# THE IOWA CITY DIMENSION

by
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The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa

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Laurence Lafore, professor of history at The University of Iowa, offered some perspectives on Iowa and Iowa City in an article he wrote in 1971 that even today provides some insights into the state and the community. Following is an introduction to the article, "In the Sticks," by Professor Lafore, which was originally published by *Harper's*.

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The piece that follows was written twelve years or more ago, and both Iowa, and my feelings about it, have of course changed during those years. But, I have decided on reflection, they have changed remarkably little.

For example, when I was writing, Iowa stood, according to the 1970 census, exactly at the median of per capita incomes. It has since risen considerably and then fallen back some; but it remains much richer, comparatively, than it was twelve years ago, and this has perceptibly altered people's lives and with it the appearance of towns and cities. Neon and muffler sellers have proliferated on the outskirts; still, the displays are negligible compared to those in most states. Some of the deadlocks on highway construction have been broken, and the highway from Cedar Rapids to Waterloo, so long controverted, is now half finished.

More important, Iowa has become, I think, much more self-conscious. This shows, in its salubrious form, in a very greatly heightened awareness of its past, of its old buildings. Thanks in large part to the State Historical Department and to the rules and resources of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, much has been saved from the jaws of bulldozers and admirably restored or rejuvenated, like the courthouses at Marshalltown, Bloomfield, Dubuque, and Iowa City. Historic districts have been created, most notably at Decorah—where, as well, the attractions at the marvelous Norwegian-American Museum have been expanded by the munificence of the Norwegian government, which gave several complete furnished rooms from Norwegian peasant houses, along with what must certainly be the most remarkable sight in Iowa, a well-preserved original Viking ship dating from the time, almost a thousand years ago, when Norwegians were exploring the coast of North America. No less dramatic is what has happened to Spillville, rather deprecatingly referred to in my original piece. It now has a Dvorak Festival and a freshly painted, prosperous looking main street.

All this—this and there are hundreds of examples of it—bespeaks not only self-consciousness, a respect for values transcending pragmatism, and a considerably higher level of sophistication. It also, and aliens like myself may feel a tinge of disappointment at this, suggests a growing tendency to behave like everybody else.

But Iowa is still determined to protect its basic institution, the family farm, and, since I first wrote, has strenuously legislated to that end. The towns look better than they did twenty years ago, and they are better.

Symphony orchestras have grown in patronage, resources, and quality; but, at their tulip festivals in Pella, the citizens still put on wooden shoes and hang out the flag of the kingdom of the Netherlands.

There are changes of attitudes; there is more money and more of a metropolitan outlook. But the center still holds.

Laurence Lafore
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The druggist, a notably oleaginous specimen in an uninteresting Philadelphia suburb, says, "Well, we haven't seen you around for a long time."

"No," I answer. "I'm only here on a visit. I've moved to Iowa."

The druggist stares in jocular incredulity, laughs, and says, "Well, you certainly *are* in the sticks."

An extremely distinguished British television personality asks me where I live. I tell him. "What a disaster for you," he affably answers.

A professor emeritus at an Eastern college, a man who has written extensively on the flora and folklore of central New Jersey, tells me, "You've gone out there from sheer perverseness. Nobody from the East could *like* living in a place like that where it's absolutely flat."

"Have you ever been to Iowa?"

"No, I certainly haven't. I know nothing about it except that it's flat."

I consider, not for the first time, the advisability of carrying with me a pocket-size reproduction of Grant Wood's *Stone City,* an Iowan version of the *View of Toledo.* But I have never come on one, so I merely turn away in search of a drink.

The cultivated lady in Bryn Mawr raises her sherry glass and stares speculatively at me over its rim. She is given to Quakerism, crusades against bigotry, and the conviction that subscriptions to the *New York Times,* the *New Republic,* and the *New York Review of Books* keep her fully informed on everything worth knowing about any subject. "Of course," she says, "*I* couldn't bear it. *I* must have art and music and literature and the theater to *live.*"

The clerk in Brooks writes down the address where the neckties are to be sent. He writes down "Ohio." I politely correct him. This is the third time in two days in New York that the same mistake has been made, and I have learned to watch what salespeople write down.

Visiting the East is like living an old joke, the one about the hostess who tactfully observes to her houseguest, "My dear, I think you ought to know that in Boston we pronounce it Idaho."

In Iowa the joke is newer. I tell a young colleague of mine in Iowa City about these remarks. He says, "For God's sake don't try to change their minds. They might come here."

He is not speaking from provincial ignorance. (He describes himself, with perfect accuracy on all four points, as a nice Jewish boy from Milwaukee, but he has lived for a long time in both England and Germany.) He is really frightened by the idea that a wave of refugees may some day sweep in from the East. It is something other Iowans worry about.

One of them, a man of prominence at the State Capitol, was quoted by the *Des Moines Register* as saying, "We ought to abolish the Iowa Development Commission. More than that, I think we should go around the country making speeches describing Iowa as a terrible place."

Still, the temptation to rebuke prejudice and correct ignorance is very strong, even at the risk of encouraging a wave of refugees. It is much more so, paradoxically, for a refugee than for an Iowan. The most instructive part of coming here, for me, has been not so much what I have learned about Iowa as what I have learned about the East, and therefore about myself. Everything Easterners take for granted about Iowa (including the assumption that it is a variant spelling of Ohio and Idaho) is wrong, and it follows that the assumptions I have grown up with about the definition and location of civilization are also probably wrong.

Provinciality is universal, but the provinciality of Easterners, which is mingled with unholy arrogance, looks to me now to have a special virulence. In the highly cultured Philadelphia suburb where I spent most of my life, the seat of a distinguished institution of higher learning, smugness is so potent that when I revisit the place now it takes on a tangible quality—the sweet, soggy deadness of an unsuccessful chocolate cake. The determination to believe, as a matter of necessary doctrine, that Iowa is perfectly flat is its most naïve form. The dogma of the lady in Bryn Mawr that Iowa is a cultural desert is less easily disputed—one woman's culture is another's barbarism—but even by *her* standards there is plenty of material for disproof. Iowa is the only place I have ever been, for example, where art shows are advertised on TV. A list of events chosen at random from the calendar of Iowa City this week includes: four concerts, one by the Grateful Dead and three classical; four plays, one by Brecht, one by Dürrenmatt, one by Shakespeare, and an original one written by a local playwright; no fewer than seventeen screenings of old films judged to be of special historic or artistic interest (besides six current ones); twenty-three public lectures on topics such as "Microgrammars and Literary Analysis" and "Rediscovering the American Cinema"; two poetry readings by nationally known poets; and an exhibit of Etruscan Funerary Art.

Iowa City is not Iowa, since it is a university town. But it is the state's cultural capital, and Iowans patronize and are proud of its cultural attractions. And refugees *are* beginning to be aware of them. At a party recently I met a black novelist who lately moved to Iowa from his home in Harlem. He told me that he was not at the Writers' Workshop and in fact had no connection at all with the university. When I asked why

in that case he was here, he looked at me with perplexity and said, "Why, man, everybody knows this is where it is."

Such mild fame has not yet penetrated very far into world consciousness. And the real danger that Iowa will attract an invasion does not arise from its cosmopolitan culture—from the fact that the Quaker lady is behind the times, or that Carol Kennicott's dream for Gopher Prairie is belatedly coming true and Main Street now has a handsome contemporary Arts Center displaying original Matisses and providing weekly chamber music concerts. What really matters is an opposite fact, that Main Street has not really changed very much since Sinclair Lewis wrote. A culture universally disdained at a time when Montparnasse was the refuge for sensitive Americans fleeing from the barbaric Midwest has, merely by remaining the same, become a place that sensitive Americans may well be fleeing *to.* In the age of the exploding metropolis, a place that is visibly nonexplosive seems to offer hope for salvation; or—since it is now judged by sensitive Americans to be too late for salvation—for salutary escape. In the age of strikes by garbage collectors, the provinces appear in a new light.

Such appearances may be pure nostalgia, and it is true that the air here reeks with the pleasant, sedative scents of Booth Tarkington's America. But there is more to Iowa's attraction than obsolescence, and there is more to it than a general reevaluation of the simple life. The world of *American Gothic* is not a regional phenomenon; it also is an Iowan one, and this is what is the hardest thing for an Easterner to realize. The state of Iowa is not a chunk of Midwest cut out by arbitrary lines from the enormous map of farmland that extends interminably through twelve states. It is a unit of consciousness, and it has a culture of its own. It exists in a way that Pennsylvania or New York do not. It is a state in the way that, say, Norway is a nation.

Habits of speech are indicative of a reality: people rarely refer to themselves as Pennsylvanians; New Yorkers are the residents of a city; and there is no word by which a citizen of Massachusetts or Connecticut can call himself. But Iowans always speak of themselves as Iowans.

It is the country—and its accessibility—that most beguiles the new arrival from the vast, reptilian suburb that writhes along the Atlantic. The land is very beautiful, and the special quality of its beauty is coherence and order, which are provided by the union of riches and their use by humans. It is a European sort of beauty that appeals to the atavistic peasant in most Americans.

It has its own unmistakable aspect, whose most conspicuous trait is geometry. The roads run sternly to compass points, as they do throughout the Midwest, where the ground rules of civilization were laid out by engineers in advance of settlers. The ruler was sovereign here (like the ruler of the Roman armies; there are clinging affinities between the roads of Iowa and of France). Even rivers were not permitted to interrupt the geometry. The roads run to them and then, often, since bridges are scarce in the country, they stop, to resume their course on the further shore. It is hard to get lost in a car if you take reasonable care to keep track of the right-angle turns. A pilot over Iowa finds his magnetic compass a less certain guide than the roads.

Geometry has become a *mystique.* A few years ago the Iowa legislature, after much debate, repealed a law forbidding the highway commission to build what are called "diagonals." After a few years a new bill was introduced to reestablish the ban. It was specifically aimed to prevent laying out a new interstate highway, from Des Moines to Minneapolis, on a straight line northeast-southwest. The sponsoring legislators were determined to preserve the tradition, even at the cost of several right-angle turns, several score of added miles, and several million dollars. The avowed reason for this was the violence the diagonals do to section lines; since property lines are all rectilinear, a farmer through whose land the interstate would run at an angle would find his fields cut into separated triangles. It is a rational consideration, stemming from a belief—now in fashion again—that land is more important than highways. But it is not the only reason, perhaps not even the real one. So strong is the sense of order, the order of the compass, that there seems something deeply *wrong* about diagonal roads. They run against the laws of the gods of the Midwest.

Not even the ruler-gods can decree straight roads when topography gets in the way. Roadbuilders have been visibly reluctant to concede defeat; the straight lines run through quite improbably difficult terrain in many places. But when, at last, a curve is made necessary by the contour map, it produces a surprising sense of drama. Even quite shallow curves suggest the protest of a whole society against land that cannot be sectioned and ploughed. The contrast magnifies the sinuosity and the slopes, like a whisper in a cave. The valleys and hills of Iowa are bigger, and the forest more primeval, for the agricultural geometry that surrounds them. And this is another key to the society; the spectrum of diversity is narrow, and so the perception of diversity is heightened.

Over prairies, which cover part of the state, the ruthless straightness is logical, aesthetically and economically. Over rolling land, the visual

impact is very different. Straightness imposes its own order, another sort of coherence, of nice union of man and nature. The arrangement of the farmhouses adds another dimension. They are often set facing each other, at intervals—in pairs, one supposes, for company, for before the coming of the automobile, the loneliness of the farms must have been awesome. The odd regularity of the houses, each with its village of outbuildings and its defensive girdle of trees, adds an almost eerie dimension to the order.

The land and the sky are very wide. The *size* of the sky, sufficiently publicized in Westerns, remains so striking that visitors from the coasts invariably comment on it. Sometimes they are unsettled by it, as a man freed from prison is unsettled. The colors are superb and surprising; the earth is dark and often black, so black that visitors suppose that a field has been burned instead of newly ploughed. In summer the crops make patterned monochromes of green; in winter the compositions are even more handsome, in grays and tans. The spectrum is, again, narrow; agriculture here has a subtle palette. But the colors are surprisingly clear. Even in the woodlands the whole aspect of the landscape is preeminently of clarity, of *cleanness,* matching the clarity and cleanness of the air. There is almost no undergrowth. There are no tangled hedgerows, no wastes of scrub and sumac, no jungles of honeysuckle or poison ivy. Things grow with an economy that almost suggests self-discipline. But the cleanness is also the result of time, money, and solicitude. The farmers and the highway authorities take it for granted that the good order of the land, like its fertility, must be seen to.

The face of Iowa bespeaks, to a remarkable extent, a serene and preeminently classless society. And so it is, at least for anyone guilty of "social relativism," as a sense of proportion is called by people who think it enfeebles the will to correct nearby social evils if one recognizes the existence of much greater ones far away. The absence of social relativism is marked in Iowa, as much among those who have never heard the term as among those who venomously spit it at anyone who observes that living conditions are worse in Calcutta than in Cedar Rapids. It is, once again, the phenomenon of the narrow spectrum—mingled perhaps with a slight impulse to flagellation. Low hills seem alpine here. Shallow curves become hairpin turns. Rivers that can be safely swum in are deplored as brimming sewers. What is likely to seem to someone who has lived in London or Washington as about the most satisfactory climate in the world—with its sparkling, crystalline winter sun and long series of flawless spring and autumn days, with summers cool and dry by Eastern standards—is bitterly excoriated by residents

for its aberrations: occasional extreme cold, occasional hailstorms in May, occasional tornados and high winds. And social conditions that look idyllic take on for natives a more than Oriental squalor.

Concerned citizens organize protest movements, and state commissions study the ghettos of Waterloo and Davenport, but nowhere in Iowa is there a slum anything like those of Chicago or Washington. And there is nothing even remotely resembling the suburbs of Philadelphia, through which one can drive for fifty miles without ever seeing a house that cost less than $100,000. Most houses, those of the poor and of the comparatively rich, have the outward aspect of what in the East would be a lower-middle-class suburb. In a few towns there are old buildings that might merit the name of mansions, mostly now boardinghouses, and there are a few examples of relatively lavish contemporary architecture, but like all houses in Iowa towns they are on incredibly small lots—lost in long stretches of simplicity.

In the country, the farmhouses seem even more forceful monuments to social equality. Outside of the few shanty villages here and there in uncultivable land, there is nothing like the miserable dereliction of farms in northern New York, or the squalid juxtaposition of rural slums of the most desperate decay with gentlemen's manor houses in eastern Pennsylvania. It is said that there is not merely a spread of incomes but a hierarchy among farmers: the cattlemen are richer and prouder than the hogmen, and the hogmen are richer and prouder than the crop farmers. But none of this is outwardly apparent; farmhouses occasionally are unpainted, and their yards slovenly, but the huge majority of them rise from their clustered evergreens with the white, square tidiness of marble monuments in a vast, well-tended cemetery.

There is said, too, to be a sort of concealed plutocracy, and people like bank directors are regarded by the community with respect, if not with awe. But the bank directors live in the same kind of houses as everyone else, and there is no way of telling, from their clothes or their manners or—most noticeable of all—their accents, that they are not like everyone else in every other way as well. Whatever the hidden inwardnesses of the hierarchy, it translates itself into no palpable variation of manner. Friendliness and equality are matters of pride, just as reserve and self-differentiation are matters of pride in Eastern cities. Class, as measured in money, of course exists, although the spread is by national standards very narrow. But class as measured by bearing and attitude simply does not.

At first, equality may appear to the Easterner in the guise of vulgarity, and friendliness as intrusion: the boys at gas stations look at your credit

card, and the girls at drive-in banks look at your check, and call you by your first name. But mostly the symptoms are agreeable, if confusing. Except in restaurants, tipping is quite unknown, and offering a dollar to the man who laboriously installs a television set or a washing machine produces not gratitude but puzzlement, and a refusal sometimes tinged with resentment. Cleaning women are either matrons of the community, happy to pick up a supplemental income by practicing a perfectly dignified profession, or, in Iowa City, graduate students. Either way they are known as "housewives" (even when male, as they sometimes are), and one is likely to meet them at cocktail parties. The reciprocating system of subordination and superiority upon which the East is constructed is wholly absent. Nobody has any sense of being anybody's social inferior.

Extravagant equality is, one supposes, at the root of the well-publicized friendliness. In shops the salespeople rush forward with glad cries to serve you. To an Easterner, raised with a breed of clerk who often seems to have devoted long years in academics of malicious obstruction, the blatant desire to please gives rise to suspicion if not of duplicity, then of simple-mindedness. Casual social relationships develop in entirely different ways as a result. Intimacy seems to flower instantly from rootless plants. The only background information that is ever deemed important is occupation and place of birth. The most important experience of my Iowa education arose from precisely this fact; I discovered something I hadn't known before: that all my life I had been playing the exhausting and unpleasant game of placing people. In Eastern cities it is an imperative, perhaps a compulsion, to discover, by circuitous conversational routes, whom you are talking to. The "whom" involves not only where a person comes from and what he does—although those are important contributory data—but, more cogently, where he fits into a complicated social order whose individuals define themselves by membership in subgroups. The process begins with the first spoken words; they may not realize it but, hardly less than Englishmen, educated Easterners are trained to register accents and what they mean. I was appalled to discover how highly trained my reflexes are in this matter, that I felt something like a need, upon meeting a stranger, to find out whether we had any acquaintances or experiences in common. In their absence, in the East, he will remain a stranger forever. In the Midwest he will cease to be a stranger as soon as you learn his first name (it is not necessary to learn his last).

Coming to Iowa is like taking off tight shoes: after the first elation of comfort has faded, you forget how great the discomfort was. But

sometimes you are reminded. At a dinner party I was introduced to a woman whose voice and appearance triggered the reflexes I had temporarily forgotten. There was a gleam of mutual recognition, of the fact that we were both rapidly and tacitly making the same reflexive calculations. And when she had inevitably asked me where I came from and I had told her, she said, in a tone of mixed interrogation and appraisal, that she had only once visited Philadelphia, to attend her college roommate's party in Chestnut Hill. Her phrasing, which would have seemed innocent enough, if a little confusing, to an Iowan, conveyed a great deal of slightly sinister information to a Philadelphian; indeed it defined with considerable precision all the essentials of her past and present. Later, when the evening had matured, I rebuked her, and she apologized. Such lapses, we agreed, are more than simply out of place in Iowa; they are dangerous, furtive attacks upon a whole series of moral values.

Provinciality, with shows of stupefying ignorance, can be found on both sides, but the Easterner is in danger of seeing defensiveness where it doesn't exist. I have repeatedly been taken, on the basis of my accent, to be English. This makes my good red American blood boil, but for reasons I am forced to confess arise from regional hauteur: in the East an English accent is a sign of the worst kind of affectation. When the mistake is made here, it condemns no affectation; it is merely a mistake. And there is a further complexity, which inculpates me of a sin very like that whose imputation is so annoying. I am led to try to learn Iowan. I have become a tolerably adept master of the foreshortened vowel and the denticulated consonant. I have learned to pronounce the noun *permit* as if it were a verb, *route* as if it were a military disaster, and *creek* as if it were an affliction of the neck. But it is, after all, regional snobbery that makes me feel it a sign of genial adaptability to affect an Iowa accent while it would be putting on airs to affect an English one.

On the other hand, there are some genuine linguistic novelties that have to be learned. A young bride, out of New York and Bryn Mawr, had to be hastily instructed by her husband that the most common decorations of Iowa fields are not pigsties but hog houses, that hog is pronounced almost (not quite) as hawg, and that a hog is not the same as a pig although it may be the same as a sow or a boar. Land is not subdivided but platted; and when title to it is transferred, there is no settlement but rather a closing. (You can buy land in a matter of hours here; title searches and insurance are unnecessary, in contrast to Pennsylvania where my title warrant started out with "all that certain terrain which our most gracious Lord King Charles II has been pleased to grant . . ." and went on for pages.)

It is hard for us to get used to the fact that many things in the East seem from this angle not only unbearable (which most of us are prepared to admit) but ridiculous. One of Donald Kaul's highy literate and intelligent columns in the *Des Moines Register* dealt humorously with a change-of-address notice he had gotten from a business executive he knew in Pennsylvania. The new address was something like, "The Brickle Farm, Old Poor House Lane, Bethlehem Pike, Micklebury." It seemed to me a natural sort of address, and I was genuinely baffled by the fact that Iowa's leading columnist had devoted an entire column to deriding it. I consulted a native, who was as puzzled by my reaction as I was by Kaul's. To him it was *obvious* that it should give rise to hilarity and revulsion, but he couldn't tell me why, and I still don't find it either contemptible or funny.

The incident provoked the first real feelings of affronted regional vanity I had experienced. But I am beginning to understand the difficulty. Kaul thought the address must have been invented out of snobbery, while I assumed it was inherited from honest folk who had evolved it several centuries before. In a society whose entire past is still alive and whose origins are barely beyond living memory, the tangle of an older world is mysterious, and its complexities are judged to have been deliberately and mistakenly made up.

This kind of reaction has, for the immigrant, a strange flavor of innocence. There keeps coming to my mind, the longer I stay here, a familiar scheme of stereotypes: the Iowans' relations with the East have a good deal in common with American relations with Europe as it presented itself in the time of Henry James. There is the same innocence, along with a conviction that its converse is dark decay. Easterners appear even to very cultivated Iowans in somewhat the same light that depraved Italian noblemen appeared to Americans in the 1890s: degenerate heirs of an evil tradition of social privilege. The Easterner begins, in time, to perceive a certain plausibility, or at least consistency, in this in Iowa. Chesterton's couplet about Reformation Europe, "The North is full of tangled things, and texts, and aching eyes, / And gone is all the innocence of anger and surprise," becomes, with a change of direction, apposite.

Stereotypes, always false, are not always misleading. There is some inner truth in the assumption of depravity; and innocence verging on simplicity is, despite all exceptions and all qualifications, in some way a quality of Iowa. The important part of the immigrant's education is that he begins to measure the two stereotypes against two sets of realities. But it seems to me now that the specific detail, not the general

truth, matters. Exceptions provide perspectives. Any society defined in generalities looks rigid, unattractive, perhaps evil, but the generalities always, on close view, break down in gradations. Iowa City, the seat of a great university, "Athens in the Cornfields," as the immigrants call it, is sometimes seen as depraved by other Iowans. Parents from the small towns worry about its corrupting influence on their children. Everything, fortunately, is unrepresentative. New York is not America; Iowa City is not Iowa. The sticks are a few miles west of where you stand.