



Portraits of the Twelve States

SECTION EDITOR

Deborah L. Miller

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Overview

The American Midwest means different things to different people. Its shape and contours shift dramatically, depending on where you are standing. From Ohio, the Missouri River looks like a distant boundary in a different kind of place. From Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin—part farm country and part forested lake terrain, imbued with the ideas and symbols of northern latitudes and defined in part by the Canadian boundary—the Ohio River that marks the southern edge of the Old Northwest looks more like the northern border of the South.

Even the peoples of the Midwest cannot always agree on where the region begins and ends. Citizens of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois sometimes claim to be the original Midwesterners because their states were the first to emerge from the Northwest Territory in the early 1800s. Residents of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, states created in the second half of the nineteenth century, are not sure that Ohio and Indiana are even part of the Midwest. The residents of Wisconsin and Minnesota seek to distinguish themselves within the region by using the term upper Midwest to refer to their area.

Midwestern states are frequently as complicated as the region. The states around the margins have close relationships with other regions. Some actually include parts of other regions, such as the Great Plains, within their boundaries. Even interior states, such as Iowa and Illinois—which may be thought of as the heart of the Heartland, the middle of the Midwest—are divided into sub-regions. Within North and South Dakota, the Missouri River marks an internal rainfall boundary—between tallgrass prairie and shortgrass prairie, between farms and ranches, between East River and West River—which is approximated by the one-hundredth meridian. A similar internal dividing line exists in Nebraska and Kansas, but no river marks it, because the Missouri, heading south, forms the Iowa-Nebraska border before continuing southeast to meet the Mississippi at St. Charles, Missouri.

As is the case everywhere, Midwestern waterways make obvious political boundaries. The Mississippi River divides Missouri from Illinois and Iowa from Wisconsin. The St. Croix River separates Wisconsin and Minnesota. Lake Michigan and Lake Superior form part of the boundary with Canada for Michigan and Wisconsin.

But rivers unite people as well as divide them. Sometimes, political borders artificially separate people who share economic, social, and cultural interests. Fargo-Moorhead in North Dakota and Min-

nesota and the Quad Cities of Illinois and Iowa demonstrate that phenomenon. Residents of small towns in southern Illinois are more likely Cardinals rather than Cubs fans and may associate more with residents of small towns in Missouri or Kentucky than they do with the denizens of Chicago. Like citizens of border states, the citizens of border cities have formed close relationships with their neighbors.

State boundaries, of course, are arbitrary, no more than invisible lines drawn by politicians in Washington, D.C. But the land they divided was real, and soon the lines took on practical meaning, as surveyors marked them, legislators passed different laws in different capitals, and newspaper editors and guidebook writers relentlessly promoted settlement. Landscape and settlement patterns frequently reinforced the general contours of political boundaries. As James Madison notes in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (1988), “States in the eastern part of the region were settled earliest and have always been the most populous, the most urban, and the most industrial. Later settlement, less rainfall, and harsher climates have left the western edge of the region more sparsely populated.” (5)

Over time, despite the importance of natural features, settlement patterns, and economic networks, many Midwesterners have come to think about themselves in terms of their native or adopted state. “Portraits of the States” thus explores the region through a series of essays on the 12 states covered in this encyclopedia. Readers should be aware, however, that this section differs from the others in both tone and content. These essays are more reflective than informative by design. We did not ask our essayists to recount history or summarize data. Rather, we asked them to write about what their state means to them.

We are delighted with the results. Roger Welsch writes about the surprising allure of Nebraska, while Jane Ahlin shares and reveals the passion many North Dakotans feel for their state. Thomas Fox Averill provides both heat and light in his discussion of Kansas, and Herbert Hoover outlines the distinctive history of South Dakota. Susan Allen Toth muses about homegrown place names and infinite horizons growing up in Iowa, and Eric Sandweiss charts his connections from Missouri through the airwaves to the greater Midwest and beyond. South Dakota-born Annette Atkins offers a plainswoman’s sideways view of humid, forested Minnesota, and Michael Perry merges personal memory and arguments about state identity in Wisconsin.

American Indians play major roles in Kathleen Stocking’s lake-locked Michigan as they do in the essays about states on the Midwest’s western edge. Becky Bradway’s Illinois story juxtaposes the relationships

between Chicago and the central and southern parts of the state, demonstrating that all Illinois is divided into three parts, all contentious. R.W. Apple highlights the people and places of Ohio, and Kurt Vonnegut eloquently explains Indiana's Midwestern qualities.

We invite readers to begin with their own native or adopted state and work out from there to the others. These engaging essays reveal the depth of the complicated emotional connections that Midwesterners feel when they think about home. As important, by revealing the ways in which the experiences of the various states have diverged and converged, they provoke us to consider the extent to which our 12 states constitute something more than the sum of their parts, a place we call the American Midwest.

Deborah L. Miller
Minnesota Historical Society

Illinois

Illinois is three states. Three geographies, three separate spheres representing the three contemporary states of being: urban, rural, and in-between (a suburban or big town identity, depending on the aspirations of those who live there). Illinois is a long, lean state, making it easy to draw the lines that separate Chicago and its suburbs, the central cities/towns, and rural southern Illinois. These divisions generally mark the difference between being a Cardinals or a Cubs/White Sox fan, southern or northern, Republican or Democrat. Only Illinoisans seem to be aware of the split. "I'm from Springfield," you might tell a stranger, and she'll say, "How far is that from Chicago?" Chicago thinks it's Illinois and the rest of the world does, too, and so the Windy City *de facto* defines the state. It dictates the politics (and Illinois is all about politics)—its macho brand of Democratic identity filters down into Republican country, and a tough-guy immigrant industrialism trumps the pastoral agricultural vision. Chicago is, after all, the second city (Los Angeles isn't a city—it's one long strip mall). The rest of the state fights Chicago dominance every step of the way.

Industry was money and power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Chicago had it. Chicago took off in the early 1800s with the construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, which linked the Great Lakes to the Illinois River (and so to the Mississippi). People came to build the canal and to take advantage of the opportunities that would come with expanded trade. Agriculture has always grounded Illinois commerce; food was bought and sold, and the devices to expand crop production were built (like reapers and,

eventually, tractors). Once the canal was wrapped up, the workers turned to railroad construction. By the 1850s, Illinois farmers could use the rails to ship their grain and livestock to Chicago, where the produce was converted to products and shipped around the country. Then the steel mills appeared, and Chicago industry filled the skies with smoke. In the 1860s, the stockyards opened, hanging Chicago with the label "Porkopolis" as New York had a laugh. Along with the pigs came Chicago's reputation as a brutal and smelly place where the only public interest was in making money.

Because of the packinghouses, the railroads, the many immigrants, the steadfast drive to grow at all costs, and the general barroom bluster, Chicago became known for its blue-collar roughness, a "tell it like it is" honesty. Chicago insists that it is relatively classless (at least compared to the East Coast), and while this isn't really true, it remains an optimistic Chi-town belief.

Without the rest of Illinois, there would be no Chicago. While the city dwellers and the downstaters rarely mix, both depend on the other. The farmers' product created the need in the Midwest for the canals and railroads, and the farmers in turn spurred industry by purchasing the agricultural machinery. Still, each of Illinois' north-central-south states protects its own turf. The downstaters resent Chicago for bullying its way into political power, while the Chicagoans think the downstaters are a bunch of rubes. The people in the center believe they're the ones who keep the state in operation, because they do the practical, nuts-and-bolts work (like farming and filing documents). The people in southern Illinois think everyone is corrupt, and look with a fonder eye upon Kentucky than any of their upstate neighbors.

And so what of the farm belt, that section in the middle with all that corn, corn, corn? Central Illinois has flatland with rich dirt, and so, of course, you find farmers. Along with the farmers are those who make their living from the farm industry, the workers for Caterpillar, International Harvester, and John Deere in cities like Peoria, Decatur, and Rock Island-Moline. And don't forget the people who work for the multinational corporations, like Archer Daniels Midland, that turn all that grain into materials. The farm industry kept the downstate cities alive for decades, attracting residents to those middle-sized cities. Farming created that eerie green-and-yellow landscape that seems tedious to many outsiders, but holds a strange beauty. The towns—Riverton, Virden, Petersburg, Pleasant Plains, Maroa, LeRoy, Arcola, Fishhook—proclaim their independence. Each is different from the other. And when people need to get to a city, they go to Springfield, Peoria, Champaign-Urbana, and Bloomington-Normal.

Inside these middle-sized cities, you don't see much corn. You find malls, government buildings, colleges—the usual institutions that serve the usual people, the government workers, insurance execs, factory hands, and schoolteachers. The cities and towns have distinctive characters, based on the backgrounds of their original settlers and the type of work maintained there. Champaign-Urbana is dominated by the University of Illinois; Bloomington-Normal is the site of two major insurance companies and Illinois State University; Springfield is the center of a large and contentious state government; and the industries in Decatur, Peoria, and Rock Island-Moline revolve around agricultural products and machinery.

Central Illinois initially attracted seekers who had been farmers in their old countries or who otherwise were accustomed to a quiet pastoral setting. Other towns were configured around mines, and so they attracted laborers and their families. The isolated nature of the countryside put a town of Irish thirty miles from a town of Italians twenty miles from a town of Germans ten miles from a town of Swedes. Towns and neighborhoods maintained strong ethnic identities (and divisions from their neighbors), which didn't change until the coming of mass media and easy travel.

Moving south, the plain turns into bluffs and hills to the juncture of the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers; this land was settled mostly by uprooted southerners and Appalachians who liked the free, slow-paced atmosphere and the beauty of the hills. The land is so hilly that it's the only part of Illinois that doesn't have a strong farming connection; what farmland that existed has long since been lost to erosion. Its industry is mining, although now many of the mines have closed. These communities came together like the ones in Chicago: A few people from a country or an ethnic or racial group settled and their families followed in droves, and they all had children, and for decades they stayed, growing descendants and roots. Talk about good names, Southern Illinois has got 'em: Rosiclare, Beaucoup (pronounced BUCK-Up), Cambria, Horseshoe, Boody. The landscape here is astonishingly beautiful and rugged; the wildness of the terrain is exemplified by the Shawnee National Forest, a quarter-million-acre park between the Mississippi and the Ohio Rivers. This land was set aside in the 1930s, when the southern Illinois economy proved to be permanently hard-hit. It is one of Illinois' few ecologically protected areas; although Illinois is the fifth most populated state in the Union, it ranks forty-eighth in the amount of land reserved for public parks. The Shawnee protects five hundred species of wildlife while still allowing humans to ride horses, climb bluffs, and hike. People from all over the country

come here to find a sense of isolated freedom that is rarely found in the more popular national parks.

Southern Illinois—once known as “Little Egypt” and the “Illinois Ozarks”—survives independently of the rest of Illinois; its city ties are with St. Louis, not Chicago. The area's biggest college is Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, a former-hippie enclave that holds rowdiness and radicalism in high regard. While southern Illinois is a conservative region, it has pockets of strong liberalism; one of the country's most progressive politicians, Senator Paul Simon, came from a town near Carbondale. More than any other area, the residents of Southern Illinois have retained their populist rural traditions. They insist upon it.

Before the north-middle-south splits, the blues and Studs Terkel and the Daleys and Lincoln's Home, the state had an identity based on hunting, fishing, and planting. Its boundaries were defined by rivers, not politics and ethnic backgrounds. Illinois was long home to the five tribes of the Illini Confederation. These tribes—the Kaskaskia, Cahokia, Peoria, Tamaroa, and Michigamea—occupied lands from Lake Michigan in the north to the Ohio River in the south, to the Wabash in the east, and west across the Mississippi. The five tribes coexisted fairly peacefully (despite skirmishes with outside tribes) until Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet showed up in 1673. The explorers made a stop at the home of the grand chief of the Illini Confederation near what is now Peoria. Unfortunately for the original Illinoisans, this opened the door to traders and missionaries. The tribes of the Illini Confederacy then made the sad mistake of siding with the French in the French and Indian Wars, which aroused antagonisms among outside tribes and gave the British added impetus to wipe them out. In 1673, the Illinois tribes numbered more than ten thousand people. By 1832, when their land was permanently taken by the government, there remained a single village of less than three hundred. Those who hadn't been killed in the wars were killed by smallpox.

And all of these residents had been preceded by the Cahokian mound builders in southern Illinois, one of the largest pre-Columbian civilizations in North America. In A.D. 900, it was the center of Mississippian culture; one of the mounds, Monk's Mound, covers fourteen acres in four terraces that reach one hundred feet high. The world's largest remaining prehistoric earthen building rested atop it. Long after the demise of this civilization, the Cahokian area was caught in the same vise of English and French settlement. Across the Mississippi, St. Louis grew right alongside the mounds. This sense of the ancient and the new occurs throughout Illinois, in condensed spaces and in juxtaposition. The names of the towns and cities and rivers evoke the tribes. So do the museums, where we

try to formally preserve our lost legacies. But the legacy of the original Illinoisans most clearly remains in the isolated parts of the state, along the rivers and in the forests. These dwindling locations continue to contain their spirits. It is easy to forget there that Illinois' identity is really a combative, bloody, and blustering one.

Once the whites settled, the three states of Illinois quickly formed their own obstinate identities. The state's splits play out in the activities for which Illinois has become best known: politics, the creation of music and poetry, architectural innovations, and baseball. The Civil War was the most famous incident to bring out the state's conflicted nature. Though Illinois prides itself on being the "Land of Lincoln," the southern third of the state had Confederate sympathies; the middle was a hodgepodge of Confederates, abolitionists, and those who held out for union while advocating slavery; the north was mostly in favor of ending slavery, with some areas (such as Galesburg) actively abolitionist. The end of the war certainly didn't end Illinois' racial divisions; Chicago was a mecca for freed blacks, and while the downstate cities have strong African American communities, the small towns are generally as European Caucasian as their residents can possibly make them. The farther downstate you go, the fewer blacks you will see until you reach East St. Louis and Cairo. As the poet Vachel Lindsay once noted, the Mason-Dixon line ran right through his backyard in Springfield. These racial and ethnic separations have had an impact upon every facet of Illinois life. The Klan had its strongholds downstate. Race riots took place in Springfield and Chicago. Even now, African Americans are redlined into their own separate communities in Illinois cities.

One striking result of this is the vibrancy of those black communities. African American art and music are an important part of the Illinois identity. Everywhere we go, we hear the echoes of Chicago blues. The riffs run through our national soul and rock consciousness, mutated through guitar solos and rap mixes. Chicago blues are black and evolved southern, mixing the industrial urban and agricultural rural. In Chi-town, Delta Blues met electricity. Chicago was where the jobs were, and it carried the mythology of opportunity; during the Jim Crow era, the black community grew. The strains from the South traveled through Memphis and Kansas City and stopped in the Windy City, where they combined with the rhythms of urban industry to make heart-stopping guitar-based riffing and wailing blues. Chess Records made its base here; among the best-known blues musicians were Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf, and B.B. King. Music transcends the state's internal boundaries, truly blending north and south,

urban and rural. Folk, rock, and country music also drift from north to south, south to north; bluegrass and string bands from southern Illinois play upstate; folkies draw their influences from both country and blues; and rockers (the best known being the Smashing Pumpkins) proclaim cynical urban angst while maintaining a baseline midwestern honesty.

Art seems to be the only activity that unifies the state. Sports, for one, exemplifies Illinois' divisions: North of Springfield live the Cubs/Sox fans; below, the Cards fans. When the Cards and the Cubs play each other, tensions are ugly. If Illinoisans are like this on the field of sport, imagine what they must be like in the field of big stakes money: politics.

Illinois makes a glorious industry of politics, raising backstabbing and manipulation into a fine art of control. We residents are fascinated by the state's workings, the moral and immoral and amoral machinations of its structures, and this attitude permeates everything, everywhere, in every field. It's a state of big business, big government, big ideas turned into big practicalities, and buckets of money. Politics is the art of Illinois. Without politics, Illinois might be, well, Indiana or Iowa.

Everyone knows Chicago has been dominated by the Daleys and Madigans and those who work as cogs in the Democratic machine. Downstate is nearly all Republican, except for pockets of Democratic populism. And the center is Lincoln and more Lincoln and his true home, the state capitol. Lanky rail-splitter Abe, whose face is everywhere, defines the land, our license plates, and every American's worthless penny. Lincoln, not a myth, was the quintessential Illinois Politician. He worked the system, walking the middle line until he held power. He didn't begin by holding his open-minded beliefs (at least not publicly), but was forced into his stand through moral necessity. Abe saw himself as a common man—he *was* a common man—a smart man who knew how to play up his populist image. And the image was true: He came from humble beginnings, rose to power, and was unpretentious and intellectual. He struggled with his own melancholy, his wife's depression, and his child's death. He experienced dark contemplations and understandings, and historians puzzle over him, even now. And after equivocation, Lincoln took a stand that was right and acted upon it both oratorically and politically. He had a visionary sense of his place in the context of history, and in this he reflects the strangest of all Illinois characteristics: visionary optimism meshed with bottom-line practicality. In Illinois, visionaries came to set up intellectual enclaves and mystical utopian communes. Gangsters came to feed and feed on the many newcomers as they worked their way into the political system. The populist dream met with populist practical-

ity, leading to high-flown beauty and the basest equation of violence and use. The Chicago that is known for its Louis Sullivan buildings, its community of writers and performers and artists is also famous for the Haymarket Square riot, the Democratic National Convention of 1968, and Al Capone. The Springfield that is famous as the home of Abe Lincoln also had one of the most notorious racial mob attacks in 1908 (as thousands of whites burned down the black section of town and lynched two innocent men). The southern Illinois known for its stunning bluffs and strange beauties is poverty hit hard by the decline of coal mining. In every part of the state, most residents remain stubbornly independent and individualistic. Their ancestors may have stopped moving west, but that was only because they knew they had found a place that they could call their own and make a heap o' money.

Money and home: the American Dream. People in Illinois hope that hard work will get them their just due, as they maintain an optimism hidden by black humor and something between humility and low state-esteem. Illinois was built by outcasts and rebels fleeing the East Coast, forced from the South, and adventuring from Europe; communities were armed pockets based on ethnicity and race, and those in each group came to believe that financial progress was the only true progress. "Get ahead" was their mantra—but in doing so, stay true to self and community. Illinois believes in hard work and gritty competition aided by whatever force is needed to make money and gain power. Along the way, great cities and idyllic towns will be created: This is the belief of the cult of Illinois. The cult's core beliefs are in justice and essential populist opportunity. Optimism is still ingrained in Chicago's attitudes and beliefs about itself (hog butcher to the world and all that) and in those of the rowdy unemployed hill-livers in southern Illinois and the government workers and former hippies and machinists in the central part of the state. The idealistic side of Illinois insists that there is value in the common human.

The ability of people in Illinois to make money allowed for a seeming leveling of opportunity for decades. Some European intellectuals who visited Illinois in the nineteenth century objected to this very sense of possibility, which they feared led to a devaluation of art and a loss of power for the (supposedly more knowing and benevolent) upper classes. The Illinois toughness and bluntness that was celebrated by twentieth-century writers was witnessed with fear and contempt by many from the East Coast and Europe. The democratic experiment that seemed to be playing out in Illinois was seen as a fearful error—the demise of the old world and the rise of the modern.

One of the ways Illinois' democratic tendencies

were expressed was through architectural innovation. These new buildings that were to be "for the people" were generally greeted with establishment amusement and, in some cases, dismay. The innovations of the Chicago School of architects, who moved from the ornate styles into a simpler "prairie style" that meshed with the flatness, and who developed ambitious skyscrapers, were initially viewed with scorn. The buildings, so obvious in their strangeness of idea, also drew artists and followers who believed that Chicago would become "the New Athens." Frank Lloyd Wright claimed that "the greatest and most nearly beautiful city of our young nation is probably Chicago. Eventually I think that Chicago will be the most beautiful great city left in the modern world." *Left*, he said, meaning that the world was in decline and that the Windy City held the promise of some shining future. He wasn't the only one who felt that way in those early years of the twentieth century. Chicago had money to spend, and the more progressive thinkers and doers believed that the money (often ill-gotten through industry and worker abuse) should be spent toward the goal of "beauty and goodness." Chicagoans liked their arts to be purposeful, to enclose people and add to the well-being of individuals, who were not patrons, but who existed as a part of and within the art itself. Art should be simple in idea and form, not ostentatious and ornamental—some might even call it naive. It was to be unbound from eastern provincialism and long-entrenched wealthy patrons. It was to be less tired, more vibrant, no longer cynical. A building should not only be looked at, but lived in. Art was to be (according to the dream) a part of everyday life, not only "appreciated" by a single class, but a part of what Wright called "the living city." Other versions of Wright's prairie style are found all over Illinois, existing as a part of their environment.

Illinois is full of artists, and the artists that continue to be identified with the state are the populists. There may well be better ones, but these are the people whose work gets put in the anthologies and called: Chicago, or called: Midwestern Town. Studs Terkel, archetypical old-school Chicago, interviews working guys and gals at the bar, transcribes their stories, is obstinately D(d)emocratic. Who else?: Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*. "General William Booth Enters into Heaven" ("Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?")—Vachel Lindsay. Richard Wright (*Native Son*). Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*). Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*). Ernest Hemingway (yes, he started in Illinois). Upton Sinclair (slaughterhouse jungles). Edna Ferber (*Showboat*; *Giant*). Ben Hecht (*The Front Page*). Carl Sandburg ("city of big shoulders"). Harriet Monroe (founder of *Poetry*, the most important literary magazine of the early twentieth

eth century). Langston Hughes (“a raisin in the sun”). And moving near contemporary, Saul Bellow, Ray Bradbury, Gwendolyn Brooks, William Maxwell, John Gardner. Is this enough?—there are plenty of others. For years, Illinois writing was characterized by a merging of social and even journalistic concerns with a populist, talkin’-to-ya, here’s-the-straight-stuff approach.

And who is coming next? I can give you that list, but it would be too long, and I would surely leave out people who ought to be there. Contemporary Illinois art, as far as I can tell, has no defining characteristic other than quality. Writers are working in all modes, perspectives, cross-media, and cross-perspectives. Experimentalists and traditionalists coexist, and no type seems to be predominant. The artistic trends and schools of thought tend to be characterized more in terms of universities (and their faculty and students) than around an “Illinois type” or a “Chicago school.”

I edited an anthology of contemporary midwestern creative nonfiction (*In the Middle of the Middle West*, 2003) and in this book, place was seen as important by the writers—even obsessively so, and even if its importance was fought against. The geography of Illinois was of fascination to several writers; most remarked upon the beauty of its flatness. Others wrote about Lake Michigan as a mystical body of water; several, about the Chicago “els,” the elevated trains; others, about the prejudice that they faced because they were gay or African American (again giving lie to the idea of Illinois as an equality-conscious “Land of Lincoln”). The form of these pieces ranged from the traditional essay to a fragmentary prose that was nearly poetry. So perhaps it would not be a stretch to assert that Illinois writers continue to be strongly aware of place as a context and as a point of impact. Many of the writers seemed at odds with this place, or in a state of mourning or anger; but at every turn, place was acknowledged as important, even life-defining. A regret at the quick changes in place identity came up again and again. And there was a recognition that the sense of opportunity and openness that once existed was coming to an end.

The state is in transition: The work of artists of Illinois now lack firm definition as the state’s populist characteristics fade into scattered national trends. All of us are classed less by locale than by movement, given that we are united by transportation and the suburbanization of life. The artistic communities are dominated by universities of expatriates, not original Illinoisans. And the decline of place-identity in the arts may reflect the state of the United States, making the question “What is Illinois?” irrelevant. Chicago still insists that it is a place uniquely of the people, and it still has a tough, muscular quality that makes it

different from the provincialism and pretension of New York, or the laid-back-party of L.A., or the southern strip-mall decorum of Atlanta. Chicago still has Wrigley Field; Chicago still has Cubs fans, loyal though the Cubs never win. People still play the blues, and sometimes the innovators transmute that into punkish rock. There may still be some Studs or Sandburg types out there, along with those who are coming up with another kind of vibrant and insistent music reflecting the next step of the cultural-industrial North-South blend.

Everything is changing. The farms are being sold, one after another. (And we haven’t been proud of agriculture here for a while. Unlike Iowa, Illinois has not embraced its farming roots—if anything, it seems embarrassed by them, even while the farms remain an essential part of the Illinois economy). The suburbs are sprawling farther and farther, small towns are linked by highways and malls and blending into the middle-sized cities, industry giving way to smaller parts, people taking jobs behind counters and desks. Neighborhoods and towns struggle to hold on to ethnic identity through advertising and tourist displays, but this is beginning to look like historical nostalgia as the lines blend and the children leave and marry outside state lines. For a state so identified by physical labor—be it in fields or in factories—the changes will be cellular. Big shoulders are no longer necessary.

I am sure, though, that we will always have the blues of the city or the country—everyone has the blues. There will always be unrecorded upstarts in the bars, playing their guitars and chanting their poems. And, for good or evil, we will always have politics, as the quick heartbeat of power goes on. And I like to believe we’ll always have in Illinois this idealistic populism, because believers breed believers, and working people will always be here, and the good guys do not always have to win as long as they play good ball and we’re hanging out with our friends. This is an understanding that so permeates the state that I can’t imagine it disappearing. But then, I’m a native Illinoisan, and we are prone to our illusions.

Becky Bradway
Normal, Illinois

Indiana

“Breathes there not a man, with soul so dead, who never to himself has said, this is my own, my native land.” This famous celebration of no-brainer patriotism by the Scotsman Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), when stripped of jingoistic romance, amounts only to this: Human beings come into the world, for their

own good, as instinctively territorial as timber wolves or honeybees. Not long ago, human beings who strayed too far from their birthplace and relatives, like all other animals, would be committing suicide.

This dread of crossing well-understood geographical boundaries still makes sense in many parts of the world—in what used to be Yugoslavia in Europe, for example, or Rwanda in Africa. It is, however, now excess instinctual baggage in most of North America, thank God, thank God. It lives on in this country, as obsolescent survival instincts often do, as feelings and manners which are by-and-large harmless, and which can even be comical.

Thus do I and millions like me tell strangers that we are Middle Westerners, as though we deserved some kind of medal for being that. All I can say in our defense is that natives of Texas and Brooklyn are even more preposterous in their territorial vanity.

Nearly countless movies about Texas and Brooklynites are lessons for such people in how to behave ever more stereotypically. Why have there been no movies about supposedly typical Middle Western heroes, models to which we too might conform?

All I've got now is an aggressively nasal accent.

About that accent: When I was in the Army during World War II, a white southerner said to me, "Do you have to talk that way?"

I might have replied: "Oh yeah? At least my ancestors never owned slaves," but the rifle range at Fort Bragg, N.C. seemed neither the time nor the place to settle his hash.

I might have added that some of the greatest words ever spoken in American history were uttered with such a Jew's-harp twang, including the Gettysburg address by Abraham Lincoln of Illinois and these by Eugene V. Debs of Terre Haute, Ind.: "As long as there is a lower class I am in it, as long as there is a criminal element I am of it, as long as there is a soul in prison I am not free."

I would have kept to myself that the borders of Indiana, when I was a boy, cradled not only the birthplace of Eugene V. Debs, but the national headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan.

Illinois had Carl Sandburg and Al Capone.

Yes, and the thing on top of the house to keep the weather out is the ruff, and the stream in back of the house is the crick.

Every race, sub-race, and blend thereof is native to the Midwest. I myself am a purebred Kraut. Our accents are by no means uniform. My twang is only fairly typical of European-Americans raised some distance north of the former Confederate States of America. It appeared to me when I began this essay that I was on a fool's errand, that we could only be described en masse as what we weren't. We weren't Tex-

ans or Brooklynites or Californians or southerners, and so on.

To demonstrate to myself the folly of distinguishing us, one-by-one, from Americans born anywhere else, I imagined a crowd on Fifth Avenue in New York City, where I am living now, and another crowd on State Street, in Chicago, where I went to a university and worked as a reporter half a century ago. I was not mistaken about the sameness of the faces and clothing and apparent moods.

But the more I pondered the people of Chicago, the more aware I became of an enormous presence there. It was almost like music, music unheard in New York or Boston or San Francisco or New Orleans.

It was Lake Michigan, an ocean of pure water, the most precious substance in all this world.

Nowhere else in the Northern Hemisphere are there tremendous bodies of pure water like our Great Lakes, save for Asia, where there is only Lake Baikal. So there is something distinctive about all native Middle Westerners after all. Get this: When we were born, there had to have been incredible quantities of fresh water all around us, in lakes and streams and rivers and raindrops and snowdrift, and no undrinkable salt water anywhere!

Even my taste buds are midwestern on that account. When I swim in the Atlantic or Pacific, the water tastes all wrong to me, even though it is in fact no more nauseating, as long as you don't swallow it, than chicken soup.

There were also millions and millions of acres of topsoil all around us and our mothers when we were born, as flat as pool tables and as rich as chocolate cake.

When I was born in 1922, barely a hundred years after Indiana became the 19th state in the Union, the Midwest already boasted a constellation of cities with symphony orchestras and museums and libraries, and institutions of higher learning, and schools of music and art, reminiscent of the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the First World War. One could almost say that Chicago was our Vienna, Indianapolis our Prague, Cincinnati our Budapest, and Cleveland our Bucharest.

To grow up in such a city, as I did, was to find cultural institutions as ordinary as police stations or fire houses. So it was reasonable for a young person to daydream of becoming some sort of artist or intellectual, if not a policeman or a fireman. So I did. So did many like me.

Such provincial capitals, which is what they would have been called in Europe, were charmingly self-sufficient with respect to the fine arts. We sometimes had the director of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra to supper, or writers and painters, and architects like my father, of local renown.

I studied clarinet under the first chair clarinetist of our orchestra. I remember the orchestra's performance of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, in which the cannons' roars were supplied by a policeman firing blank cartridges into any empty garbage can. I knew the policeman. He sometimes guarded street crossings used by students on their way to or from School 43, my school, the James Whitcomb Riley School.

It is unsurprising, then, that the Midwest has produced so many artists of such different sorts, from world-class to merely competent, as provincial cities and towns in Europe used to do.

I see no reason this satisfactory state of affairs should not go on and on, unless funding for instruction in and celebration of the arts, especially in public school systems, is withdrawn.

Participation in an art is not simply one of many possible ways to make a living as we approach the year 2000. Participation in an art, at bottom, has nothing to do with earning money. Participation in an art, although unrewarded by wealth or fame, and as the Midwest has encouraged so many of its young to discover for themselves, is a way to make one's soul grow.

No artist from anywhere, not even Shakespeare, not even Beethoven, not even James Whitcomb Riley, has changed the course of so many lives all over the planet as have four hayseeds in Ohio—two in Dayton and two in Akron. How I wish Dayton and Akron were in Indiana! Ohio could have Kokomo and Gary.

Orville and Wilbur Wright were in Dayton in 1903 when they invented the airplane.

Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith and William Griffith Wilson were in Akron in 1935 when they devised the 12 steps to sobriety of Alcoholics Anonymous. By comparison with Smith and Wilson, Sigmund Freud was a piker when it came to healing dysfunctional minds and lives.

Beat that! Let the rest of the world put that in their pipes and smoke it, not to mention the works of Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, and Toni Morrison; Cole Porter and Hoagy Carmichael; Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan; Twyla Tharp and Bob Fosse; Mike Nichols and Elaine May.

And Larry Bird!

New York and Boston and other ports on the Atlantic have Europe for an influential and importunate neighbor. Midwesterners do not. Many of us of European ancestry are on that account ignorant of our families' past in the Old World and the culture there. Our only heritage is American. When Germans captured me during the Second World War, one asked me, "Why are you making war against your brothers?" I didn't have a clue what he was talking about . . .

Anglo Americans and African Americans, whose ancestors came to the Midwest from the South, com-

monly have a much more compelling awareness of a homeland elsewhere in the past than do I—in Dixie, of course, not the British Isles or Africa.

What geography can give all Middle Westerners, along with the fresh water and topsoil, if they let it, is awe for an Edenic continent stretching forever in all directions.

Makes you religious. Takes your breath away.

Kurt Vonnegut
New York, New York

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Iowa

When I was young, I thought Iowa went on forever. I had never been to Texas, but I could not imagine any state larger, roomier, more full of sky, than Iowa. Living in Ames, whose surrounding landscape varied from pancake-flat to gently rolling farmland, our little family—widowed mother, my sister, and I—rarely ventured into other terrain. On our summer vacation, when we drove straight north through Iowa to a Minnesota lake, the Iowa cornfields on either side of the bullet-straight highway seemed very much like the cornfields around Ames.

In those years, Iowa's narrow highways had curving concrete curbs on each side. (Were they meant to discourage us from veering off the road and disappearing into one of those endless cornfields?) Since my mother hated those curbs—as well as high speeds, big trucks, and the dangers of passing—we seldom ventured onto those highways just for fun. We did sometimes drive thirty miles south to Des Moines for shopping or a basketball tournament, or north to Osage to an uncle's farm, and once, unusually, on an overnight trip east to the hilly Amana Colonies. But Iowa seemed mostly the same: open land, tidy towns dwarfed by the fields, occasional patches of woods and windbreaks, more open land. On and on and on.

And yet, even as a child, I think I knew that Iowa was not always quite what it seemed. Just fifteen miles west of Ames, the level fields suddenly disappeared at the Ledges State Park, where sandstone bluffs towered almost a hundred feet above a creek that wound past thickly wooded slopes. Nearby, the Des Moines River sometimes rose in flood; a marker in the park showed how alarmingly high this flood could reach. Grown-ups told us children garbled versions of Indian myths, usually involving lovelorn maidens or braves who had drowned or who had tragically leaped to their deaths

from one of the highest bluffs. A picnic at the Ledges was an excursion into another, wilder world, of flowing water, dusky groves, and long-ago romance.

I did wish Iowa had an ocean. Although Ames was quite proud of its campus centerpiece, a human-made pond hopefully christened Lake La Verne, it was mud-dily murky. I was also dimly aware of two largely ignored, fast-moving streams that snaked through town, but I could sense no mystery in either Squaw Creek or Skunk River. Unlike a watery map of Minnesota, which I studied on our summer car trips, I could only find on the Iowa map a few random, depressingly small blue dots. To my dreamer's eye, the map looked unappealingly monotonous, hundreds of tiny squares divided by blue-and-red lines, accented with endless tiny settlements.

Yet here again Iowa could surprise me. Far from Ames, Iowa did have three lakes, close to the Minnesota border: Spirit Lake, Clear Lake, and Okoboji. (Of the handful on the Iowa map, these were the only three I ever saw.) I never paused long there, just hours on an overnight family reunion, or a dawn-to-dark adventure with high-school friends, or an occasional side excursion as our family headed toward Minnesota. The shores of these shining lakes were lined with vacation cabins, often only yards apart, whose beckoning docks led out into unknown water. I could envision the excitement of staying for days, even a week or more, in one of those cabins, with an unfamiliar, wave-tossed lake at my doorstep, surrounded by fascinating people I'd never met. People who lived right next to the water had to be more glamorous than the other Iowans I knew.

Even now, when I have lived many years in Minneapolis, only minutes from a sizable lake, if I say to myself, "Okoboji," I can still feel a buried tremor of excitement. Okoboji whispers of an imaginative child's fantasies: swimming all afternoon under a blazing blue sky, roasting hot-dogs on the shore at dusk, rowing out on a lake gleaming in the moonlight. Part of Okoboji's charm is its name. For a state that some outsiders, rushing across on the interstate, consider repetitively dull—what Iowan hasn't heard those uninformed comments?—its place names reveal quite a different spirit.

When I first plunged as a teenager into the passionate poems of Stephen Vincent Benét, still widely reprinted in the 1950s, I instantly took to my heart his ballad "American Names." "I have fallen in love with American names, /" he writes, "The sharp names that never get fat, / The snakeskin-titles of mining claims, / The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat, / Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat." Benét would have loved Iowa's names. I grew up with those fragments of unintended poetry, taking them for granted,

but still absorbing their evocative, often strangely moving voices. Now I can sense how many of those names, counties, cities, towns, and even streets, sing of Iowa's complex heritage. Long after the first Iowans were chased from their ancestral lands, their voices still echo across the state: Pottawattamie, Poweshiek, Winnebago, Winneshiek, Pocahontas, Tama, Maquoketa, Cherokee, Keokuk, Hiawatha, Keosauqua, Osage, Sac City, Sioux City, and, of course, Iowa itself.

In time I also became sensible of the many European ethnic groups who had come to Iowa, settled here, and left their names behind them. After high-school French, I could translate the meaning of "Des Moines," feeling a little embarrassed that I pronounced it, as Iowans do, with a flat nasal twang that firmly eliminates anything French about it. (Iowans do a little better with Dubuque and Fayette.) I knew that Madrid, a settlement west of Ames with a definitively heavy accent on its first syllable, was a relative—a very distant country cousin—of a great city in Spain. I could also faintly hear a certain far-off homesickness in names like Norway, Wales, Guttenberg, Batavia, Schleswig, Westphalia, Macedonia, Montezuma, Panama, and Tripoli.

But the Iowa names I have always liked best are homegrown. Many are plain and no-nonsense: Beaver, Hawkeye, Marsh, Wood, Rock Rapids, Deep River, Red Oak, Clearfield, Eagle Grove. Some are openly patriotic, like Independence and Liberty Center, or a little puzzling, like Diagonal and Gravity, or happily eccentric, like What Cheer. Who can't hear a touch of melancholy in the naming of Lone Tree or Lost Nation? Who wouldn't want to live in a town called Mapleleaf, Morning Sun, Pleasant Valley, Rose Hill, or Strawberry Point? Who could fail to warm to a state boasting two little towns, almost next to each other, called Edna and George?

Perhaps like many others who only learn to appreciate a place after leaving it, I began to recognize my deep-rooted affection for Iowa when I went away for college. Northampton, Massachusetts, was an attractive spot, with spreading old trees arching over its historic streets. But the East seemed crowded. Northampton blended into one outlying town, then another. It was hard to tell where towns stopped and country began. Growing up, I had understood, without thinking much about it, that I lived very close to an infinite horizon. If I wanted to, I could soon find myself alone under a wide sky. I missed knowing that.

During my college years, my mother remarried, and Buell, my new stepfather, loved to drive. When I was home on holidays, Buell and my mother often took me with them on their frequent leisurely tours around the countryside. Years before William Least Heat Moon, my stepfather relished the subtle revela-

tions of blue highways. “Buell wants to drive every single road in Story County,” my mother told me once, and several excursions later, I began to grasp how many different back roads one Iowa county could pack into a few dozen square miles.

Buell taught me to see Iowa with a sharper, more focused lens. He often drove without a plan, maybe heading ten miles in one direction and then turning in another. Only twenty minutes out of Ames, we might find ourselves in a wooded dip, not quite a valley, with an abandoned farm sheltered behind trees at the end of a long rutted lane. I wondered why I had never before discovered this secluded gravel road next to a shadowed gurgling creek, a place inconceivably remote from Ames’s busy streets.

On these meandering trips, we were alert. We looked for round barns, octagonal barns, and crumbling old barns with massive stone foundations. My mother called out if she saw a barn whose once-bright red had faded to an especially luminous glow. We rolled slowly through small towns, remarking on the clean white lines of old church steeples, ornately decorated banks, grandiose funeral homes, and main-street cafes with homey names like Cozy Nook, Vi’s Diner, Sally’s Snack Shop, or, succinctly, just Eats. On those unhurried, long afternoons, I learned to pay attention to monumental grain elevators, mellow brick schoolhouses, weathered houses with turrets and rambling porches, leafy avenues hushed by summer heat, and wildly colorful backyard gardens overflowing with hollyhock, zinnias, nasturtiums, petunias, and snapdragons.

I am still exploring Iowa. When my husband James and I drive back to our Minneapolis home from Ames, we sometimes take longer, slower routes just so we can see more. On book promotions, I have been able to investigate parts of the state I hadn’t seen before. And Iowa still surprises me. In Davenport, which I’d thought of as a roistering river town linked eastward to the markets of Chicago, I was startled to find hominy and grits on a menu. Then I remembered that Davenport was not far from Missouri, which in turn leads into the Deep South. Recently James and I drove east from Ames to the Mississippi, then north along the river until Iowa ended. So Iowa is flat? Or landlocked? Certainly not here. As we swerved and curved through deep valleys and along panoramic ridges, I realized why Grant Wood’s paintings show such seductively undulating hills. Standing high above the great river on Pike’s Peak, with its magnificent miles-long vista of water, diverging channels, islands, tributaries, and cliffs, I could easily convince myself I was looking over a foreign country.

Perhaps because I live today in Minneapolis, on my wanderings around Iowa I seldom seek out cities. I

have enough of cities. That is not how I felt when I was young. Growing up, I was almost sleepless with pulsing anticipation on the nights before an outing to Des Moines—home of fabled Younkers Department Store, with its moving escalator and classy Tea Room; an Art Center where I am almost sure I was once awed by a world-famous painting of Whistler’s mother; a giant indoor arena that sometimes showcased plays guaranteed straight from Broadway. I also knew Iowa had brand-name businesses, though I probably only could have named Quaker Oats in Cedar Rapids, Maytag in Newton, and *Better Homes and Gardens* in Des Moines.

Now twenty-first-century Iowa, far from being a strictly agricultural economy, prospers with varied industries. From Sioux City to Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs to Waterloo, Davenport to Dubuque, Iowa’s cities (not to mention its many college and university towns) offer cultural and historic attractions far richer than those of fifty years ago. (Even then, Iowans revered Iowa City, home of the University of Iowa, as a haven of the arts. After all, that was where creative writers came from all over America to study at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop.) Yet what I appreciate most about those cities is that they still do not gobble up all of Iowa’s fields and sky.

Many people mourn that our world is increasingly crowded. Fortunately, it is possible to forget that in Iowa. Sometimes James and I stop our car on a deserted back road in Iowa’s level center. On a clear day, we try to calculate how many immeasurable miles we can see in all directions. We point out to each other the widely scattered but ubiquitous farms—houses, silos, barns—that look like tiny Monopoly markers on a giant square board. Or we may count the water towers on the horizon, signs of towns once connected only by horseback. They are still too far apart for anyone to walk comfortably from one to another. But the farmhouses and towns are plainly visible. Shelter, houses, churches, stores are never too far away. Iowa’s distances are seldom lonely.

Who exactly are the Iowans who live in these farmhouses, small towns, or larger cities? I have never been able to come up with an encompassing answer. When I meet someone from Iowa, and I explain that I’m “from Ames”—a suggestive phrase, as if I were extended on a long invisible cord from the town where I was born—we usually nod, smile knowledgeably at each other, and act as if we somehow shared a secret handshake. “So you’re from Belmond? Of course I know where that is,” I say confidently. I’m an Iowan, after all. I’ve heard of Monona, Grundy Center, Harlan, and Charles City. I am conscious that Lamoni is pronounced with a long “i.” Mention Oskaloosa, and after I exclaim, “Well, no kidding, I’m from Ames,” I

might even burst into the old Central Iowa Conference Fight Song: “I don’t care ’bout the fame of old Marshalltown, or the feats of Oskie High / And Grinnell is the team that we love to beat / And the same goes for old Boone High, RAH RAH RAH.”

The important word about that handshake is “secret.” Iowans recognize that nobody outside the state is mindful of them. Because Iowa is so often overlooked—quite literally, as jumbo jets soar overhead, seldom stopping, from New York or Boston to Houston or Los Angeles—it is a state that almost seems like a private enclave. Visitors who pause briefly, perhaps for a sales trip, a convention, or sudden car repair, and who then stay long enough to poke around, usually find themselves unsettled. Things they don’t expect happen here. Who could have foreseen, in a state alleged to be boringly flat, Iowa’s many unusual caves? Dancehall Cave at Maquoketa Cave Park? Crystal Lake Cave near Dubuque? Or eerie Spook Cave, reachable only by boat through a none-too-large hole in a limestone bluff?

How, puzzled visitors might ask themselves, can a stick-in-the-mud state have produced the Winnebago, a national symbol of America’s incurable restlessness? If Iowa is indeed tame, why is one of its parks called Wildcat Den? How can supposedly staid Iowans patronize riverboat gambling? (It floats and flourishes at Council Bluffs, Sioux City, Fort Madison, Dubuque, Marquette, Bettendorf, Osceola, Clinton, and Davenport.) Who could have predicted the emergence of Maharishi University, which has almost taken over the otherwise unremarkable town of Fairfield? Do the maharishi’s acolytes really levitate, rising in meditative tranquility from the soil of southern Iowa?

Once anyone looks hard at Iowa, it begins to shimmer with possibilities, rather like the enigmatic cornfields in *Field of Dreams*. Here’s an intriguing experiment. Try standing alone, sometime after the middle of July, in front of a long row of sky-high corn. (Find a field large enough to feel as if it might swallow you up.) Stare down this darkening tunnel until all you can see is a disappearing arch of green. If you stare long and hard enough, after a while your vision may blur a little. The row of corn might seem to move, or change, or murmur. You don’t even have to wait until dusk. The rustle of leaves, the endless rows, the rippling swells, will all be magic enough. Like Kevin Costner in that quintessentially romantic Iowa movie of 1989, you might then be quite ready to see the fluttering green curtain part and a team of legendary, long-dead baseball players emerge one by one.

Iowans don’t usually consider themselves as romantics—which suggests they may not know as much about Iowans as they think. Consider, for example, not

only *Field of Dreams*, but also Meredith Willson’s joyous *The Music Man*, inspired by Mason City, or Robert James Waller’s heartstring-plucker of a novel, then a movie, *The Bridges of Madison County*. The Little Brown Church in the Vale, enshrined in one of America’s oldest sentimental ballads—“Come to the church by the wildwood, / Oh, come to the church in the vale”—remains a hallowed site near Nashua.

Instead of seeing themselves as dreamers or visionaries, Iowans like to pretend that they are hard-headed, practical folk. We don’t put up with foolishness. We have no time for nonsense. We have a knack, even if we don’t always practice it, for keeping things simple. All Iowans like bargains, we joke to each other. We love corn on the cob, chocolate milk, ribs, baked potatoes, lemon meringue pie, fat juicy pork chops. We have faith in high-school basketball tournaments, marching bands, potluck suppers, and Fourth of July parades. Mostly, we would agree, we share what it is like to live somewhere quiet, to enjoy plenty of space, to breathe clean air, to look up at millions of stars at night because artificial lights don’t drown them.

But some Iowans aren’t like that at all. Since I grew up in a college town, I could see that Iowans came in all sorts. Across our street, Henry Dunnnett, a sharp-tongued agricultural economist, was a sober elder in the Presbyterian Church. He was quite different from gentle Aaron Holst, just down the block, a sophisticated nuclear physicist from New York who was also a fine pianist. Those who didn’t work at the college were quite different from one another, too. Our unpretentious next-door neighbor, who sold Oldsmobiles, was warm and affable; another neighbor, a prominent dentist, lived in a big house on a hill and kept very much to himself. I couldn’t have picked which was the typical Iowan.

Although the classic stereotype of Iowans is probably Grant Wood’s satiric painting *American Gothic*, I have never been convinced by that stern, rigid farmer and his humorless wife. My Uncle Bill, who farmed near Osage, was genial, generous, and intensely involved in liberal politics, and his wife, my Aunt Grace, was a dynamo of energy. When I worked as a summer replacement at the Ames newspaper, I often consulted with our county agricultural agent, a ginger-haired man whose frequent jokes and stories livened up our little newsroom. If the rural Iowans I interviewed for the Ames *Daily Tribune*’s Farm Page were sometimes economical with words, they were almost always open, friendly, and helpful. I didn’t know Grant Wood’s farmers.

So who are typical Iowans? Statistics, which I never entirely trust, could supply endless data about percentages of rural and urban population, ethnic groups, Republicans and Democrats, Catholics and Presbyter-

rians, college degrees, size of families, and much more. But I find it more illuminating to ponder the list compiled by Iowa's largest newspaper, the *Des Moines Register*; of Famous Iowans. The list includes both those born in Iowa, even if they only lived in the state a few years, and those who came to stay long enough to become firmly identified as Iowans. And what a list it is! Try forming a composite of Glenn Miller (born in Clarinda), the Ringling Brothers (who spent twelve years in McGregor), John Wayne (born in Winterset), and legendary labor leader John L. Lewis (an Iowan for six years). Orville and Wilbur Wright lived in Iowa for three years as boys; Herbert Hoover's birthplace was West Branch; opera star Sherrill Milnes attended Drake University in Des Moines.

Add Tennessee Williams, who qualifies because he claimed his time at the University of Iowa changed his name (from Tom to Tennessee) and life. Stir in George Gallup, who grew up in Jefferson and who popularized opinion polls. Think of Ronald Reagan, who entered the entertainment world as a sports broadcaster in Davenport and Des Moines. He probably knew other Hollywood stars of yesteryear from Iowa: Donna Reed, Don Ameche, Neva Patterson, Marilyn Maxwell, Don DeFore.

The once-chic designer Halston, actually Roy Halston Frowick, lived in Des Moines briefly as a child. He makes the list because at age two, he was named "healthiest city boy" at the Iowa State Fair. Think of Halston next to Wyatt Earp, who grew up in Pella, and Bix Beiderbecke, the celebrated cornet player of the 1920s, from Davenport. Amelia Bloomer, a feminist whose name became attached to a new-fangled female garment, lived for years in Council Bluffs, and Amelia Earhart attended high school in Iowa.

But for me, the quintessential Iowans may be the Duesenberg brothers. Frederick and August Duesenberg—whose German background suggests the variety of Iowa's cultures—built their first car in 1904–1905 in Des Moines. The sleek Duesenberg, which became a fabulous success, symbolized luxury and class. According to the *Des Moines Register*, the word turned into American shorthand for anything that was special or extraordinary: hence "Duesie," then "doozie."

That's my Iowa. A doozie of a state, Iowa is deceptively unassuming. Any time someone starts to label it, the reverse pops up. Rural? Not exactly. Conservative? That depends. Flat? Look more closely. Dull? Picture Glenn Miller linking arms with Wyatt Earp, Amelia Bloomer with Ronald Reagan, Herbert Hoover with the Ringling Brothers. Now there's a circus.

Susan Allen Toth
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Kansas

Kansas is in that great middle part of the United States that many people call "flyover country." Flown over, or traversed at night by car, Kansas is rarely seen, except by its own inhabitants, as the place it actually is. Like so many midwestern states, Kansas is an abstraction. Abstractions invite and support stereotypes, as in the humor of an October 3, 1994, *New Yorker* cartoon in which *all* the states between Manhattan and L.A. are labeled Mudville, as though all were nothing but a great expanse of dirt, of agriculture, of cows and chickens and pigs, of mud. Nothing much happens here, except that Casey strikes out.

The places we don't know live only in story, joke, one-liner, phrase; they often come to represent anything but what they really are. Think of the constant misuse of geographic words like *prairie* and *plains*. (Prairie: tall grass, generally east of the hundredth meridian, more than twenty inches of rainfall; Plains: short grass, generally west of the hundredth meridian, less than twenty inches of rainfall.) In any TV map of the United States, or any national news report, Kansas might be part of the "Midwest," the "West," the "Middle West," or the "Western States." In fact, Kansas contains both the geographic center of the United States (before Alaska and Hawaii) and the geodetic center of the United States. Kansas is even at the center of the North American continent, so surely its location shouldn't be so hard to fathom: As the center, it is central.

Though central on the map, Kansas is not central in the popular mind or the popular culture: Kansas is the Timbuktu of the United States, its farthest reach, its unlikely destination, its metaphor for obscurity. Kansas is the place name of choice when Hollywood wants to make a point about flyover country. In *Diamonds Are Forever* (James Bond), evil terrorists steal a weapon of mass destruction, and want to zap the world in order to show their power and capacity for violence. One points out to the group that the orbit of the space weapon will soon put it over Kansas. "If we zap Kansas," a terrorist quips, "the world wouldn't learn about it for a year."

In *Twice Bitten*, an old vampiress needs virgin blood. Her young captives, male and female, have just spoiled her plans by having sex. She laments the scarcity of virgins, and her servant takes her hand to comfort her: "Don't worry, there are others. In places like . . . Kansas."

In these images, the popular culture leaps between two abstractions. The first: Kansas is obscure, desolate, and forgotten. Second: Kansas represents an innocent past when stern and virginal people read their Bibles, and, as L. Frank Baum wrote of Dorothy's Uncle Henry, "did not know what joy was."