Material culture

- Culture: language, values, beliefs, rules, behaviors, and artifacts that characterize a society (p. 31)
- Material culture: artifacts of a society, which represent adaptations to the social and physical environment (p. 96)
- Includes clothing, buildings, inventions, food, artwork, writings, music, etc.
- Material culture both reflects and shapes nonmaterial culture (e.g., norms, values, ideology)
- James Loewen’s Lies Across American (1999): a study of monuments as material culture
- Loewen distinguishes between “past” (things that happened) and “history” (what we say about them)
Nathan Forrest statue in Memphis, TN

- Confederate cavalry leader
- Forrest has more statues in TN than any other state honors a single person
- Historic sites are always the tales of two eras
  - Era of person or event honored
  - Era when monument was erected
- Forrest monuments erected between Reconstruction and Civil Rights movement
- Forest is symbol of white supremacy
  - First national leader of KKK
  - Slave trader before war, hired black convict labor after war
  - Led massacres of black soldiers during war

Monuments throughout the South honor slaves who were loyal to the Confederacy.

In fact, most slaves stopped working, fled, joined the Union Army and/or engaged in espionage.

No monuments in South honor local blacks in Union Army.

Intent of monuments is to present slavery as benign institution that had support of slaves.
Indian Statue in Muscatine, Iowa

- Although presented in 1926 by “Muscuitine Tribe” and dedicated to “Mascoutin Indians,” no such tribe existed in Muscatine then.
- Actually built by “Improved Order of Red Men,” white fraternal organization.
- White-built monuments to Indians tend to justify conquering Indians by:
  - Honoring Indians who helped whites.
  - Honoring Indian tribes who are no longer there.
  - Honoring Indians as “vanishing race” (as by Red Men).

Massacre monument in Almo, Idaho

- Monuments are usually proposed by local organizations and present favorable picture of community
  - Often leave out unpleasant history
  - May commemorate things that never happened
- Almo, Idaho, monument commemorates Indian massacre of 296 whites that never happened
- Another example: Pittsburg, Tx, has monument to airplane inventor Rev. Burrell Cannon
- Target for snowplow revisionism?

Catt Hall in Ames, Iowa

- Loewen gives as example of case where “reasonable people” disagree
- Carrie Chapman Catt was national leader in women’s suffrage movement
- Claimed “white supremacy will be strengthened, not weakened, by woman suffrage”
- Opponents (Sept. 29 Movement) argued her racist statements made her an inappropriate person to name a building after
- Proponents argued she was “product of her times”

Ball of twine of Cawker City, KS

- Local production of monuments leads to competing claims: two towns claim to have world’s largest ball of twine

- Even bizarre attractions may reflect norms & values—twine ball’s motto is “Thrift + Patience = Success”
Some key points about monuments

✓ Monuments (as material culture) both reflect nonmaterial culture (e.g., ideology) and shape it
✓ Monuments tell the tale of two eras
✓ The “past” (things that happened) is often quite different than “history” (what we say about them)