

County Fair

Every summer of my boyhood, we left home in the bronze Pontiac Chieftain and headed west for where Dad grew up. Staggered red signs entertained along the two-lane highway like this one:

DON'T STICK YOUR ELBOW

OUT SO FAR

IT MAY GO HOME

IN ANOTHER CAR

BURMA SHAVE

My older sister competed for who could record the most state license plates as we spliced through acres of soybeans, corn, and sunflowers and slowed for small town speed traps. The next day we'd cross U.S. 6's iron girded bridge across the Mississippi River and enter Iowa.

Gramma would greet us in an apron over a dress of flowers faded from Twenty Mule Team Borax washings, her face wrinkled like a sun-scorched prune, gray hair stretched into a bun. I didn't identify it then, but her accent was Bohemian from her Prague birthplace before the Kozderkas fled to the new world and settled near where Dvořák composed the New World Symphony.

The aging gabled house seemed to referee a land battle between city and country, as Iowa City sprawled and farms surrendered to housing plots. A damp straw odor spewed across the yard, with its hand-planted vegetable and blackberry patch that was home to snakes.

Chickens clucked in the barn, home to spiders as big as golf balls with legs, and in command a guardian goose I'd been warned never to approach.

Inside Gramma's parlor was a painting of an old-world ancestor whose eyes followed you. A grandfather I never knew, Adolph died when Gramma was 45. He'd been a city councilman, part saloon owner, financial consultant, and New York Life Insurance agent. Gramma loved having Dad come home, but her home was no longer his home, and for sure Iowa wasn't my home. Mine was a city. Iowa interrupted competing in my library's how-many-books-can-you-read contest, hitting tennis balls against a Mt. Washington School wall, and bicycling to Stanberry Park where trilobites and crinoids awaited discovery. To me Iowa meant country – an empty state of mind, a vapor of a past that perhaps never was and would surely never be again, assuredly not for me.

Dennis Detwiler lived across the blacktop road from Gramma's house in a cottage built of boards with peeling paint. Dennis was nine like me the summer of 1958. I pictured our fathers growing up as country boys, when Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Warren Harding took turns as President. Black-and-white photo scrapbooks at home and a framed collection of my father's National Rifle Association championship medals projected what Iowa meant to them, when Dad shot mink and muskrats and sold their pelts for spending money, how when he was seventeen, he yearned to join the Army to chase Pancho Villa, but his parents squelched that and enrolled him at the University of Iowa. Dad fled to the city after Army service, first to Chicago, then to Cincinnati, or I wouldn't be here to tell you the story of the 1958 Johnson County Fair.

The fair highlighted my annual Iowa visit. My parents would amble with Gramma through General Electric's Wonders of Electricity exhibit, marvel in the Quilt Arcade, behold enormous yellow tractors and harvesters, gawk at the world's largest statue of liberty made entirely of butter, and learn how to use more Crisco, while Gramma's entry in the strawberry-rhubarb pie competition awaited judgment. Dennis and I were unleashed with five dollars of tickets each until 2 o'clock, when we'd meet up by the Ferris wheel.

Dennis and I bought corndogs on a stick and scanned the day's offerings, ranging from the elocution contest semifinals to the dunking booth to the Whirligig to the strongman's hit-the-bell stand. We headed to the swine shed, where Dennis' classmate Pamela was vying for a prize. It cost nothing to enter but my innocence.

Pamela grinned with braces glinting and pigtails tightly wound. With my plastic Kodak I took a snapshot of Dennis standing next to but not touching Pamela. She stretched an arm toward Dodie, an enormous hog sporting a pink lace collar. On "cheese," the sow seemed to smile but then let loose in the other direction. This was methane contributing to climate change, but no one knew that then.

Pamela boasted that Dodie weighed almost eight hundred pounds.

Does Dodie sleep in your room? I asked.

Pamela giggled. Nah, she said, but sometimes we sleep together in the barn.

Dennis explained that hogs wallow. No kennel needed, just a fence and a place to slop. And plenty of food to get them plump.

Why plump? I dumbly inquired.

Don't you know, city boy?

What?

Do you like bacon?

Oh, I said. Death in the country - not the end of life but its very meaning for animals hugged at the fair. I pictured Dodie as an Aztec warrior waiting for the high priest to cut out the beating heart as an offer to the gods of our gluttony.

Dennis and I left for the Pizza Pop Stand. We chomped on greasy slices as we passed a ten-foot-tall ear of corn emblazoned with a red company logo and a new word - HYBRID. Behind it was the Swine Weigh-in Booth. Next came a yellow squash-like vegetable the size of a giant beach ball atop a stand in front of the Ugly Cake Contest tent. We wandered through the Bovine Barn, divided between Beef and Dairy. The milk cows mooed last rites for their neighbors.

Here today, steak tomorrow, said Dennis, pointing at a gold ribboned cow, oblivious to its fate. Its cud moved hay side to side. I sneezed three times.

We walked outside. One barker in a peppermint jacket challenged us to hurl baseballs at bottles, while another fellow waved us toward an array of holstered water guns aimed at targets that could win a stuffed Japanese panda. We encountered a tuxedoed guy with a bulging Adams Apple waving a cane. He promised a never-to-be-believed experience inside a tent. We handed him two 25-cent tickets.

The first spectacle shocked - a stuffed cobra in mortal combat with a mongoose. A spotlight beamed on an enormous glass jar where a two-headed calf fetus floated. Take your seats, blared a speaker. We grabbed two in the front row. Curtains parted. A human appeared in a shocking pink dress and ruby shoes. But she had a moustache and foot-long beard. And yet, she appeared to be a she.

The Bearded Queen, the announcer proclaimed. Marvel at this wonder of nature!

Freak, you mean, snickered Dennis, eyes riveted on the stage.

I was struck dumb. Girls and boys – as different as truth and falsehood. Yet, here was a challenge to that. She stroked her beard, and it didn't come off. Sometimes appearance can shatter belief, but I was learning it might be otherwise – that perhaps appearance can deceive to take your money. Years later I would learn that hirsutism is a rare condition affecting females. But then it was shear shock. We fled.

Hey, let's go in this one, said Dennis, pointing to an enclosure with posters of fashion models in fur coats gracing the entrance. RICHES AWAIT! - letters above the lintel boasted – NUTRIA AND YOU!

Riches – now that gets your attention. The bow-tied man at the entrance grimaced and asked if our parents were here.

His are, said Dennis.

That was enough. Bring your folks, the guardian said, they'll thank you. Come in and learn how bright your future can be.

We entered and were enraptured by beautifully shaped panels, charts, photos, and large dollar signs. A woman who looked like an aged Doris Day asked about our parents, and when she learned they were nearby, she led us around the circle. She pointed to a photo of a statuesque woman in a fur coat with the Empire State Building in the background.

Is that mink? I asked, recalling that Dad used to hunt them here.

Better than mink, she said. That's nutria.

What's nutria? Dennis asked.

No mink remained in Iowa.

I'll show you, said the woman.

She led us through a door to a pen holding cages of nutria of several colors, most a dark brown. The creatures had blazingly orange incisors. They looked like large rodents with Halloween pumpkin teeth.

Their pelts are worth a fortune, said the woman. Look at this, she said, caressing a life-sized poster of a model posing before the Eiffel Tower. Give this to your folks, she said, handing us a dark blue folder with gold script. Opportunity of a Lifetime, it glowed. Projections trumpeted that a small investment for a breeding pair (\$200 said the fine print) would multiply to thousands in months, and profits would never end.

How can that be? I asked.

They breed quickly and often, the woman said. You sell the offspring back to us, we sell them to others, and you make money every time. Or you can use the pelts and sell the meat. You can't lose. You'll get rich. Bring your folks!

Dennis and I walked outside.

You know, said Dennis, we could bring back hunting here in no time.

But they're not mink, I said. They're ugly. They're ... they're rats.

We talked it over, using our remaining tickets to buy red velvet funnel cakes, powder wafting like a cloud with each bite. Wind was picking up.

Fur's one thing. But eating nutria. Yuck, said Dennis.

Bacon was one thing, rat meat another, I agreed about that. Getting rich by selling rat fur and rat guts? Something's off here, I thought.

I wouldn't mind hunting them, said Dennis. We could use something to shoot around here.

Okay, what about this – freedom, I blurted my thought. What if we let them out? Maybe they'll skedaddle and settle in Iowa. You get your target practice, and the nutria go free.

A siren whined. An announcement sounded – tornado conditions in the area.

Dennis and I reentered the nutria booth. The saleswoman was agitated, perhaps believing the announcement meant more than it seemed to us. As she tended to a couple who were scouring the get-rich details on a wall panel shaking from the upswell outside, we sneaked

into the nutrias' lair. We would unlatch the cages. I pictured the rodents fleeing like Moses and the Israelites from Pharoah, scampering to the exits for their new home in Iowa's woods and streams. They'd scurry through the animal sheds. The hogs and cows would panic and stampede, providing cover for the nutrias' escape. Perhaps all the fair's doomed creatures would be liberated and spared execution.

I could see the future. Nutria would flourish and restore Iowa 1900. Dennis could hunt like his father and mine did. We would turn back the clock.

But a siren interrupted our plot.

Tornado sightings nearby, said the announcer.

Years later I would learn about nutria – how Ponzi-scheme promoters sold them to farmers in the 1920's and the rodents were abandoned when buyers couldn't feed them or get a cent for their fur or meat as the depression struck, how nutria native to Peru invaded Louisiana and feasted upon and destroyed its protective delta marshes. I sensed as a boy there was something wrong with their appearance in Iowa, and I knew without proof that the nutria barkers were like snake oil salesmen just out to get your money. This was an invasion of fraudsters into farm life, the ineffable intrusion of greed into the country life of honest toil.

Dennis and I left the nutria in their cages and bolted toward the Ferris wheel as two o'clock neared and the crowd was scrambling toward the exits. Wind scattered fliers promoting Dinocide. I thought, why kill dinosaurs? I grabbed one to read how this miracle substance saved crops and could even be used to control head lice in children. Later I would learn from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* that Dinocide was a tradename for DDT.

The sound system announced, Tornado warning lifted. And in an instant, calm and blue sky returned.

We met the folks and Gramma on time. She was grinning with two gold teeth gleaming and clutched a blue ribbon for her strawberry-rhubarb pie. A spin on the Ferris wheel climaxed the day before our return to Kimball Road, the day before our long drive home to Cincinnati.

That afternoon Gramma asked me to come with her to the barn. I unlatched the door as she glared into its dim interior. She approached the goose, who seemed to sense its fate. She grabbed the creature's neck just below the beak and began to swing the bird. It blared a few honks as the neck seemed to stretch the width of the barn. It was over in seconds. Then she struck with a hatchet. The headless body stumbled, wings flapping briefly before collapsing on the floor.

Just before we sat down for dinner, Gramma asked me to go pick eight ears of corn. Run back with them so we can get them in the pot before sugar turns to starch, she instructed. That corn was the sweetest I ever had that night. And the goose was tender. I was no vegan. I'd been initiated into the order of omnivores. This was different – and better - than buying plastic encased and ready-to-cook poultry parts at Albers or Kroger back home.

Iowa, country, would never be my home. But those Iowa City visits linger like residue before conception. County fairs, life and death in first person, knowing the intrusions into what Iowa had been and no longer was or would be, and yet, how country is part of us, that it perseveres as an invisible life force – all this entered within. I absorbed it each summer.

As my school history books preached about log cabin presidents and manifest destiny and our exceptional and greatest democracy on earth, I could reflect more deeply between truth and fiction and the muddle of the two we are offered. I could see how as the nation began and spread from ocean to ocean, life was about what we could make of the land and it could make of us. But then doing better meant leaving the farm behind, moving to cities in search of progress, in search of dollars, in search of Oz. And the land lost its magnetism and became instead dollars per square foot. And even Iowa life became less about living with the land and more about what we could do to it for financial gain.

Today less than five percent of Iowans farm, though agriculture pervades Iowa's self-image. County fairs persist. Today they are less about sustainable country than a tarnished reminder for urban and suburban folk of a relinquished past, one that few of us now call home. And yet, when we know our home, surely an element is what America was when it was young and beautiful, when America was of spacious skies above a fruited plain.

Joseph J Dehner, January 31, 2022