

## Time Trip Into the American Heartland

*Day 5- Vicki is still laughing.*

Without being able to see Carol who is still pumping out her home, we left Sheboygan today to keep to schedule and headed down Wisconsin blue highways into beautiful Illinois farm land. We are finding that using blue highways sometimes means difficult map reading and wrong turns as today until we bobbed and weaved over to a straight-shot road that took us south.

I spent the first two years of high school in the small Illinois town of Rantoul when my father was transferred to nearby Chanute Air Force Base. After four years overseas at air bases in the Azores and Morocco, and a European tour on the way home, small-town Illinois amounted to re-entry shock for me. Our family had also spent three years in Brazil and Puerto Rico when I was a young child, and most of our stateside time in and around buzz-hive Washington, DC. Though I was only beginning to understand it as a high school freshman when arriving at Rantoul Township High School, I had had the tremendous advantage of having grown up in foreign cultures and hearing the hubbub of the nation's capital. Landing in the midst of the flat Illinois prairie corn belt, I'm sure I bore something of an attitude at what I took to be yesteryear rural provincialism. How lackluster I thought: only one language, one religion, one cuisine, no world-view.

Seventeen years after leaving Illinois, I flew back into the very same prairie county as a young United Nations officer on a visit to the University of Illinois near Rantoul and saw my teenage time here in the different light of wholesome American heartland experience, which had begun to let me at age fourteen see my own nation in its astounding variety of peoples, places, heritages and ways of life. Having benefitted from just that same breadth of experience overseas, it took me a while to appreciate the extensiveness of it in my own country. As barely a teen, I mistook the Midwest villages, the winter basketball games in small gyms across the flatter-than-flat plains, scrubbed well-behaved farm kids, the nicest all-American teenage girlfriend, corn to the horizon, and those long unswerving gravel farm roads as a kind of unsophisticated outback. Today rolling southward into Illinois, it was that later step-back view that came as a young adult of the state as its own important part of the American mosaic that held my mind, and what would be an early example on this trip of some of what I was looking for and wanting to interpret in the vast medley called America. Today, once more, I saw Illinois fondly through appreciative eyes.

This afternoon, Vicki again worked her magic and found us an exceptionally nice campground far off the beaten track near the village of Secor, Illinois. Hickory Hill Campground, named for just that, is nestled in beneath a broad high canopy of stately old-growth hickories.

I'm writing today's entry on my iPad by the light of a full moon at our site's picnic table out in the American heartland at the lower lip of the great rising prairie to come as we meander westward. With crickets in the trees sounding for mates, pet cats out strolling on their evening grounds inspections, a hoot owl commending the soft night, the peaceful Hickory Hill Campground is a time trip enchantingly evocative of my prairie boyhood here.

Hickory Hill is a large, very peaceful campground with many permanent residents, a lifestyle hidden to most Americans. For several decades now, rural America has been the destination of nearly all of the nation's manufactured homes, which are far less expensive to build than traditional one-off custom homes or developer cookie-cutters seen in urban areas, suburbs and towns above a certain size. Manufactured homes usually come in the form of "double-wides" in which lengthwise halves of a home are trucked separately from factory to home site, dropped on a pad, fastened together right down the middle ridge, and hooked up to utilities. Many rely on their own wells and septic systems. Though both double-wides and single-wides are often called mobile homes, they are almost always mobile only once.

One step more economical than the manufactured single-wide is the old-fashioned towable trailer, invariably the maximum eight-foot width permissible on US highways and up to sixty

feet long, the longest permissible highway length. Thus at the largest an occupant lives on a 480-square-foot footprint with about 400 square feet of interior living space or a little more with built-on additions. Double-wides and single-wides get hauled in on flat-bed trailers, which take their wheels with them after the drop, but trailers retain theirs. Trailer park occupants around the country are mostly empty-nesters and retirees on modest incomes, live in close quarters to one another and take pride in their well kept postage-stamp yards, plantings and gardens. Most pull in, hook up once and settle in for the duration. There is the occasional sleazy trailer park, though probably not nearly as prevalent as dodgy urban neighborhoods, and nothing like urban development's high-rise housing projects. Some trailer parks cater to families raising children where there is an active late-afternoon scene of school busses, bikes and trikes, and young voices. The actress Hilary Swank grew up in a trailer park in Bellingham, Washington.

Because of land costs, there are few trailer parks in urban areas. One usually has to get well beyond the suburbs to begin finding them and, even then, needs to know where to look. Hickory Hill Campground is a good example, tucked off in its large quiet grove surrounded by Illinois farm land a mile or two from the nearest village, Secor, population 373, not even large enough to be listed in the index of our road atlas. Most of this campground caters to vacationers and tourists in their RVs, but off in opposite corners of the large property are permanent residents in their permanent trailers in permanent well-tended communities. A decent used trailer can be had for a price in the low five figures, a fixer-upper for less. For low-income people, or the high proportion of oldsters whose only income is Social Security, a tidy trailer in a well kept trailer park offers a comfortable way of life superior in most cases to their other options and to what is endured by the urban poor. Here at Hickory Hill, the permanent residents live under a beautiful tended bower of giant hickories that urban poor can only dream of. Many permanent trailer dwellers cannot afford to buy, so rent the trailers where they live.

Walking through Hickory Hill's two settler corners on this soft evening, we encounter only a few older than middle aged or elderly. By their very presence here, the Hickory Hill oldsters have proven their foresight by planning and providing for old age with limited income. Without a generation's slippage of the middle class and poor, some fair proportion of the permanent residents here and in other trailer parks would have instead made it to secure pensions and home ownership, but maybe not the magnificent crown of old hickories here.