

Iowa Harvest

October, 2012

To drive across Iowa during harvest is to set a Grant Wood painting in motion. Davenport to Sioux City and back is 760 miles. No need for GPS, just chase the setting sun to get there and retrace your steps heading back. Beans, corn, vista, beans, corn, homestead, beans, corn, windmills. Windmills, diminishing into the horizon, turning the inexorable prairie wind into 21st century power. So it goes at 1.1 miles per minute, with a Guthrie, Mellencamp, and Glen Miller soundtrack.

A pit stop at Ames features the highlight of the trip. Our daughter is a freshman at Iowa State, and taking her to dinner is a delight. Her enthusiasm for her classes, even 8:00 a.m. calculus, is heartening. She is going to be a music teacher, and I can't wait to watch and listen as she cultivates each year's crop of new students into musicians. All teaching is a noble pursuit, but to provide the life long gift of music is transformative. I could stay forever, but homework beckons for her, and I hope to make Fort Dodge before the last hotel room is taken for the night.

The sun has long since set, the monotony of Interstate replaced by the texture of country roads, and the soundtrack amps up to JD McPherson and the Gaslight Anthem to keep me awake. The harvest looks positively heroic at night. Combines, pickups and semis move in a mechanized ballet, with piercing lights drilling luminous holes through the dusty darkness. I flirt with the idea of stopping and asking if I can help, but I grew up in a city and would either get in the way or be sucked into some auger to my doom. Regardless, the resilient, unyielding scene is familiar. The Midwest work ethic is ingrained, whether in the fields long after dinner, a sandbag levee at midnight, or early morning calculus.

Iowa hospitality also holds true. The Fort Dodge Country Inn & Suites is full up for the night but the innkeeper calls another motel and finds me a room. A few hours sleep and the morning leg of the westbound trip takes me through three more hours of rolling farmland and timeless small towns. Early, Iowa, population 552, is a favorite. The entry

monument into town proclaims Early to be the “Crossroads of the Nation”. Without a single traffic light yet, they apparently have big plans for the future.

Sioux City arrives in the windshield mid morning and the day is spent in work pursuits. Meetings conclude at 5:45 and the drive home begins with a dash to get to a four lane highway before dark. A friendly deputy on a county road outside Sac City advises a slightly lower speed, and watching for deer at dusk. Dusk passes without incident and four hours of night driving gives ample time for thought.

Harvest in Iowa is impossibly beautiful. Colors changing, farmers toiling, students open to the future ahead. It is a Grant Wood landscape, with Norman Rockwell portraits.

But this harvest season has a callous intruder. This Iowa, this “beautiful land”, has become a “battleground state”. Two days on the road has granted relief from the robocalls and sickening PAC fueled knife fight that passes for debate in contemporary politics. You cannot travel any distance in Iowa at the moment and not come away with the strong sense of reaping what is sown. It is as inescapable in the fields as it is during a father / daughter dinner at college. We reap what we sow.

The producers of the gratuitous political ads relentlessly assaulting Iowans don’t seem to understand this. Pulling strings from afar, they don’t really know us. If they did, they would try something better. You want to impress Iowans? Be respectful. Be modest. Try a civilized narrative. Tone it down several notches and please, stop interrupting us, for we have honest work to do.