

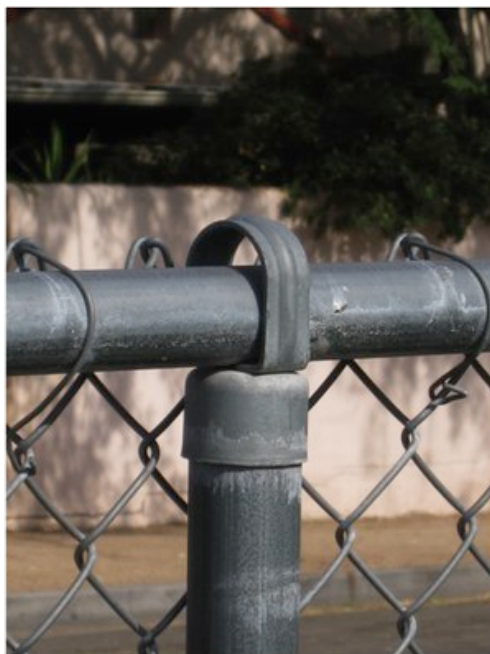
JOURNEYS AROUND A FENCE

BY MICHAEL GILL

Two blocks from my house is an elementary school built in 1926. It's a mission style building with a tower in front and a courtyard in back. Its walls, which are thick adobe and stucco plaster, are painted a tan color that looks yellow in sun and orange in shade. The windows are tall and thin, and the trim around them is a rusty red. It's roofed in red, orange, and black Spanish tile. It's a beautiful, stately building, solid and graceful.

But it's not the building I want to talk about. What I want to talk about is the chain link fence surrounding the perimeter of the school grounds. I circumscribe this fence while walking Humphrey every evening and have recently noticed that it has more to say than I initially realized.

Parts of the fence are old and parts are new. The old parts are placed around playgrounds and athletic fields. They were built to keep the children in — to prevent them from, say, chasing stray balls into the street. The new parts enclose the areas that were originally unfenced, so that a visitor can now enter the school only through the



central front gate, which is always under surveillance. The new fence was built to keep other people out.

So the fencing has something to say about how our views of child safety have changed over the years. It probably also has something to say about the efficacy and opportunity costs of recent safety measures.¹ But that's not what I want to talk about either. What I want to talk about are the finials.

A finial, as you probably know, is an ornamental piece on the top of or at the end of a pole. Look at a curtain rod in your house. Chances are the rod doesn't just abruptly end. It probably sports some

decorative piece in the shape of an egg or an arrow or a seashell or a pineapple. That's the finial. The word comes from finish: a finial is placed at the spot where the pole finishes. Finials also give an item a more finished look. You'll find finials on the top of flagpoles and bedposts and at the ends of shower curtains. You will also find them — sometimes — on fence-posts.

Do the posts of the chain-link fence around the elementary school have finials? No

¹ It might be pointed out, for instance, that anyone set on doing harm to our children will probably be little deterred by having to jump a five foot fence, while in case of emergency the children will be able to exit the school grounds on their own only through a single gate. And leaving aside such speculative and extremely unlikely disaster scenarios, it might also be pointed out that every day the new fencing forces dozens of parents and other perfectly harmless adults to walk half a block around the school grounds to get to places that the building itself has perfectly good doors to lead them to directly.

and yes. The new parts of the fence do not have finials. The old parts do.

On top of the posts of the new fence are loop caps that consist entirely of unadorned bands of extruded aluminum. These bands have the job of holding the top rail of the fence in place, and they do this job perfectly well.

The loop caps on the old fence posts are iron. On the bottom of the old iron loop caps are thick rings. These also succeed at the job of holding the top rail of the fence in place — by forming a kind of tunnel for the top rail to travel through. But these loop caps also have something on top: dense-looking acorn-shaped finials. Well, they're not exactly acorn-shaped. They're wider at the bottom and narrower at the top than acorns. And they have an upward spiraling swirl on them. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that their shape is something between an acorn and soft-serve ice cream.



The soft-serve+acorn finials of the old fence serve no function whatsoever. They're purely decorative. They're the only decorative feature. The rest of the fence, old and new, is just plain chain-link.²

Now what I have recently found myself thinking as I walk Humphrey by the fence is that those finials didn't just happen to appear. Their presence is the result of numerous discrete conscious actions

undertaken by a diverse group of people. The manufacturers had to decide to give their loop caps that particular design — that the dimensions of the other parts of the fence dictated that the finials should be just that height, width, and depth, and that they have that particular soft-serve+acorn shape, and that they swirl upwards counterclockwise. School district employees had to decide to order that particular style of loop cap from that particular manufacturer. Workers had to consciously attend to the pieces on the top of each of the posts

as they installed the fence at the school. There were probably a score of people who had entire workdays whose focus was those very finials.

Was it worth it? Or would it have been just as good to go with the purely utilitarian finial-less bands? I want to say it was worth it. And as evidence I want to point to the small but real delight the finials afford me every time I walk past. I don't mean to say

that their worth consists of the delight they afford me. I mean to say that they have intrinsic aesthetic worth, and that the delight they afford me is evidence of it.

At the same time, I'm aware of how indulgent, effete even, that may sound. I am also aware of the obvious counterargument. Decorative iron finials cost more than extruded aluminum bands. The

² Although plain really isn't fair. I predict that if you study closely how the body of a chain-link fence is constructed — trace the individual strands of wire as they swoop around each other to form the rhythmic diamond pattern — you'll be dazzled. (See [Appendix A](#).)

money saved could be used for education. The benefit of an additional computer station or teacher's aide or part-time librarian dwarfs in importance anything that anyone will ever gain from the presence of the finials.

I don't think this anti-finial argument can be defeated on its own terms. If we are in the business of trying to get the most bang for the taxpayer's buck, then it may very well be impossible to defend

the purchase of iron finials instead of aluminum bands. If the finials are worth it, it will have to be because of their aesthetic value on its own, not because they promote any other kind of value, educational or otherwise.

But maybe this talk of aesthetic worth is beside the point. Maybe my delight in the finials is a symptom of something else — namely, an unreflective fascination with the past. It's not that I think all things from the past are better than all things from the present. It's just that I find the details of life from the past more interesting than details of life from the present. I don't know why, but there's a

kind of thrill I get from discerning clues about why someone acted in a particular way eighty years ago that I don't get from discerning why someone acted in a particular way four years ago or last week.

A good place to look for such clues in our neighborhood is on the sidewalks. Most of the sidewalk paving stones are unremarkable. But on

the last slab at the end of some of the blocks is a maker's mark: a name that has been stamped into the concrete when its cement was still wet.

The oldest sidewalk marks in our neighborhood say, "Borderland Construction Company 1922." The Border-

land sidewalks were laid at the very inception of the neighborhood, when the area was first being transmuted from cactus, mesquite, and creosote scrubland to a grid of streets. Many of these sidewalks

were laid before the building of the houses that now line them. To get to their jobs in 1922, the Borderland workers would have had to drive right out to the edge of civilization every morning. They would have framed, poured, and smoothed the cement under the hot Arizona sun, and then at the end of the day stamped the circular Borderland logo at the end of a sidewalk that had nudged out into unoccupied desert.

By 1931 the neighborhood had caught up to the sidewalks and was ready to venture out further. The Borderland Construction Company didn't lay the raft of new sidewalks, however. This time the



job was given to “White & Miller Contractors.” There is one intersection where you can see this precisely: the sidewalks on the north side have the “Borderland Construction Company” mark while the sidewalks on the south side have the “White & Miller Contractors” mark. White & Miller also stamped on the side of the curbs the names of the streets they were lining, something Borderland had not done on the first batch of sidewalks.

What happened between 1922 and 1931 that led the city to give the sidewalk job to White & Miller instead of to Borderland? Was the city unhappy with the previous job Borderland had done?



Did White & Miller underbid Borderland? Maybe Borderland and White & Miller offered to do the job for the same amount but White & Miller were willing to throw in the street names on the side of the curbs for no additional charge.

But the neighborhood wasn't done growing in 1931. In the late 1930's it was ready to push out further again. But this time they didn't give the sidewalk job to either Borderland or White & Miller. This time it was done by the Works Progress Association, whose terse, blocky “USA/WPA” mark contrasts tellingly with the more expansive circular marks of



Borderland and White & Miller.

The city didn't ace out White & Miller completely, however. They let them lay the new curbs in 1938. Maybe the city was happy with the job White & Miller had done in 1931 but it was obligated to find work in town for the WPA. “Sorry White & Miller,” the city might have said.

“We can't let you have the sidewalk job. Uncle Sam is forcing us to give it to the Whistle, Piss, and Argue gang. But I'll tell you what we can do. We can let you have the curbs.”

The full double-name circle of White & Miller's original mark wouldn't fit on the narrow top of the curb, so they stamped in only a half single-name version. But they were then faced with the quandary of where to put the “1938.” There wasn't enough room to put it underneath their names, and if they put the date either before or after their names the mark as a whole would be unacceptably asymmetrical. So they declared “1938” twice, once before their

names and once after.

And that wasn't the only thing they did differently. Like their 1931 counterparts, the sides of their 1938 curbs bear street names. But in addition, the new curbs have stamped into them the address numbers for each block, along with the (endearingly superfluous) word block after the numbers. So while a 1931 curb informs us merely that



we are on "E FIFTH ST," a 1938 one tells us that we are on the "2200 BLOCK" of "E FIFTH ST."

Do the makers' marks on the sidewalks³ have any great aesthetic worth? Maybe not. I'm willing to accept the possibility that the delight they afford me is merely a symptom of gratuitous fascination with past decision-making. But there is one older feature of our neighborhood whose compelling aesthetic superiority I do want to insist on. And that's the streetlight.

On the residential streets in our neighborhood there are three different kinds of streetlights. The oldest have lampposts made of metal. The base of these lampposts consists (from bottom to top) of a thick cylindrical foot, a narrowing piece shaped like the horn of a trumpet, and three stacked rings. Out of the rings rises the main shaft, which is fluted, wide vertical grooves alternating with thin raised stripes. The capital of the post consists of a thick collar and a flaring piece with raised elongated lozenges evenly spaced around it. The abacus at the very top is ringed by acorn shapes.

These lampposts, which exude the power and grace of Ionic columns, support three different kinds of lampshades. I assume the shades were all originally the same but that breakage and replacement over the years led to the differences. Each of

these kinds of lampshades consists of distinct bottom and top pieces. One of the shades has a goblet-body for a bottom and a conical clown's hat

with pom-pom for a top. Another of the shades has a similarly goblet-like bottom but the top piece



³ Which, when you think about, are really nothing more than long-lived advertisements.

looks more like an upside-down stemless martini glass. The third shade is similar to the second, except that on the bottom of the martini glass (which is on top of the shade, since the martini glass is upside down) is a stout cone.

In the past, the old lampposts supported not only lights but also street signs. These signs were metal, white lettering on a black background, with a subtly deco font: note the low crossbar of the A, the high waist of the R, the slender shoulder of the S. The street names occupy a rectangular on the signs. The address numbers occupy an oval resting on top of the rectangular. The designers used white piping to emphasize the rec-



tangular and oval shapes. They also used bilateral white piping to bring the oval and rectangle into concert with each other.

I have been able to find only one of these old street signs left in the entire neighborhood. The rest have been replaced by the white-on-green variety ubiquitous everywhere else in this country. Some of these white-on-green signs sit atop stop signs. Others of them, however, are supported by a second, newer kind of lamppost.

The main part of the newer kind of lamppost is a pebbly concrete thing that is uniform in appearance except for the very bottom, which is somewhat domed. Sticking out of the top of the pebbly concrete thing is an unpainted gray pole. Coming off the pole at a right angle is another unpainted gray pole. At the end of the second pole is a flattish white rectangular housing containing a fluorescent tube.

It's readily apparent that the gray poles are doing all the work — that the pebbly concrete thing is just a cover. Indeed, it almost looks as though origi-



nally the lamppost consisted of just the gray poles, and that the pebbly concrete thing was slapped on later to try to prettify the whole affair. One flaw in this plan is that the pebbly concrete thing is not actually very pretty. But a flaw at least as serious is that the pebbly concrete thing doesn't reach all the way to the top. It just stops, nineteen-twentieths of the way up, and then, without any transition, the pole pokes out.⁴

But I shouldn't be too hard on the pebbly lampposts, because they are at least trying. The people responsible for their placement must, I think, have given some thought to how the posts would look. They put at least a bit of effort not merely into lighting the street but also into enhancing the look of neighborhood.⁵

The same cannot be said about what's been

most recently installed. What's been most recently installed are hooded metallic fixtures attached to spindly arms (themselves supported by even spindlier wires) that have been unceremoniously clamped to pre-existing wooden utility poles.

It must be admitted that it's an efficient arrangement. The pole and the electricity were already there, so why not, in the manner of a remora or epiphyte, use them to hold up and power lighting implements? But surely something has been lost. Maybe the loss is overridden by gains: the aesthetic reasonably outweighed by the prudential and the financial. But, I want to insist, there has been loss as well. Even if these installations make sense, there was a value to the old streetlights of which the new implements are bereft.⁶

Look at the utility



⁴ The older and newer streetlights shed a different kind of light. The fluorescent tubes held up by the pebbly concrete things are directly harshly down at the street. The bulbs in the old light shades diffusely illuminate the entire area around the metal lampposts. (But see footnote 6.)

⁵ And I should note that there are two of the pebbly concrete lampposts that are different from and, to my mind, more attractive than all the rest. These two have just one metal pole that curves at the top rather than two metal poles that meet at a right angle. I have no explanation for why there are two and only two of these superior, curvy pebbly lampposts. (See [Appendix B](#).)

⁶ Recently I related some of my thoughts about streetlights to a friend who works late and frequently rides her bicycle home through our neighborhood after dark. She suggested, with a politeness that almost concealed her contempt, that I had things exactly backwards. The old streetlights might look quaint, she said, but they do a terrible job of lighting the street. The pebbly concrete lights are brighter and they rightly point down at just the place that needs to be lit up. The newest, clamped-on lights are brighter still and illuminate wonderfully wide, overlapping areas. In contrast, riding through the stretches with the oldest lights involves regularly having to traverse areas of darkness — a serious concern both because of what may be on the road and because of who may be by the side. On top of all that, the downward aim of the newer lights ensures that they do not contribute to light pollution. (My friend is a supporter of the International Dark-Sky Association.) This was far from the first time that talking with this particular friend has made me feel viciously frivolous.

pole. Look at the top of it. You could search all your life and never find anything in the world whose lack of a finial is more emphatic.

And speaking of finials. There is one last thing I wanted to mention. I recently explained to Hannah and Jesse, who both attend the elementary school, the difference between the soft-serve+acorn iron finials and the extruded aluminum bands. I then sent them off with the task of counting the finials. They came back with a curious answer: seventy-five or seventy-six.

It wasn't that they disagreed or couldn't remember what the exact count was. The ambiguity was due to the occupant of the top of one particular fencepost. It was, they said, definitely an iron finial, not an extruded aluminum band. But this particular finial was not soft-serve+acorn shaped. It was, said Hannah, kind of like a slanted-in pyramid. Or as Jesse said, like an arrowhead-shape only wider.

Later that night while walking Humphrey I found it. It was something I had passed by a thousand times without noticing.

It was made of the same material as all the other finials, and had underneath it the same thick ring for the top of the fence to tunnel through. It looked like it was built and installed at the same time as the rest. But the top was, as Hannah and Jesse had said, more like a slanted-in pyramid or a too-wide arrowhead. Why was it there? Had they run out of the



soft-serve+acorn shapes at the very end of the fence-building and used this because it was the only substitute they could get their hands on quickly? Had there once been more of the pyramid+arrowhead finials, maybe at certain entrances or by the gates, but these wore out and were replaced? Might someone have made the conscious, whimsical decision to grace the fence with a single aberrance? How many people did the rogue finial-placer expect to notice his gesture? What reaction

did he wish the aberrant finial to inspire? There is, I'm sure, a rich story to be told about all this. I just don't know what it is yet.

Appendix A



Appendix B

