

Iowa: A Civic Place



Every year the Iowa State Fair begins with a parade from the State Capitol to the fairgrounds on the outskirts of Des Moines.

Photo by Jim Day

David M. Shribman

A handful of people are standing in a soybean field, around a giant John Deere tractor. In the center is a presidential candidate. This is the Iowa you know — a staging ground for presidential campaigns, a political theme park out there someplace south of Minnesota and east of Nebraska, full of corn and stuffed pork chops and roads that seem to come to a perfect 90-degree angle on the prairie. In years divisible by four, Iowa is jammed in center stage. Otherwise, you hear little about it.

There's some justice to that. Said Richard, Lord Acton, Oxford educated, reared in Rhodesia, married to an Iowan, and a sometime resident of Cedar Rapids: "My theory is that America is like an airplane with its wingtips in New York and Los Angeles.



Those extremes plunge and soar, but the body in the middle stays relatively stable, and Iowa is in the middle of the middle.”



Iowa hosts the first important political milestone of the presidential election year: precinct caucuses. These events, populist but not really democratic, are a combination of church fellowship dinner, cattle auction, quilting circle, camp meeting, encounter group, and preliminary hearing in a criminal trial. They occur on a Monday night, usually in stinging cold and under cover of snow. They're sociable events: Neighbors get together in fire halls, school basements, and people's homes, talk about their preferences, declare one another fools or Communists, separate themselves into corners, and vote by ballots.

Iowa is, at its core, a civic place. At the heart of the caucuses' prominence is a simple notion, appealing to the heart but at base utterly preposterous: that some magic formula of agronomy, geography, geology, divinity, demography, maybe — who knows? — even sorcery has rendered Iowa the absolutely perfect proving ground for the country. “Alabama is the South, the North is the North, and California is California, but Iowa is America,” Bill Wundram of the *Quad City Times* wrote not long ago.



Iowa is also a place of great distances. In the middle of the last century, 30 million acres of tall-grass prairie filled the state; now there are but a few scattered acres. Some 6 million acres of forests covered Iowa in 1830; only a fraction remains. “Iowa in its primitive state was ideal for wild creatures, but not for civilized man,” reads a 1927 account of Iowa wildlife. “Therefore the latter — as he has indeed endeavored to do with all the world — has sought to adopt primitive Iowa to the service of his needs and desires.”

Today, you can stand at Living History Farms, at the edge of the western sprawl of Greater Des Moines, and relive the rhythms of old Iowa. There is a cornfield planted with seed dating to 1900 and plowed with horses, along with the sort of bark lodges that the Ioway Indians used in the 1700s, when Iowa was still overrun with buffalo. But if you listen carefully, you will hear the sound of trucks roaring along the interstate, going to Minneapolis, Omaha, and Kansas City.

“This is a place that works,” said Frank Conroy, who wrote *Body and Soul* and directs the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. “If the plumber is more than 15 minutes late, he apologizes profusely. The dollar goes about twice as far as it does in Boston. I live on a pretty, tree-lined street. My child walks four blocks to public school. The public library is breathtaking. People are nice. It is every cliché you have ever heard of, except it is true.”

Iowans are, in a word, civilized, in part because the state is a civilized place. It has no wild outbacks, as Wisconsin and Minnesota have. It has no wild tradition, unless you count the hollers at the women's basketball games at the University of Iowa.



Iowa defies logic and some economic principles: It is a place where money trickles up — from, of course, the ground. “Everybody in this state is dependent upon the land in some way,” said Mary Swander, who teaches at Iowa State University and whose great-grandparents homesteaded in western Iowa. “As a professor, I'm dependent upon the state's economy. Storekeepers and merchandisers are dependent upon it, too. If the farmer doesn't come in and buy nuts and bolts in the hardware store, the hardware store goes out of business.”

Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak, an Indian known to the whites as Black Hawk, once said the land “never failed” the Indians, adding, “We always had plenty, our children never cried from hunger, neither were our people in want.” Jeff Bruner of the *Ames Daily Tribune* gives a more modern look: “In Iowa, the dark, rich soil reduces just about every other piece of ground in the United States to the status of mere dirt.”

Yet the land, like the winds, is fickle. There



In January 1992, Prasong "Pak" Nurack, in the cook's apron, and Friends of A Taste of Thailand celebrated the successful campaign to save the restaurant from the urban renewal wrecking ball. Photo by Bob Mandel

A Taste of Thailand: Serving the "Publics"

Dan Hunter &
Patrick McClintock

Have you ever seen a bird fly backwards? What is the cause of the current farm crisis? Are you able to touch your toes? Whom will you vote for? A Taste of Thailand restaurant in Des Moines conducts polls on all sorts of topics.

Thai natives Prasong "Pak" Nurack and Benchung "Beni" Laungaram, his wife, opened the now-popular restaurant in December 1983, in an abandoned auto repair shop, repainted bright yellow. "So the publics will know we are here," said Prasong. It may be the only restaurant in the world with a home-made voting booth.

The quixotic polls and the delicious Thai food have made A Taste of Thailand a place to meet candidates for every office and a mandatory stop for presidential candidates — from Al Haig to Paul Tsongas. Journalists

from the *New York Times* to the *London Times* stop by for conversation. In 1988, C-Span broadcast a discussion between restaurant patrons about the caucuses. Television crews from many countries and other networks swarm in with lights and cameras.

After the lights and cameras depart, A Taste of Thailand's service to the community continues. On the statistically coldest day each year, the restaurant sponsors the International Hot and Spicy Food Day. For many years, it also sponsored the Free Speech Award, to increase awareness of the First Amendment. In addition, Prasong and Benchung have welcomed visitors from all over the world to observe American-style democracy. Prasong has a simple explanation: "We are here to serve the publics."

Dan Hunter is a Des Moines songwriter, playwright, and political satirist. Patrick McClintock is a writer and political activist. They both love Thai food and together organized the Friends of A Taste of Thailand.

is a randomness to nature and to the farmer's life. Corn and soybean harvests were poor in 1993, bountiful in 1994, and weak last year. Spring rains made plantings late — or canceled them. Perhaps as many as 200,000 acres weren't planted. Then it became deadly hot in August, mischievously cold in September. Corn harvests were about half of 1994's levels.



And so that is it. Iowa is about the land and nature and people and taking pride in what we do with our lives. But it is also about gorging yourself on blueberry strudel in Pella, on three kinds of sausages in Amana, and the very best fried pork-tenderloin sandwich in the world. It is about remarkable steak houses, each with no windows: Jesse's Embers in Des Moines, Lark Supper Club in Tiffin, and Rube's in Montour. It is about a state university with a football team with 73 players who each weigh more than 200 pounds — and a marching band with more than 240 musicians.

And, oddly enough, Iowa is about Herbert Hoover. "My grandparents and my parents came here in a covered wagon," Hoover once said in West Branch, where he was born in a two-room cottage in 1874. "In this country they toiled and worshiped God. They lie buried on your hillside. The most formative years of my boyhood were spent here. My roots are in this soil. This cottage where I was born is physical proof of the unbounded opportunity of American life."

This is the essence of America. This is the essence of Iowa.

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