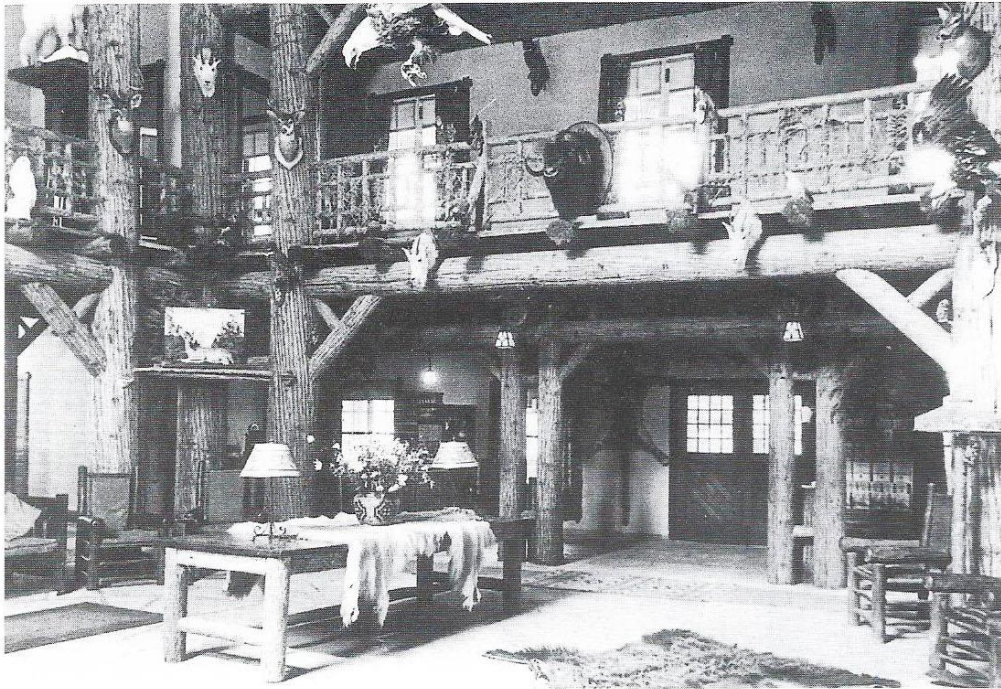
5 Fairmount Cemetery Chapel, Spokane, 1890

6 St Andrew's Church, Chelan, Washington, 1898

Lake Chelan in central Washington that drew more directly from the rude construction of the early pioneers (fig. 6). Built like a log cabin of notched and overlapping tree trunks, it celebrated the abundance of fine timber growing nearby. Most wooden churches built in the Northwest in the late 19th century were faced with finished lumber and displayed at least token features of medieval or classical styles of architecture. Their builders wanted to demonstrate through refinement of design that they were not backward or unsophisticated. Since the small town of Chelan had a sawmill, it appears that the decision to build the church of whole logs was made, not out of necessity, but as a preference.

Logs for the church were cut from timber growing along the shores of the lake and towed by steamer to the sawmill, where they were shaped for a perfect fit before being assembled on the site with help from the community.¹⁶ The church is a simple structure with a steeply pitched roof whose gable end faces the main street of the town. Beside it, built in the same fashion, stands a tower with an open belfry; the entry is through the back of the tower.



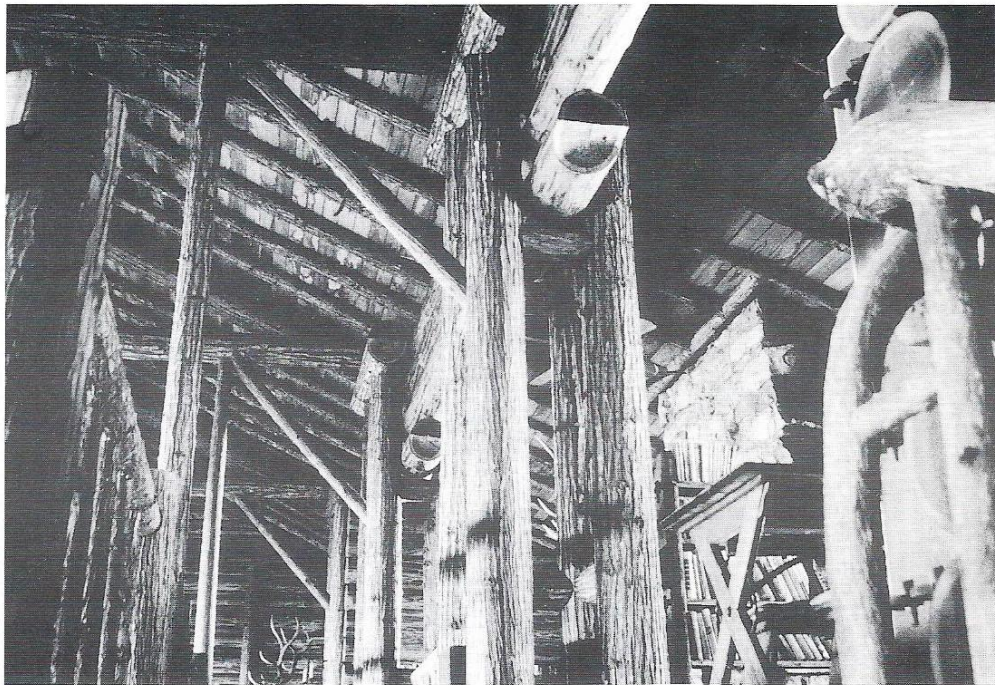


7 Lake
McDonale
Lodge, Glacier
National Park,
Montana, 1913,
The Hall

logs at the corners. At the base of the walls, their ends project out, to give the effect of buttresses on a medieval church. On the tower, the logs are corbelled out at the corners to support the overhanging floor of the belfry, and above that to carry the hipped roof. The large, arch-like openings of the belfry are also of corbelled logs. The effect is sculptural; heavy shadows are cast; there is a sense of stability. The interior of the church shares the rugged appearance of the exterior; the roof, of scissor trusses made up of tree trunks, is supported on log buttresses projecting boldly from the walls.

Kirtland Cutter had evidently gained a sufficient reputation for his rustic picturesque architecture to win a commission from Andrew Carnegie's sister-in-law, Lucy Carnegie, to build a camp at the head of Raquette Lake in the Adirondacks in 1907. This time he combined the chalet with the medieval hall of England to create a huge interior space complete with ingle-nook fireplace and minstrels' gallery.¹⁷ But a few years later, he freed himself from conventional types to follow the inspiration of the Northwest forests.

At Lake McDonald Lodge in Glacier National Park in 1913, Cutter build a hotel that captured the imagination of countless travellers. Unlike the chalet with its frontal gable, the lodge presented its long side to the water. Under a broad, overhanging roof with cross gables at the end, continuous balconies with rustic wood balustrades opened off the rooms to give the guests views down the lake. The interior of the hotel focused on a great



hall rising through three storeys, built of massive tree trunks with their bark still in place (fig. 7). The rustic tradition of the Adirondacks is present here, but transformed into an architecture on a grander scale. In each corner of the square central space stand three cedar trunks rising twenty-five feet to support one end of a diagonally placed roof truss. Two huge trusses intersect at the centre, where they meet a common crown post. The weight of the roof rests not directly on the columns, but on two tiers of horizontal logs, the lower of which joins two columns together. Below, the same columns support a gallery running around three sides. Heavy cross braces add to the stability of the structure and help to reduce the span of the gallery.

Throughout the tall central space there is a clearly expressed hierarchy of structural members, each one scaled to the task it has to perform. They diminish in size from the columns to the twisted timbers of the balustrades of the balconies and stairs. All these timbers are from tree trunks or branches still retaining their bark.

In contrast to the awesome structure of the main space, the staircases on either side are more whimsical in design with balusters and handrails of gnarled and twisted branches. The treads of the stairs are of solid logs split in two. An enormous fireplace completes the hospitable atmosphere of the great hall. A huge iron cauldron on a swivelling crane hangs over the hearth and Indian pictographs are incised on the lintel over its opening.¹⁸

8 Kootenai
Lodge, near
Kalispell,
Montana,
1919-20, roof
structure of the
Great Hall

In 1919, Kirtland Cutter had his final opportunity to design a rustic lodge for a wealthy patron, this time on Swan Lake near Kalispell in western Montana. His client was Cornelius Kelley, the president of the Anaconda Copper Company, who for years had shared a summer camp with a business associate, Orville Evans. By now, Kelley lived in an impressive mansion on Long Island, New York, but every summer he came to Swan Lake for two months. Cutter was asked to design a spacious lodge, where he could entertain in style the many influential visitors he enticed into the wilderness.¹⁹

The Kootenai Lodge, as it was named, had a reception room fifty feet by seventy-five feet with a gallery running along one side, above a massive stone fireplace. Like a medieval great hall, it had a fine roof of exposed timber trusses, but rather than following medieval details, Cutter designed it to convey an image of the forest. All the main structural timbers had their bark intact, the support for the gallery and the roof above was ingeniously contrived in a totally original way (fig. 8). Clusters of four tree trunks, rising through the cantilevered gallery, hold up giant log purlins that in turn carry the roof. The opposite wall is articulated with pairs of columns emphasising the support of each roof truss. In the structural design there is a clear contrast between the reddish peeled logs of the walls and the grayer tree trunks and branches retaining their bark, which were used for columns, roof trusses and handrails.

The great room, shown on Cutter's plans as the Assembly Hall, is hardly cosy. As the name implies, it was a place for large gatherings, and here, summer after summer, members of Kelley's elite social circle would gather before and after dinner. In contrast, the gallery was an intimate place for private conversations. The Kelleys had a household staff of nine, including Thomas Clydesdale, the impeccable Scottish butler, but with gardeners, woodcutters, hunting guides, grooms, chauffeurs, night watchmen and laundresses there were about seventy employees on the payroll. For the guests, no luxuries were lacking. Each year the silver chest was brought from New York with fifty place settings. There was Wedgwood china, Stueben glass and fine table linen. Clydesdale's service made no concessions to the back woods. Even during the 1920s, Cornelius Kelley kept a well stocked cellar. Fine wines and bourbons were served as if prohibition had never existed.

Cutter's own house in Spokane, built in 1888, may have been the first relatively authentic version of the Swiss chalet built in the United States. In the previous four decades, various pattern books had included exotic versions of the chalet, decorated with ornate fretwork and fanciful details never seen in the Alps.²⁰ A few such houses were built. However, Cutter's adoption of the type appears to have been motivated by a study of the genuine vernacular structures of the Bernese Oberland; it was therefore a new phenomenon. The design by Cutter the following year of the Moore

house, which was based on anonymous rural houses in England, combined perhaps with some influence of the Shingle Style, confirms his pre-occupation with vernacular types. While most architects were devising houses inspired by more pretentious European styles, Cutter's evocation of folk traditions was unusual.

When Cutter received the commission for the Idaho Building at the Chicago Exposition, he amplified the chalet to convey the power of the frontier landscape. Utilising huge tree trunks for the walls and exaggerating the projection of the eaves, he approached the sublime qualities that the mid-century landscape artists had attained in their paintings of the West. The interior of the pavilion, avoiding consciously Swiss details, was designed to resemble miners' and trappers' cabins; on the top floor, ingeniously designed roof trusses of vast logs spanned a spacious room of unique character.

In the Fairmount Cemetery chapel and the church at Chelan, Cutter no longer followed an established type; he allowed the native materials, craggy basalt and massive logs to speak for themselves. In his wilderness lodges at Lake McDonald and Swan Lake, he freed himself from the imported Swiss prototype and, inspired by the surrounding landscape and by the experience of the pioneer, he developed his own structural vocabulary.

Kirtland Cutter, in his fifty-year career as an architect, designed in a wide variety of styles. Montgomery Schuyler's accusation of promiscuity could certainly have been levelled at him: he ranged from Moorish to Tudor and from Mission to Neoclassical. However, among his mansions for mining millionaires and his grandiose public buildings, he completed a significant body of work in a rustic picturesque style that was to be followed in countless national park lodges and wilderness resorts. Cutter, building often for the social elite, was an early creator of an intrinsically American way of building based on a mythic pioneer vernacular.

1. The 17th-century New England version of the English cottage, with its central chimney and clapboard or shingled walls developed as a distinct American vernacular type. It was neglected by later generations until the late 1870s, when it became the basis of the Shingle Style and the early 1890s when the Colonial Revival began. In the case of the Shingle Style, the simple cottage was developed into high style houses of great complexity. See Vincent Scully, *The Shingle Style* (New Haven 1955).
2. Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.
3. Brooklyn Museum, New York.
4. The Ames Gate Lodge (1880), one of the first American buildings to exploit rough natural materials for their own sake, was illustrated in *American Architect*, 26 December 1885.
5. See Harvey Kaiser, *Great Camps of the Adirondacks* (Boston 1982).
6. Montgomery Schuyler, "State Buildings of the World's Fair", *Architectural Record*, 1893-94, Vol. III, pp. 55-71.
7. The Mission Revival has been described by David Gebhard as an artificial creation

based on a myth (*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 26, 1967). It was an attempt to evoke California's Hispanic past in a new architecture appropriate to California.

8. Cutter travelled in Switzerland in the early 1880s and claimed to have studied the architecture of the chalet. He may also have been influenced by the Himalayan Dwelling illustrated by Viollet-Le-Duc in *The Habitations of Man in All Ages* (London, 1876), p. 383, which demonstrates that the type of log construction he was using was to be found in other mountainous regions.
9. *American Architect and Building News*.
10. *American Scandinavian*, July 1909.
11. *Spokesman Review*, Spokane, 24 May 1893.
12. A large collection of Cutter's drawings and papers is held in the Eastern Washington State Historical Society Museum, Spokane, Washington (EWSHS). See Kirtland Cutter: Spokane's Architect, in Henry Matthews, *Spokane and the Inland Empire*, ed. David Stratton (Pullman 1991).
13. It appears that Cutter was also influenced by the Shingle Style in the design of this house. See Henry Matthews, "Kirtland Cutter and the Shingle Style", *Arcade; Northwest Journal of Architecture and Design*, Vol. IX, No. 5, December 1989.
14. Andrew Jackson Downing in *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York 1850), p. 123, described the Swiss chalet as "Bold and striking in outline . . . especially adapted to the wild and mountainous scenery where it originated" but the chalet illustrated is genteel and prettified.
15. In this building, the influence of H.H. Richardson's Ames Gate Lodge appears to be strong.
16. *An Illustrated History of Stevens, Ferry, Okanagan, and Chelan Counties, State of Washington*, Western Historical Publishing Co., 1904, pp. 724-25.
17. Drawings in the EWSHS.
18. Drawings in the EWSHS.
19. Wetzel Bett, "Kootenai Lodge: Wilderness Waldorf for Copper Magnates", *Montana Magazine* (Helena 1980).
20. Sources include Bicknell & Comstock's Specimen book of one hundred architectural designs, 1880, p. 15 and *Palliser's Modern Homes*, 1879.

CREDITS: Fig. 1: Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; figs. 3, 4: Eastern Washington State Historical Society; fig. 7: Glacier National Park Museum.