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
- Forrest 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

**Faithful slaves of Fort Mill, S.C.**

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

Local production of monuments leads to competing claims: two towns claim to have the world’s largest ball of twine. Even bizarre attractions may reflect norms and values—twine ball’s motto is “Thrift + Patience = Success.”

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).