

Technology and the Future of Democracy
June 4, 2011 (VPR Commentators Luncheon)

Return with me now to the plains of Texas in the summer of 1935.

The get-away car is a Ford Coupe.

The driver is Clyde Barrow.

Beside him is Bonnie Parker.

They rob banks. Dust swirls. The heat stifles. The car bounces.

Later that year Barrow sent America's richest man a letter.

"Your 1934 coupe is the most reliable get-away car I ever stole," he wrote. Ford framed that letter and put it on his office wall.

Imagine the impossibility of explaining today's automobiles to Bonnie and Clyde? "If you live to have children, they will own air conditioned automobiles that can receive messages from outer space directing them to the First National Bank in Lubbock.

This voice from outer space would then guide them to the shortest way out of town – offering alternative routes should road blocks appear."

They'd never believe us.

Today the Model A Ford is a computer.

And like Bonnie and Clyde we are trapped in a static paradigm – that the future is linear and driven only by contemporary extensions of the past.

We centralize public policy to eliminate "paper work." But the paper is gone.

Computers do not fear exponentials.

We provide billions for "shovel ready jobs." But the shovel is gone. The money goes for massive machines and the few workers who run them.

We call for "commuter rail" when the data show that in ten years more people will be working at home than using public transportation.

About the time Clyde Barrow was extolling the virtues of his getaway car, the English poet Laurie Lee wrote: "When the automobile came, the village died."

Someone in the future might well write: “When the computer came, the village lived.”

Place is replacing profession as the organizing principle of life.

Computer technology is as decentralist as mechanical technology was centralist.

Let us not waste our genius scheming our way to a system scale oxymoron like “global village” (that will surely end in horror).

Rather let us expand our genius to conceive a world of village life whether in the country or the city – a global life of human scale.

Only then can we know real democracy – democracy in the fullest sense of the word.