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Rootstalk, Spring 2021
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Frequent Rootstalk contributor David Ottenstein took this issue's cover photograph in 2019, in Saskatchewan, during a photography trip to the Canadian prairie.

*Cover design: Mark Baechtel, Jonathan Andelson
Table of contents image: David Ottenstein
Layout: Jon Andelson, Mark Baechtel*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JON ANDELSON

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**All reference information appears at the end of this issue in "Endnotes."*

Publisher's Note: Why I Carve Spoons

BY JON ANDELSON

In the spirit of hopefulness that spring betokens, this spring especially, I thought I would take a break from the weighty topics I have addressed in my last few Publisher's Notes—the pandemic, the derecho, climate disruption, the death of a prairie hero—and write about why I carve spoons. To be sure, spoon carving is a quirky, some might say anachronistic, pastime, but for me serious ideas lurk beneath its surface about our ties to the natural world, the relationship between practicality and artistry, the meaning of knowledge, and the threat posed to craftsmanship by industrial capitalism.

While there is no particular connection between spoon carving and the prairie since the humble spoon is found world-wide, it has a rich history here. Native peoples were carving spoons and other wooden objects long before the arrival of Europeans, and when those Europeans came they often brought carved wooden spoons with them and continued the carving tradition here. Today, when I carve spoons, I feel a connection to those traditions and, ironically perhaps, also conjure lessons about how to live sustainably heading into the future, a big challenge facing those of us who live in the prairie region.

I do what is called "green wood carving," meaning carving wood that has been cut fairly recently (or has been sitting in water or in a plastic bag in the freezer to prevent it from drying out). Cut wood begins to lose its moisture almost immediately. When cracks form on the cut ends of a log or branch, the wood has begun drying on the way to what is called seasoned or cured wood. Seasoned wood can also be carved, but it tends to be harder than green wood, and modern carvers are more likely to use power tools on it. One of the attractions of

green wood carving for me is that all you need (I qualify this below) is a knife. Consequently, green wood carving is a quiet activity compatible with meditation, listening to music, or conversation.

My spoon carving teacher was my friend Chris. Although he often says that he was only six months ahead of me in learning the craft himself, six months is a sizable lead over no experience at all. First, Chris introduced me to Mora knives, inexpensive yet well-made carving knives that have been manufactured in the small town of [Mora](#), in south-central Sweden, since 1891. Chris prefers carving with the slightly longer-bladed Mora knife, whereas I have grown to like the slightly shorter-bladed one. He then taught me some of the basic strokes: the push stroke, the thumb push (for fine work), the pull stroke, and a stroke that he calls the chicken wing that is much easier to demonstrate than to describe in words. Chris finds that he uses the chicken wing a lot, whereas I am especially fond of the pull stroke. In these and other aspects of carving there is plenty of room for personal preference. In addition to the straight knife, a hook knife, with a roughly U-shaped blade, is enormously helpful for cutting out the bowl of the spoon. Mora makes those, too.

Chris started me on green wood carving by giving me a spoon “blank.”

A blank is a piece of wood that has already been roughed out into the general shape of what you plan to carve. I carved my first spoon from a smooth-grained piece of apple wood. Even starting from a blank it took me five or six hours to complete, as I was operating from the old adage, “You can always remove more wood, but you can’t put any back.” (Few carving experiences are more dispiriting than

getting into a good rhythm with your knife and suddenly poking a hole through the bowl of your spoon.) So, all you need to carve spoons is a straight knife and a hook knife...as long as someone provides you with blanks. If there’s no such person, you’ll need to start several steps earlier in the whole process.

First, get your hands on some green wood. This is relatively easy in rural areas but a good deal more difficult in the middle of a city. Ask around. Although any kind of wood can be carved, dense hardwoods are best for kitchen utensils. They hold their edges better during carving, resist wear, and are easier to keep clean. For spoons you’ll want a branch (or trunk) roughly two to five inches in diameter; you’ll need a saw to cut it. The length of the branch depends on the kind of spoon you want to make, maybe five inches for a personal spoon and as much as twelve inches for a cooking spoon. Then you need to split the branch along the grain using an ax, or a wedge and hammer, or (if you really get into this) a maul and a froe. You need to remove the bark and the central pith with a knife or an ax. You can then sketch the outline of the spoon you want to carve on the flat side of either half of the branch and remove the excess wood from the handle area. You can do this with a knife, but an ax is quicker. After the Mora knives, an ax



A BIRCH-BLANK ROUGHED OUT WITH AN AXE

is the tool I use most often in spoon carving. Chris and I are fans of the axes made by another Swedish company, [Gränsfors Bruks](#), which has been making hand-forged axes for over a century. The axes are well-balanced, hold their edge, and seem indestructible when used properly. A final touch that Chris and I enjoy about them is that each ax bears the initials of the craftsman who made it. You can go online and find their name and sometimes a photograph.

Why Sweden? For one thing, the country has a long tradition of wood carving. A 1,000 year old tool chest un-

earthed in Sweden contained a tool kit strikingly similar to the tools routinely used by spoon carvers today.¹ Even more to the point, as we learn in Wille Sundqvist's book, [Swedish Carving Techniques](#), early in the 20th century Sweden began to recognize the detrimental effects of machine production on traditional handcrafting. Local handcraft societies sprang up, and in 1912 a [National Association of Swedish Handcraft Societies](#) was founded. Later, governmental Rural Economy Associations employed "handcraft consultants" in a few Swedish provinces. In 1990 there were 15 such paid consultants in wood, metal, and leather crafts, Wille among them.² Traditional handcrafts can be found in every country, of course, but Sweden has taken their preservation more seriously than most. This could explain the popularity of Swedish carving tools and the large influence of Wille and other Swedish carvers on those who've taken up the craft elsewhere in recent years.

Several things happen to me when I carve a spoon—or a fork, a wooden butter knife, or a bowl. The first is that I slow down. I examine the pieces of wood at hand for hints about what lies within that I could bring out. This involves knowing something about the various kinds of wood and their carving properties (apple, basswood, and walnut carve differently, for example), knowledge that comes mostly from experience. Head knowledge. It also involves thinking about design, the different possible shapes, sizes, curvatures, and decorations of

what I might make. Aesthetics. I pick up the knife and slowly—because the knife is sharp—apply a pull stroke or a push stroke to the wood to begin shaping it how I imagined. Hand knowledge. Perhaps I cut too deeply on one side, spoiling the symmetry I envisioned. I stop to re-envision my design. "Every good craftsman," writes [Richard Sennett](#), "conducts a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking...a relation between hand and

head."³ To which I would add heart, since I carve for the pleasure of it and to make something functional but also handsome—"the

point is not to produce, but to create," as [Joshua Vogel](#) says⁴—and perhaps because I plan to present what I am making as a gift.

While I carve I am stepping away, however briefly, from the world of mass-production in plastic, metal, ceramic, paper, fiber, and wood which surrounds most of us most of the time. That world is of relatively recent origin. By contrast, the first carved wooden spoons began to appear in the Bronze Age, 3-4,000 years ago, and a spoon-like object intentionally shaped from mammoth ivory has been dated to over 20,000 years ago.⁵ Other handcrafts have a much longer history. Our hominid ancestors began making stone tools at least 2.5 million years ago. Those objects in turn became part of the environment that shaped who we became. Surely Joshua Vogel is right when he says, "Making things by hand is not simply a contemporary craft movement but a fundamental part of being human."⁶

But have we in the modern world begun to lose touch with that aspect of who we are? The archaeologist [Alexander Langlands](#), who has taught himself how to do more traditional handcrafts than I know the names for, thinks we have: "Against a rising tide of automation and increasing digital complexity, we are becoming further divorced from the very thing that defines us: we are makers, crafters of things."⁷ I don't know if losing touch with handcrafts will harm us in the long run. I do know that, for me, carving spoons feels good.

While I carve I am stepping away, however briefly, from the world of mass-production in plastic, metal, ceramic, paper, fiber, and wood...

Shortly after I began carving, Chris and I initiated regular group carving sessions. Two things inspired them. Three years ago, before I ever set a knife to wood, Chris proposed to the College's [Center for Prairie Studies](#), of which I served as director at the time, that we host a workshop on spoon carving. He wanted to bring to the campus a carver he'd done a workshop with at the [Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum](#) in Decorah, Iowa. A dozen students signed up for the one-day workshop, which was a success. I didn't actually carve that day because I was too busy monitoring the tools and the refreshments and photographing the event. I grew curious, though, and a couple of months later Chris gave me my first lesson. The second thing was that for many years one of my colleagues has been hosting weekly flintknapping sessions on Friday afternoons for anyone who cared to drop by. He provides the stone, the knapping tools, and instruction for those who need it. Chris and I asked John if we could introduce a second craft to those sessions, and he agreed, so we put up flyers around campus announcing the weekly flintknapping AND spoon carving sessions.

Three or four people showed up for the first couple of sessions, and then inexplicably we began to see eight or ten every week. It was spring, and when the weather was good we worked outside; if it was inclement we were in the basement of the anthropology building. Come summer John was away, but Chris and I decided to keep the spoon carving going, and we moved the location to a lawn adjacent to the college's vegetable garden. Students, staff members, faculty, and community members dropped by the sessions. Some tried it once or twice and decided it wasn't for them; others got hooked, and a community of carvers began to form. In the fall we continued to meet at the garden until colder weather pushed us into an unused one-room former church located next to the garden, which the college had acquired. We wrote on a blackboard, "The Church of Cræft," adopting an old English spelling used by Langlands as his [book](#)

[title](#). Some weeks, over thirty people showed up and we would run out of knives. I recently asked Kristen, a community member who has been one of the regulars and who became so proficient that we invited her to help instruct new carvers, why she came. "I like spoon carving because it's very peaceful but also mindful. You're forced into the present by the knife in your hand, but at the same time you can be around other carvers talking

about life, spoons, or the weather." Others say similar things, and I recalled Richard Sennett's observation that the early Greeks considered craft and communi-

Some tried [carving] once or twice and decided it wasn't for them; others got hooked, and a community of carvers began to form...

ty to be connected.⁸

So, why do I carve? I enjoy carving by myself. It allows me to turn inward, though it also connects me with nature. It gives me both focus and relaxation. It allows my hands and my head to work together. It puts me in the moment, but also connects me to the past and to the future. It mediates practicality and artistry. It teaches me to accept failure, as when I break off the tine of a fork or poke through the bowl of a spoon, or the wood cracks and I have to start over again. I like what the carver [Pat Diette](#) said: "Each spoon is a quick little journey in self-doubt, perseverance, and success." I also enjoy carving with others. I like teaching carving. Carving—and handcraft in general—is something anyone can learn to do, irrespective of age, gender, or ethnicity, which also makes it something around which we can find connection with those not in our immediate circle. I like to carve with friends, and I have made friends through carving. Most of all I like carving with my oldest daughter, now 32, who caught the carving bug from me. Carving with her provides a precious generational connection, as does using one of my grandmother's wooden spoons almost every day in my kitchen.

I wonder if you would enjoy carving. 🌿



TOP: TWO FRIENDS CHATTING AND CARVING USING THUMB PUSH (ON LEFT) AND PULL STROKE (ON RIGHT). AT LEFT: CHRIS BAIR, CO-FOUNDER OF THE COLLEGE'S CARVING GROUP, INSTRUCTING SOME NEW CARVERS AT THE COLLEGE GARDEN. BOTTOM: CARVING OUT A SPOON BOWL WITH A HOOK KNIFE





PHOTO BY JAN GRAHAM

Mark Baechtel received his B.A. in print journalism from [The American University](#) in Washington, DC, and his M.F.A. in fiction-writing from the [Iowa Writers' Workshop](#), where he was selected as an Iowa Arts Fellow. He has nearly 40 years of publishing experience, and is author of [Shaping the Story](#), a textbook guide to short-story writing (Longman, 2003). He has taught at the University of Iowa, Grinnell College and various art centers, as well as working as a professional book editor. His work has appeared in numerous newspapers, magazines, journals and anthologies, nationally and internationally. He is currently polishing the stories in a collection of short fiction, titled *What Moves and What Is Still*, and is at work on a novel titled *Renovation*.

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Editor's Note The Butterfly Effect

BY MARK BAECHEL

I have had my second injection of the Moderna vaccine and, as of two days ago, I'm 90 percent immune to the coronavirus. As I write this, outside my window spring is on its way, and I should be feeling hopeful rather than melancholy. But after a year that has provided as much storm and stress as 2020, maybe the way I'm feeling is understandable.

I'm not quite old enough to have experienced the McCarthy era first-hand, but I've experienced its reverberating shock-waves all my life. I did live through the turmoil of the 60s, and I have a very vivid memory, as an elementary schooler, of those days, beginning in song and demonstration, ending in rage and revolution. I remember feeling afraid that the peaceful and idyllic world of my rural Midwestern childhood would be neither peaceful nor idyllic when I grew up.

In the event, I was both right and wrong. Successive waves of change—social, economic, technological and political—have swept over America and the world during the last three-quarters of a century. Some of these changes have been positive, some negative and some equivocal. All have occasioned turmoil. On the positive side, there has been a wholesale reconsideration of gender-roles and sexuality during my lifetime. Technology has sped the flow of information, and made such enterprises as *Rootstalk* possible. Human responsibility for the erosion of the natural world became a commonplace of public discourse and the EPA was established, with its administrator being given a seat at the President's cabinet.

On the negative side, America fought its first losing war, and the unrest attendant upon it overshadowed the reforms LBJ had hoped for with his Great Society. The nation resolved to go to the moon, and at last began to

address its legacy of systemic racism, only to abandon both efforts at their respective high points. During the last 40 years or so, the rich have gotten much richer on the backs of the middle class and the poor. And during the last Administration, the fault lines in our nation's polity grew more and more pronounced, resulting at last in the rage-quake that shook Capitol Hill on January 6th.

It may sound strange if I say that this meditation on American loss has been triggered by a small butterfly, but it has. In researching the "Endangered Animals of the Prairie" feature for this issue, I did some reading on the Poweshiek skipperling (p. 54), including an essay by *Rootstalk's* Publisher, Jon Andelson. I learned that this diminutive insect—named for Iowa's Poweshiek County, where the journal and its Grinnell College home are located—was first described to science in 1873 by Henry Webster Parker, a 48-year-old professor of chemistry and natural history at the College. The Poweshiek skipperling has long since disappeared from these environs, wiped out by the wave of prairie conversion which so thoroughly extirpated the native flora—and, consequently, much of Iowa's native fauna—that only a tenth of a percent of the original tallgrass biome remains.¹ This spelled doom for the Poweshiek skipperling which, as I learned, can only survive on prairie which has never been cultivated. Now the species can only be found in

isolated pockets in Michigan and Manitoba.

Why, some might ask, should we care about that? It's just one species of butterfly, after all, and according to the Smithsonian institution, there are over 17,500 species of butterflies in the world, 750 in the U.S. alone.² My complaint doesn't arise from morbid over-sensitivity, though. It arises—appropriately enough—from my understanding of the butterfly effect. This is the well-known concept, closely associated with the work of

mathematician and meteorologist [Edward Lorenz](#), which holds that the formation and path of a tornado can be influenced by perturbations in the environment as tiny as the flap of a distant butterfly's wings. I wonder: what changes might have been occasioned here by the absence of the Poweshiek skipperling's delicate movements?

Not all injustices are heralded by a demagogue like Joseph McCarthy, standing up before the Senate with a fictitious list of names in his hand, or the bluster of a president, insisting against easily accessible facts that an election has been stolen from him.

Diminutive losses can accumulate, with small losses adding to and worsening larger ones. This matters in all of the many worlds we occupy—political, environmental, social, personal. What begins as seemingly innocuous language in the text of a bill, the decision that recycling is too much trouble, or a micro-aggression in a classroom or restaurant, ends by contributing to injus-



PHOTO OF A POWESHIEK SKIPPERLING BY MICHAEL REESE FOR [WISCONSIN BUTTERFLIES](#). TAKEN AT [PUCHYAN PRAIRIE STATE NATURAL AREA](#), GREEN LAKE COUNTY, WISCONSIN. JUNE 28, 2007

tice, environmental degradation and fury on the other side of the country, or the other side of the world.

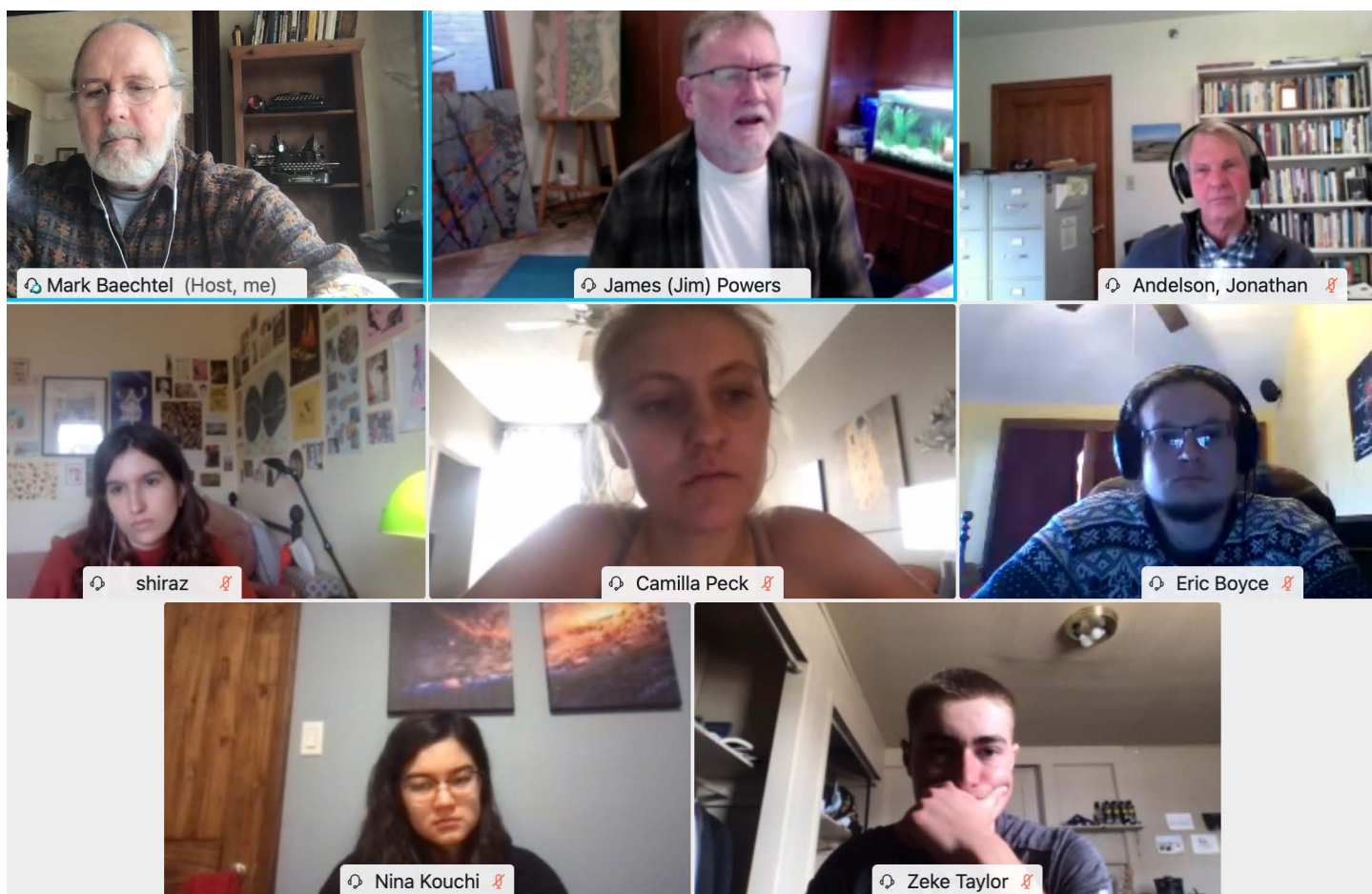
This evening my teenaged daughter, out for a walk with the dog, came across a Luna moth, resting in the middle of the sidewalk. It was newly emerged from its chrysalis, its wings still crumpled, in the midst of drying. It was strange and gratuitously lovely, in the way wild things can be. She took out her phone and took pictures, and when she came back to the house and showed them to her mom and me, there was wonder in her voice. She will never have the experience, though, that Professor Parker had—of stepping out her front door and observing the Poweshiek skipperling, something rare and intrinsic to our patch of the prairie, and of bringing it to the attention of the world for the first time.

The birth of a moth; the absence of a small butterfly. These might seem like small things, and a moment's inattention could allow them to slip past us unremarked. But if we don't attend to small things like these then the loss of large things may creep up and catch us by surprise. 🍃



PHOTO BY CLAIRE BAECHTEL

THE EDITORS



The editorial staff for the Spring 2021 issue of *Rootstalk* listens during an online meeting as guest speaker Jim Powers, Grinnell College's Senior Director for Special Projects and Operations, talks about the challenges of electronic publishing. In the top row, from the left, are Editor-in-Chief Mark Baechtel, Jim Powers, and Publisher Jon Andelson. In the middle row, from the left, are Associate Editors Shiraz Johnson, Millie Peck, and Eric Bjorn Boyce. In the bottom row, from left, are Associate Editors Nina Kouchi, and Zeke Taylor. Because the COVID-19 pandemic closed down Grinnell's campus, work on this issue took place in Grinnell, Iowa; Long Island, New York; Casper, Wyoming; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Also contributing to this issue (in 2020) were Associate Editors Aru Fatipuria, Emma Schaeffer, and Maddie McCabe.

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ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BETSY BOWER

Betsy Bower is a metal artist and blacksmith. She is passionate about creativity and connecting people to their inherent gifts and being a reminder of the importance of self-expression. You can find her fiery spirit hammering away in her studio in Denver, CO.

“Imagination Is an Endless Portal”—Making Art in Casper, Wyoming

INTERVIEW BY MILLIE PECK

Art is the one thing that mystifies me the most; it takes me to a place inside of myself where anything is possible. I am bringing the unseen and the intangible into form—all artists are. The imagination is a portal that is endless and we all have access to this inner realm where the unconscious can be tapped. I chose blacksmithing and steel sculpture as my primary medium because it's tangible. I need to build things with my hands and feel them. Working with fire connects me to the beginning of humanity where some of the very first tools were made. Bending and manipulating steel reminds me that even the most rigid things in life can soften and be reshaped.

—Sculptor Betsy Bower

Until recently, self-taught sculptor Betsy Bower lived where what is referred to elsewhere as a an “art community” didn’t really exist. Casper, Wyoming—Bower’s hometown and the hometown of LGBTQ icon [Matthew Shepard](#)—is a tough place to build an art career.

In the following interview, Rootstalk Associate Editor Millie Peck talked to Bower about the challenge of becoming an artist in a place where making a life as an artist is a challenge, and about what continues to drive her artistic vision.

Rootstalk: Tell me a little bit about how you got started as an artist?

Bower: I grew up welding in my dad’s shop; [Bower Welding and Ornamental Iron](#).

When I was 13, he started taking me down to Utah to go to blacksmithing workshops to learn from some of the best blacksmiths in the world who were demonstrating. Then he built a little smithy—that’s what they call it, like a blacksmithing shop in the back of his shop—and started collecting tools ‘cause he was fascinated by it. So, I would practice what I learned in those seminars, in those workshops. I got really hooked on it, I really loved the art of bending hot steel and manipulating it and working with it.

My senior year of high school I went to Japan as an exchange student. We stayed at my cousin’s house in Denver the night before I flew out, and he was a metal artist as well. He was a jeweler, and he built these



amazing sculptures and metal wearable art, like chastity belts. His work was amazing and so I thought that maybe I would get into jewelry or something like that. I knew that I wanted to work with metals, and I thought that maybe I would get into jewelry because I could make money that way.

Then in Japan I studied different art forms, like pottery, calligraphy, and flower arranging. In Japan there is an art to absolutely everything, and I was so amazed

by that. It was so beautiful to experience a country that valued the little things, just everything felt so alive and it’s so cute. They put little faces on all sorts of inanimate objects and things like that, it just made everything feel more alive. When I came back, I wanted to make things feel alive. So, I got more into the style of making organic forms.

I went to [Casper College](#) and made jewelry. I started working for my dad on the side, and then starting to do my own jobs too, ‘cause I

didn’t think I could make a living doing art or doing sculpture, or doing metal art, but then I started to. I started to make money doing it, and so I was like, “maybe this is possible?” I went to [Burning Man](#) in 2009, and I was blown away by the sculptures I saw there and the things that people would create, so I just decided that it was possible.

Rootstalk: How did you gain recognition as an artist?

Bower: When I came back from Burning Man, I did an art show and one of the pieces inspired [Shawn Rivett](#), and we started working together and we started building things for his gallery in Casper, which is now closed,

called Haven. Doing work for him got me more known, like I got into this [307 Magazine](#). I played bass in a band, the Foreign Life, and my bandmate, who was the drummer, wrote for 307 Magazine. He did a whole feature on me and that went Wyoming-wide. Then the Wyoming medical center got ahold of me.

They wanted a piece, like a sculpture for their lobby and some other pieces around the hospital.

One by one I just started having pieces go up all over Casper and in other places in Wyoming.

One by one I just started having pieces go up all over Casper and in other places in Wyoming....

Rootstalk: Do you have any formal art training?

Bower: I've always been creative; I guess that's as formal as it gets. I guess these blacksmithing seminars count too. I have a flower arranging certificate from Japan. I went to

Casper College and I took some art, but I didn't pursue a degree because the professors would say to make money as an artist you have to teach. And I was just like "What that's bullshit! No..." So I just decided it wasn't useful to get a degree if I wanted to do what I wanted to do because there

wasn't a curriculum for it. I took three-and-a-half years of just art classes and music, and I spent a semester in Hawaii studying and I took pottery and different things there and drew inspiration from the different art forms I saw

there. I mean for a minute my backup plan was to become a tattoo artist; I would joke with my mom that that's what I wanted to be, just to sorta be a rebel. But no, I just decided that it wasn't necessary for what I wanted to do. I didn't want to do what other people were telling me to do to get to where I wanted to go, because I didn't know anyone else who was where I wanted to be.





Rootstalk: Your dad really helped you jumpstart your career, how does he feel about you being an artist?

Bower: My dad doesn't talk a lot, but there was another interview I got to do — for I think the [Casper Star Tribune](#) or something—and one of the writers went and interviewed him and so I got to read in the article what my dad said, and it was things he never really said to me. He said, “Betsy can see around the corners.” I think what he meant by that was I can visualize something in 3D, and I guess I thought that was something everyone can do, but maybe not everyone can do it. I know that some people are verbal processors or they think in sound or something like that, but I definitely visualize things and think in 3D. He noticed that I can kinda like make decisions about a piece while just thinking about it. He expressed being proud of me. I think he always wanted and supported me going in the direction of my dreams and doing art because he never, like, complained about me leaving messes in his shop, I mean his other employees would. He never stopped me from just do-

ing what I wanted to do and he always let me use his scrap steel or sometimes his new steel and do whatever I wanted with it. He always took me to blacksmithing seminars where I got to learn how to make things. Together we made this little torch—like a pedal torch where you press a pedal with your foot and then the fire blows up so you can have your hands free to use things and hold things over the fire. So yeah, he's awesome and has never been super verbal. He has always just acted on it and helped me sort of develop my skills because he's always believed in me.

Rootstalk: How did you stay inspired living in a town with such a small art scene? How did you find the drive and motivation to keep going?

Bower: I have this mind that keeps going on its own. Also, definitely from traveling and I mean even just nature. Anything really can inspire me, I'm just an excitable person. Burning Man for sure blew my mind wide open and then helped me through the possibilities of like wow, if I only lean into something I re-

ally want to do and then just do it, then it's possible. In a way I kinda became a hermit while I was in Wyoming and just made my studio my own little fantasy land and did whatever I wanted there. I had the focus to do it because I'm definitely an individual learner and thrive when I'm like able to just have silence and can create my environment around me, so that I can be alone to think about and contemplate things and then do it. I never loved classroom settings and things like that. I hated school growing up because it was just too distracting to be around everybody else, and if I did not sit in the very front of the classroom, I wouldn't do well in the class. So, think being alone is part of what fueled me doing anything at all. I lived in Seattle for a little bit, and there was so much to do, there are endless things to do with endless numbers of

people with interest to do it with, so I didn't get any work done there. So when I was in Casper I was like, Hmm there's nothing to do here, I mean not nothing; you can definitely go outside and enjoy nature and, you know, go to little coffee shops and stuff and hit up the few Galleries and museums that they have there. But like really, there's

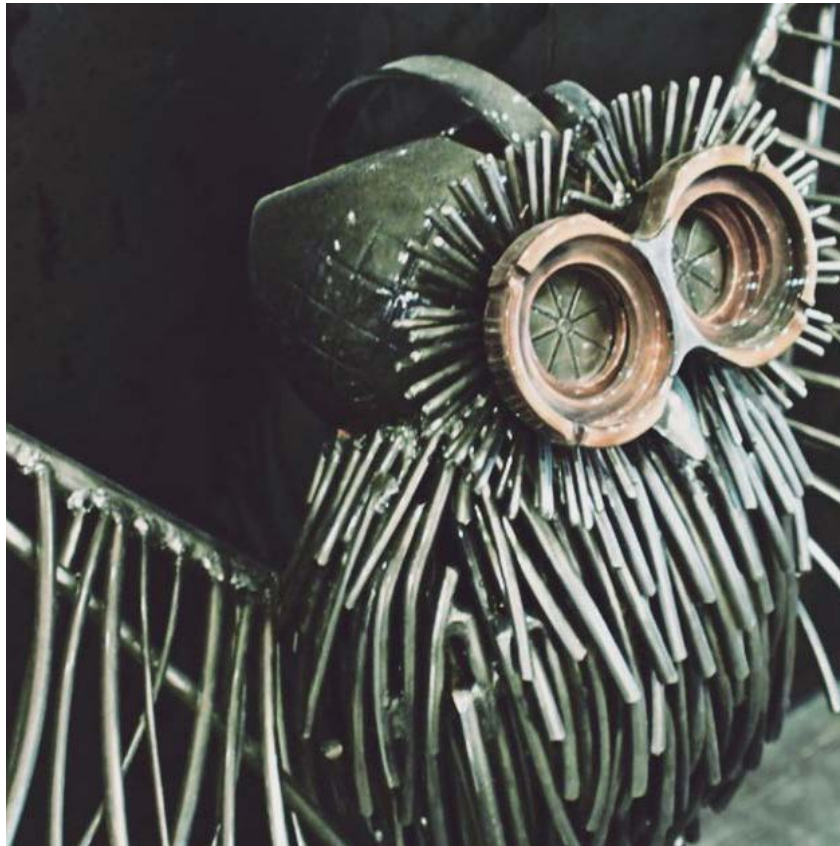
not an endless number of things to do, so it gave me the focus to actually get some work done and entertain myself while doing it with my own company.

Rootstalk: What was it like being a queer artist in Casper?

Bower: It was hard staying in Casper. Casper is the hometown of Matthew Shepard, and so you'd think there would be more equality

there, but really, there wasn't anything. I kept searching for an outlet to meet my people; I felt really alone. And there wasn't really anything.

[PFLAG](#) (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) was trying to do picnics in the park that I would go to. I made this lyra stand apparatus to hang



my trapeze from and I performed one year. They would just sort of tuck it in the back of [Washington Park](#) where you couldn't really see it. I would always invite friends to go, but no one would show up. It was just the same people who always went, which wasn't many. I mean for them it was, for them 50 people is like "Wow, look at what we did."

And I'm thinking "This isn't enough. There are people wanting to take their own lives because they feel so alone or like there is no one there to understand them and there are no outlets for queer people. They can't be themselves, and they feel like they have to conform to the way that everybody else is, and that's just not how it needs to be. So I started going to PFLAG meetings to ask, "Why don't you advertise it, why don't you make something of this?" But nobody really listened to me, and so I finally got some friends to go with me one time, and we just sat at this table and then we finally had some gravity. I was able to say, "We need to make the picnic in the park something different, something bigger, like create booths, actually advertise it so that people actually come." and then they listened. I got my friend Mallory to be a part of it with me, and we started planning something bigger, and then it worked and it took off. Eventually I got to walk in our little

pride parade with Matthew Shepard's father and do a little speech across from the courthouse. TV came and they interviewed us, and they were like, "This is how you do pride in a small town in America, yes!"

I guess I felt like if I'm gonna be here, I want to do something that the community needs. It felt really uncomfortable because I grew up in a religious, Mormon family, and it was totally unacceptable to be out and queer, but I did it anyway. I just decided that it was worth the risk. If I had

to make myself a target so that other people could feel accepted and loved and know that they have a place in the world, where they can be themselves, then it's worth the risk. I feel like Burning Man taught me that and just being around other people who were totally, authentically, radically themselves.

Rootstalk: Do you feel like art was a big part of how you expressed your identity?

Bower: Yeah it was, and I didn't realize. One of my teachers was talking about the concept behind art, like really creating something meaningful in every art piece. They emphasized that very art piece

means something, and they would psychoanalyze the pieces. At first, I thought it was all bullshit; I don't think about that at all when I create something, and that was the story I told myself. Then one time I had finished this tree piece with pipes that were bending, this organic form, and it just has this balance to it. It went in my friend's gallery, Haven, and it was like actually structural and held up the staircase above.

I was having a couple drinks with one of my fellow artists, who was a graphic artist, at this party and it was probably one in the morning, and he was just looking at it and said, "This is what I see in this piece." To him it expressed something, and when he reflected that back at me, it was like he saw into my soul a little bit in the way that he described it, and I thought "Whoa, I actually am expressing something in my art, and I just didn't have the intention going into it, it's just what came out of me."

Eventually I got to walk in our little Pride Parade with Matthew Shepard's father and do a little speech across from the courthouse. TV came and they interviewed us, and they were like, "This is how you do Pride in a small town in America"...

And so, I realized that it doesn't really matter whether it's intended or not, it comes through. A couple of days ago, I did a little piece for a show, and one of the presenters was like "I see death in your art." And I said "Yeah, that's a piece of it; that's part of its beauty; there's dark and there's light," and I kind went into explaining that, but it's just like my identity does come through. That's what I love about it and that's where I'm going next with some of my art to really dig deeper into the emotions that do generate behavior in me and society and create from that space, from those feelings.

Rootstalk: What's your biggest dream as an artist?

Bower: My biggest dream is to take art to Burning Man, and I'm currently working on an art car called the "Goth Cart". It's like a golf cart that I'm turning into a gothic version of itself. I'm collaborating with other artists to make it into this wild thing, One one of my neighbors has the world's fastest jet engine bus so he works with fire, so I'm gonna have this thing, like, blow fire out of the top of it. And then I have another neighbor who makes cars artistic, so he's helping me, he gave me a bumper the other day so that I could cut it down and make it look super badass.

Rootstalk: What are you working on now?

Bower: What I'm working towards now is developing an art community, and I'm trying to figure out how to do it online. Before Covid I would have these art parties where I just invite people over to my studio and teach them skills like plasma cutting, welding, or how to use the forge and blacksmith. I've done flower making workshops where people make roses together, to get them fired up, to get them excited to use their creativity.

They took away funding from the school system for art classes, which is to me, devastating, because you put your money where you think there's value. If they take away money from art, that's telling the world, or our country, that art and creativity are not valuable. So, yeah, I just want to make it my mission to bring that back, to inspire people to realize how valuable it is. Because it is such a healing, cathartic thing to do art, the process of making art is healing, and looking at art can be healing and inspiring and meaningful. Without art there is less meaning to life. I think every person needs to know that if they can harness their gift, whatever it is—poetry, writing, creativity, painting, sculpture, whatever it is—if they can develop that gift, they can bring more meaning to their lives. 🌿

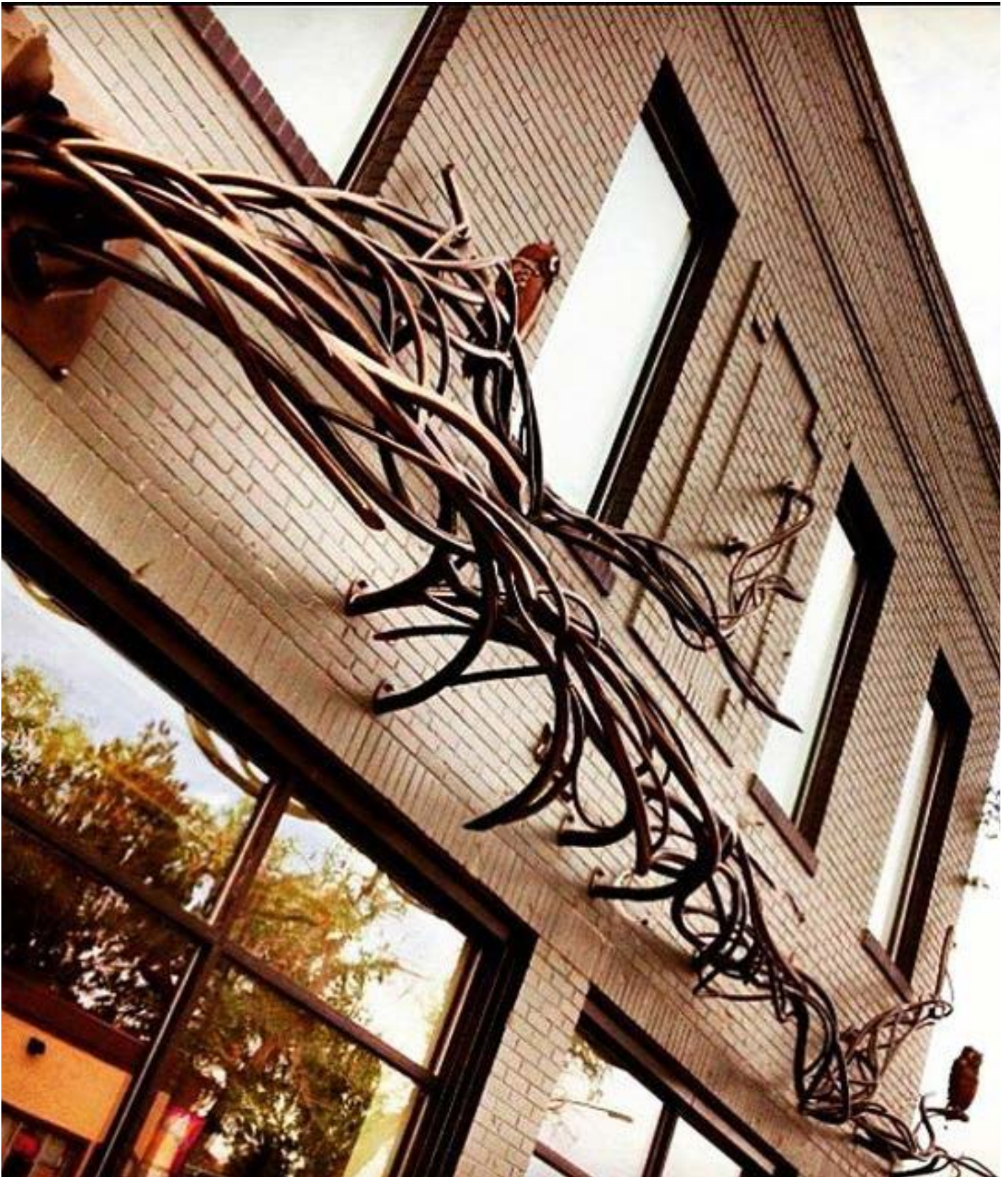




PHOTO BY WILLIAM OJENDYK. "QUAD CITIES #23, HILLSDALE, ILLINOIS, 30 APRIL 2021"



PHOTO BY ZAREEN JOHNSON

Shiraz Johnson '22 is a third-year student at Grinnell College majoring in mathematics and concentrating in statistics. She is from Long Island, New York, but is glad to have Iowa as a second home. Shiraz is the co-president of Grinnell's Math Club and works for two different libraries in both New York and Iowa. In her free time, Shiraz enjoys crocheting, baking, reading, and playing board games.

Along the Way

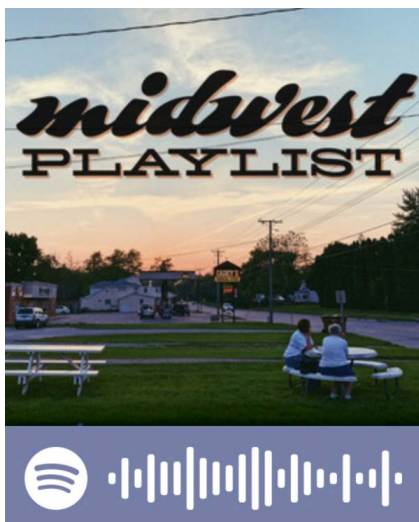
BY SHIRAZ JOHNSON

It's difficult to remember summers where my dad and I didn't pack backpacks, coolers, books, and ourselves into a car and drive west from our home on Long Island. For most people, a road trip is about getting to a destination, but for us it was about the road. Highways, side streets, and rundown dirt roads. We spent most nights in little motels with bright blue swimming pools and American flag murals, but for two weeks each summer we called our car "home." I have fond memories of visiting museums and old friends, riding horses and roller coasters, and singing along to music coming out of car speakers.

This piece reflects those times, as well as the shared "road trip experience" of many Midwesterners. My collage and poem were inspired by the trips spent driving through Missouri—[Ted Drewes frozen custard](#) (featured in the bottom right of the collage) is a must have! I wanted to give others a little taste of that warm feeling of being curled up in the front seat of a car, of being on an adventure. Take a listen to the "Midwest Playlist" to hear some of the amazing music that came from the area, and maybe one day you'll take a road trip and decide to put it on while driving in the middle of nowhere. 🌿



ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF SHIRAZ JOHNSON



To listen to Shiraz Johnson's playlist, click on the image at left, or scan the spotify code in the app.

Along the Way

BY SHIRAZ JOHNSON

Roads in
middle of nowhere,
Missouri
are made by
cars before us
paving the way
in dirt

I'm going to Graceland
and in response my dad
tries to find
NPR an antenna
searching through the
night sky for
a radio signal
that is too far
away to pick up

We're in perpetual
darkness except for
when the car
coming at us forgets
to turn off their
brights and I have
to blink hard
with blue spots
dancing behind my
eyelids and
feel guilty
because my dad
can't drive with
his eyes
closed

And as we're driving
in easy silence
on the road
made by other cars
I realize that
maybe my dad
is making a
road for me,
too

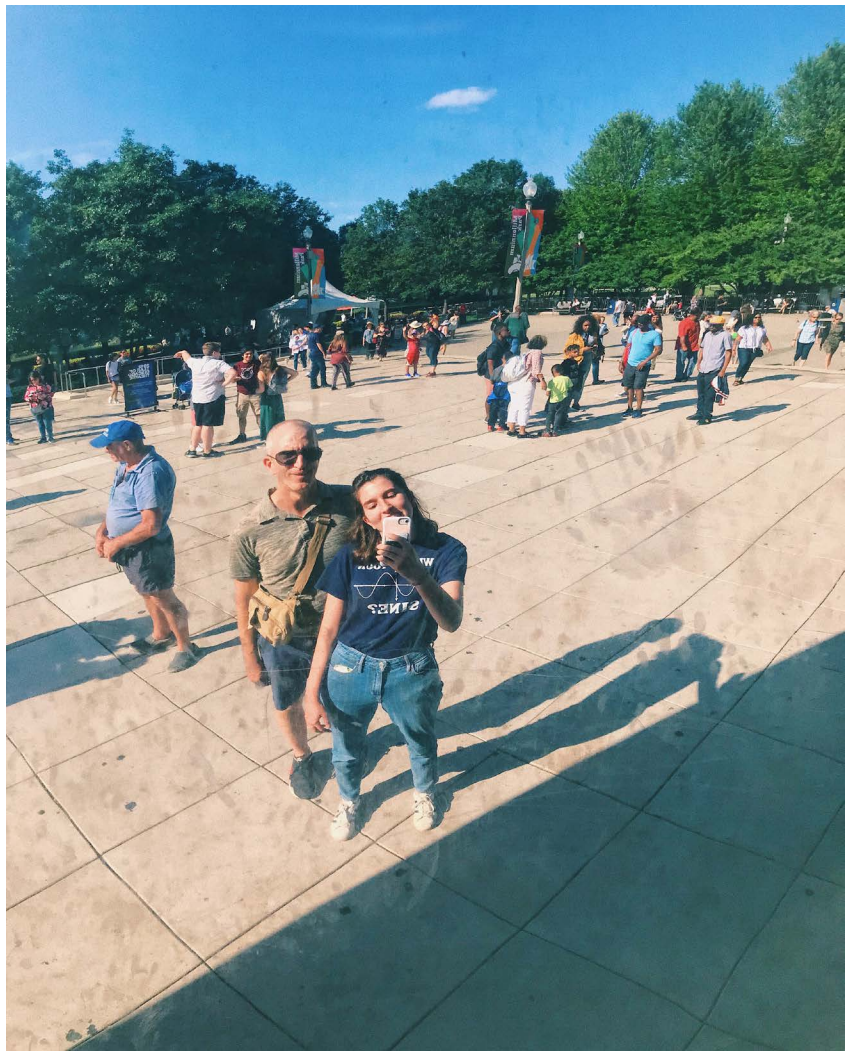


IMAGE LOCATIONS FROM TOP LEFT: [MARYVILLE, MISSOURI](#); [INDIANA DUNES NATIONAL PARK](#); AND [THE BEAN](#), CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Endangered Animals of the Prairie



BISON SKULLS, IN DETROIT, MI, WAITING TO BE GROUND UP FOR FERTILIZER IN 1892. PHOTO COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Too often, when we think about the landscape of the prairie region, we think only about endless cultivated fields. In reality, the prairie is an astonishingly diverse biome, and the Midwest is home to numerous plant and animal species, some of which can be found nowhere else..

In recognition of this fact, in this issue of *Rootstalk* we are featuring a new addition to our regular “...of the Prairie” feature. In the past we’ve highlighted prairie birds, mammals and trees; in this issue we’re recognizing four threatened animal species that call the prairie home.



PHOTO BY KIMBERLY FRASER, COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE (USFWS), MOUNTAIN-PRAIRIE DIVISION

The Black-footed Ferret (*Mustela nigripes*)

Status: Critically endangered
Individuals in the wild: 370

This member of the weasel family preys primarily on prairie dogs, and this in large part accounts for its endangered status. As the open grasslands of the Great Plains have shrunk, so has the population of prairie dogs, and the population of the black-footed ferret along with them. In fact, this species' numbers have plummeted so disastrously that for a while it was suspected that the species had gone extinct. A remnant population was found, however, and for the last thirty years a coalition of state and federal agencies, zoos, Na-

tive American tribes, conservation organizations and private landowners have combined efforts to give the black-footed ferret a second chance. Habitat loss and disease are still serious threats, however, and very few of these sleek and graceful animals remain living in the wild. 🌿

To see a collection of the World Wildlife Fund's photos and videos on the black-footed ferret, click this [link](#).

You'll find more entries focused on the prairie's endangered animals on pages 45, 54, and 62.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BERYL CLOTFELTER

*Born in Oklahoma in 1926, **Beryl Clotfelter** moved to Kansas at the age of two and lived in southern Kansas until he entered college in 1944. After college, he did graduate work in and received a PhD in physics. After two years as a research physicist for Phillips Petroleum company, Beryl chose to return to academia, and he taught in universities in Idaho and Oklahoma. In 1963, he moved to Grinnell College, where he is now Professor Emeritus of Physics.*

Harvesting Wheat in the 1940s

BY BERYL CLOTFELTER

During the eight years that I lived in Coats, Kansas—from 1934 to 1942—the town existed to support the farms in the area, and the well-being of the farms was of crucial importance to everyone in town. The farmers, in turn, depended entirely upon wheat, for it was the only cash crop. Wheat was planted in the fall and sprouted and grew to a height of a few inches before winter, then died down during the winter months and began to grow again in spring. As stalks became taller and the grain began to ripen, the wheat became more and more vulnerable to weather damage, for the heads became heavy and the dry stalks became brittle. Five minutes of hail could completely destroy a field of wheat, cutting down all the stalks and beating grain out of the heads. An hour or so of rain and wind could flatten the field and make the crop difficult, if not impossible, to recover.

When the wheat was ripe, everything else in the community took second place to the harvest, which required about two weeks. In a town as small as ours, churches that had Wednesday night services canceled them during harvest time, and all other non-essential community activities were suspended during the period of wheat harvest. It was a time of high drama, when everyone in the community watched the weather if clouds began to threaten. I am sure that in a town whose population was measured in thousands, many people would have been unconcerned about the wheat harvest drama, but in a town whose population was measured in hundreds, few could have been unaware of the tension at wheat harvest time.

The machine that was used to harvest wheat was the combine, so called because it combined three separate harvesting operations: reaping, threshing and win-

nowing. At that time, most combines were pulled by tractors; self-propelled machines were just beginning to appear. A three-man crew was required to harvest wheat: a tractor driver, a combine operator, and a truck driver to haul the grain from the farm to the elevator in town. I do not recall ever knowing of a woman working in the harvest field, so if a farmer did not have at least two sons old enough to work with the machinery, he needed to hire help for harvest.

Many people in the community who could spare time from other jobs were pressed into service. My father, a minister and pastor, probably worked in the wheat harvest every summer that we lived there, and as soon as I became old enough, I also was employed during harvest. Their absence from the field did not indicate that the women in the family were not working, for they

were preparing and then cleaning up after a large meal at noon. Always the crew stopped at noon to go to the house for a dinner that typically included fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans, bread or freshly baked biscuits, and pie.

Self-propelled combines that one sees today have the cutting platform across the front of the machine, and the operator sits in a cab high above the ground and enjoys his air conditioning and per-

haps a sound system. When a combine was pulled by a tractor, the tractor was directly in front, and the cutting platform extended off to the side 12 or 15 feet. The cutting platform consisted of a sickle bar at the front to cut the grain, a reel that rotated to knock the cut stalks back onto the platform so they did not fall forward onto the ground, and on the platform itself, and either a mov-

A three-man crew was required to harvest wheat: a tractor driver, a combine operator, and a truck driver to haul the grain from the farm to the elevator in town....



PHOTO COURTESY OF THECOMBINEFORUM.COM

ing canvas belt or an auger to carry the grain into the machine. Inside the machine, stalks of wheat passed through a beater which beat the grain out of the head and reduced the stalks to coarse chaff. The mixture of grain kernels and pounded stalks went onto a separator which shook to cause the kernels to fall through a grill into a collecting pan and also gradually walked the chaff to the back end of the combine where it was discharged onto the ground. An auger transported the grain kernels from the collecting pan to a bin on the side of the machine high enough that a truck could drive under it.

Inevitably, some kernels rode to the back of the machine with the pounded stalks and were lost, and that loss increased as the quantity of stalks being processed became greater. Therefore, it was important that the cutting platform carrying the sickle bar be raised as high as possible without missing heads of grain. The operator stood at just about the level of the reel and raised and lowered the platform with a lever or with a wheel, depending upon the make of the machine, to try to get all the heads with a minimum of stalk. When the combine was in motion cutting wheat, the operator had to be constantly alert to raise the platform when the wheat was tall and lower it when the wheat was short, always being aware of the danger of running into the ground. Because the operator stood at approximately the level of the discharge, when the wind blew dust from the discharge at the back of the machine toward him, he worked in a cloud of dust and ground-up wheat stalks.

If there had been a heavy dew during the night, the combine crew could not begin work until the wheat had dried, because if the heads were damp, kernels would

not be beaten out in the threshing process. That might mean that the crew could not actually enter the field and begin work until about 9 o'clock in the morning. The time before that was spent putting fuel in the machines and greasing the bearings of the combine. Most of the bearings were not sealed, and every day the operator had to pump grease into them before work began. The operator used a grease gun, which is similar to a caulking gun, and attached the nozzle to a small nipple on the bearing called a zerk. (The name is eponymous – the system was invented by Oscar Zerk.) The grease was put into the gun from large buckets which the farmer bought in preparation for harvest season. Making up

for the late start in the morning, crews often worked until the sun was low on the horizon. I think that crews I worked on usually stopped by about 7pm, but my memory on that is hazy. I do remember that I was always ready to stop before the farmer was. Sometimes tractors and combines were equipped with lights so that they could work until after dark, but I recall see-



PHOTO COURTESY OF THECOMBINEFORUM.COM

ing combine crews using the lights only a few times.

My first experience working in the wheat harvest came the summer I was fourteen years old, when I drove the truck hauling wheat from the farm to the elevator in town. I was working for a farmer who lived a few miles out of town, and I think that my father also was working for the same man, probably as a combine operator. When the combine bin was full of wheat, the machine stopped, and I drove the truck up next to it so that the spout of the bin was over the bed of the truck. One of the crew opened the gate of the bin, and wheat ran into the truck. When I had a load, I drove into town. I had no driver's license at that age, but we were far from any

highway that was likely to have a patrolman, and what I was doing was not unusual.

At the elevator I drove the truck onto the scales, so that all four wheels were on the scales platform, and the elevator attendant weighed the truck and its load. Sometimes the attendant took a sample of the grain to check for moisture content. I then drove into the elevator itself and positioned the truck over a grill made of steel rods with the front wheels of the truck on a hydraulic lift. Two or three elevator employees worked at that station, and one of them opened the back gate of the truck so that the grain could run out and then operated the hydraulic lift to raise the front end of the truck to encourage the grain to flow. I could stay in the cab and ride up with the lift, or I could step out of the cab and stand aside until the grain had been dumped. Usually I preferred to get out because I did not enjoy riding up. I then drove the truck back over the scales so that the empty weight could be recorded, then returned to the farm for the next load.

In 1942, I moved with my parents from Coats to Gypsum, Kansas, and in 1944, during my first semester of college, my parents moved from Kansas to Nash, in northern Oklahoma. My pattern of working for farmers in the community was broken by the move. However, during my freshman year at college I lived in a dormitory with a roommate I had never met before. At the end of the first year we both needed to work during the summer, and at my suggestion we decided to follow the wheat harvest. I was able to make arrangements for us to get work in the Nash community, where my parents now lived, which was still wheat growing country even though it is in northern Oklahoma, and also at Gypsum, the community where I had once lived.

My roommate and I went as a team, although at

one stop we went to separate farmers. He had never done any work on a farm, but I thought that he could drive a tractor, and I had had enough experience that I offered myself as a combine operator.

We worked near Nash, Oklahoma, for about two weeks. We then moved to Gypsum, Kansas, and worked for another farmer for about two weeks. When the harvest was done there, we took a bus to Oberlin, Kansas, went to the courthouse, where farmers were coming to hire men, and found employment. After the harvest was done there, we went to Sidney, Nebraska, and my memory is that we hitchhiked on that leg of the trip. There, again, we found employment and worked throughout the wheat harvest. The next jump would have been

into the Dakotas, but my roommate needed to get back for a commitment in Oklahoma, and so we returned home.

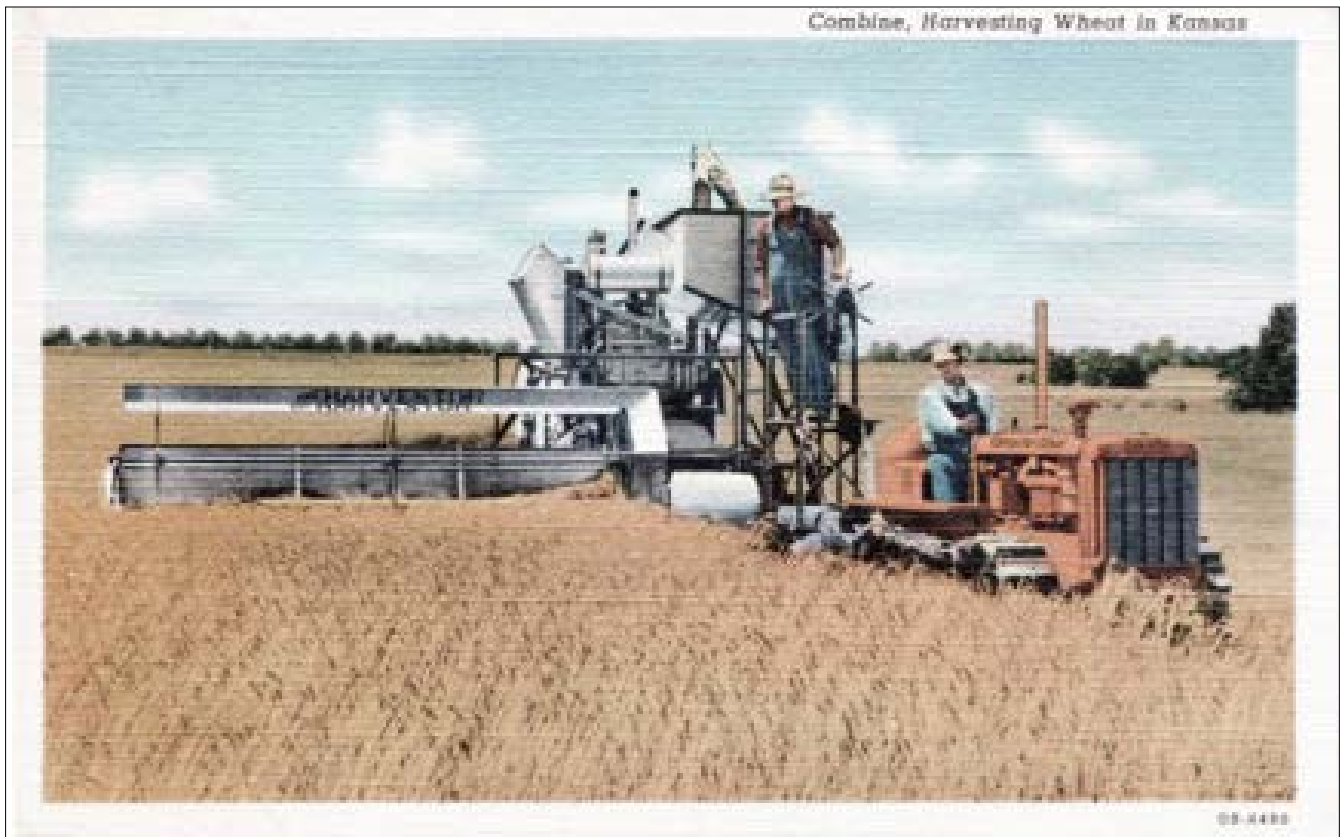
At every location, the farmer provided us room and board for the time that we worked for him. I have no idea now what we were paid, and I do not think that there was any explicit discussion of the value of our room and board for the time that we were at each farm.

I have only vague memories of the routine work, but three experiences stick in my mind vividly:

(1) My lips became painfully chapped from the sun, even though I always wore a large straw hat while working in the field. I do not think Chapstick was on the market yet, and I did not have a chance to get something like Mentholatum or Vaseline that would have soothed my lips. As a substitute I used oil that was intended for the crank cases of our machines. I remember how it tasted, but I do not remember how well it worked on my lips.

(2) When we were hitchhiking, we once were picked up by a young couple in a coupe with a rumble

We worked near Nash, Oklahoma, for about two weeks. We then moved to Gypsum, Kansas, and worked for another farmer for about two weeks. When the harvest was done there, we took a bus to Oberlin, Kansas, [and] went to the courthouse where farmers were coming to hire men, and found employment....



"THIS POSTCARD SHOWS WHAT I THINK IS AN INTERNATIONAL HARVESTER COMBINE OF THE SORT THAT I WORKED ON. THIS LOOKS VERY MUCH AS I REMEMBER THE COMBINES THAT I MOST COMMONLY SAW, ALTHOUGH I DO NOT RECALL EVER SEEING A CATERPILLAR TRACTOR IN A WHEAT FIELD. MY MEMORY IS PRIMARILY OF COMBINES WITH THE CUTTING PLATFORM ON THE RIGHT-HAND SIDE PULLED BY TRACTORS WITH RUBBER TIRES." POSTCARD FROM THE COLLECTION OF BERYL CLOTFELTER

seat, and we rode together in that seat all afternoon. It was my only experience with a rumble seat.

(3) Late one evening we arrived at a town where we planned to spend the night, and we decided that instead of spending money for a motel room, we would sleep outside. We walked out from the edge of town a short distance and bedded down in the ditch, with dry weeds smoothed under us as a mattress and also to protect us from the cold ground. So far as I can recall, we slept well.

My roommate went to a different college in the fall, and I lost track of him, and several attempts to locate him were unsuccessful. More than fifty years later he contacted me, and we exchanged a few letters before he died. When we began discussing our summer following the wheat harvest, I was amazed by his recall of details that I had completely forgotten, and I asked

him if he had kept a diary or kept notes and how he could remember so much better than I. His response was, "You probably do not remember the details of our 'wheat harvest summer' because it wasn't the HUGE experience in your life that it was in mine." He had never done anything similar before and did not do it again.

I realize now that we were near the end of an era. When combines were first introduced, they were pulled by horses or mules. I never saw a combine pulled by horses, for that era had ended completely. Then for several years they were pulled by tractors, and we were at the very end of the tractor period, for already we were seeing self-propelled combines. The war had accelerated the introduction of self-propelled combines for several reasons, including the reduction in steel in manufacture and the reduction in manpower to operate in the field, but once they were well-established they changed



“A COMMON COMBINE WAS THE BALDWIN GLEANER; THE ONE SHOWN HERE IS A 1938 MODEL, AND IT PROBABLY DID NOT DIFFER MUCH FROM THE ONES THAT I SAW IN THE EARLY 1940’S. I THINK THAT BY THE TIME I WAS DOING THAT WORK, MOST TRACTORS HAD RUBBER TIRES RATHER THAN THE LUGS AND STEEL SHOWN ON THIS TRACTOR.” PHOTO COURTESY OF TWIN CITY HISTORIAN TONY THOMPSON

the pattern of cutting wheat in the Great Plains. The owner of a self-propelled combine could load it onto a truck and make the jump ahead to the next region where wheat was becoming ripe. Contract combining became common – crews with combines and trucks, sometimes several of each, moved from community to community contracting with farmers to harvest their wheat for them. Some crews working that way traveled from Texas to Canada cutting wheat all the way, and we saw spectacular pictures of fields being cut by several combines at once, chasing each other around the field.

After college, I moved away from wheat country and have never lived there since, and so I know nothing about practices today. When I see the humongous combines sitting in the dealer’s display yard in Grinnell with an air-conditioned cab to protect the operator and perhaps GPS to guide the machine, I cannot imagine

what the experience would be like, for my memory is of dust and dirt and noise.

Even though my knowledge of the technology is 75 years out of date, I feel certain that two things that I remember from my experience in a small town in wheat country have not changed: the sense of urgency felt by everyone in the community about getting the crop harvested, and the anxiety of the farmer on a summer afternoon when the wheat is almost ripe and thunder clouds roll in with a greenish tinge that often presages hail. Until the grain has been cut and stored in bins, the crop is at the mercy of Mother Nature, no matter what the technology of harvesting may be. 🌾



PHOTO BY ROBERT LISAK. ALL OTHER PHOTOS
COURTESY OF DAVID OTTENSTEIN

David Ottenstein is a free-lance commercial photographer based in New Haven, Connecticut, where he has worked since graduating from Yale University in 1982 with a BA in American Studies and a concentration in photography. In addition to his commercial work, he pursues fine-art/documentary photography, exploring interiors of abandoned and decaying buildings in the northeast, the vanishing agrarian landscape of the Midwest, and visual/cultural themes contained in the landscape of the American West. His work is being collected by the [Western Americana Collection at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library](#), Grinnell College, the [New Britain Museum of American Art](#), the [Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art](#) in Kansas City, and Pennsylvania State University's [Palmer Museum of Art](#), among others. David is a member of the [Silvermine Guild of Artists](#) in New Canaan, Connecticut.

“Land, Wind and Sky”: A Sojourn on the Canadian Plains

BY DAVID OTTENSTEIN

On the Canadian prairie in southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, one is acutely aware of three basic elements—land, wind and sky—for often, that is all there is. In June of 2019 I spent three weeks photographing in this vast prairie region. Similar to the Midwestern prairie, the land was sometimes flat, but frequently comprised of rolling hills, and there was often a strong, steady wind. I experienced expansive open space, a stillness that induced a reassuring sense of solitude, and an enormous sky filled most of the time with a dramatic array of cloud formations ranging from towering cumulonimbus to delicate cirrus clouds.

The landscape served as backdrop to the aging, largely abandoned buildings I was there to photograph. I was not disappointed with what I found: churches, schoolhouses, farmhouses, grain elevators, fences and other structures. Unlike similar subjects I've encountered on the prairie in Montana and North Dakota, the buildings in Saskatchewan and Alberta were usually free of graffiti or other signs of vandalism. I don't know the reason for this, but I suspect it has more to do with respect for the history of these places than their remoteness, although that may well explain some of the difference.

Upon arriving in Saskatchewan, I spent five days based in the small town of [Assiniboia](#) (population 2,400). I easily found a nice motel; there was an art gallery, a

phone store where I was able to address my smartphone and other technology issues and ample restaurants from which to choose. But once I left town each morning in search of my subjects, I quickly felt the vast openness of the prairie, through which I could drive for hours and only occasionally encounter small towns that were little more than hiccups on the landscape. I was reminded

constantly how small and insignificant the human imprint on this land actually is.



WEATHERED LUTHERAN CHURCH, SASKATCHEWAN



CENTER-PIVOT TRACK, ALBERTA



CRUMBLING GRAIN ELEVATORS, SASKATCHEWAN

I experienced expansive open space, a stillness that induced a reassuring sense of solitude, and an enormous sky filled most of the time with a dramatic array of cloud formations....



GRAIN ELEVATOR AND CLOUDSCAPE, SASKATCHEWAN.



GNARLED TREES, SASKATCHEWAN



BASEBALL DIAMOND, SASKATCHEWAN

My observations and the images which record them reflect my curiosity about the landscape. Why does it look the way it does? What has shaped it? How do light and happenstance allow us to read, interpret and attempt to comprehend it?



BARN AND CUMULUS CLOUDS, SASKATCHEWAN

The landscape served as backdrop to the aging, largely abandoned buildings I was there to photograph. I was not disappointed with what I found: churches, schoolhouses, farmhouses, grain elevators, fences and other structures. Unlike similar subjects I've encountered on the prairie in Montana and North Dakota, the buildings in Saskatchewan and Alberta were usually free of graffiti or other signs of vandalism. I don't know the reason for this, but I suspect it has more to do with respect for the history of these places than their remoteness....

Sometimes, my photographs depict an inhabited landscape, often not. Either way, the pictures are about how we and the landscape interact....



ABANDONED SCHOOL WITH AN APPROACHING STORM, SASKATCHEWAN



FENCELINE, ALBERTA



PRAIRIE LAKE, SASKATCHEWAN

Whether I'm photographing in remote farmland, a forested national park, or a small town, I consider myself an observer of the landscape—the natural, the built and the somewhere in between. I think about all three in the same way. I'm not partial to one over the other. My observations, and the images which record them, reflect my curiosity about the landscape. Why does it look the way it does? What has shaped it? How do light and happenstance allow us to read, interpret and attempt to comprehend it? Sometimes, my photographs depict an inhabited landscape, often not. Either way, the pictures are about how we and the landscape interact.

My photographs address the human imprint on the land. In subtle, fading tire ruts traced through the

desert, or the sprawl of urban development on the plains stretching out from distant mountains, or the decomposing frame of a farmhouse on the edge of a cornfield on rolling hills in Iowa. In some of my recent work, I've been looking at small towns struggling to sustain themselves, sometimes holding their own against forces that are shifting the balance between thriving urban centers and small rural communities, and sometimes failing to remain viable.

My intent is not to judge—neither to condemn nor to celebrate—but to point out, to say, “take a look at this.” I hope to impart to the viewer a sense of what I felt and experienced when I first encountered my subject. 🌿



A STORM IN ALBERTA

Endangered Animals of the Prairie

The American Burying Beetle (*Nicrophorus americanus*)



PHOTO BY LINDSAY VIVIAN, COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, TAKEN AT PRICE RANCH NEAR BURWELL, NEBRASKA

Status: Threatened Individuals in the wild: unknown

The American burying beetle got its name from its habit of burying small dead animals when it encounters them. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service had listed this large beetle as an endangered species, but in October of last year “[downlisted](#)” it as [threatened](#), but no longer in immediate danger of extinction, largely due to captive breeding programs such as the one run by the Cincinnati Zoo.

Researchers aren’t entirely sure of the reasons for this distinctively marked insect’s decline, but speculation is that—as is so often the case—the population has shrunk mostly because of habitat loss. The beetle once had a range that stretched across 150 counties in 35 states in the eastern and central United States, as well as

in southern Canada in Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia. Now the beetle is found only in six states: Arkansas, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and South Dakota.

USFWS cautions that it is important to continue conservation efforts on the beetle’s behalf, as ongoing climate change and continuing urbanization and agricultural expansion will perpetuate the threat to its existence. 🌱

To watch a video on the Cincinnati Zoo’s efforts to breed the endangered American burying beetle, click [this link](#).



PHOTO COURTESY OF NINA KOUCHI

Nina Kouchi is a third-year student at Grinnell College from Charlotte, North Carolina. She's majoring in Computer Science with a concentration in Technology Studies. During the pandemic, she decided to try some new things and found that she really enjoys camping and hiking.

**All references appear in this issue's "End-notes."*

Water Management on the Missouri River

NINA KOUCHI

In March 2019, devastating floods hit the Missouri River floodplain and lasted for almost an entire year. Corey McIntosh and his wife, Tina Popson, who farm along the Missouri in western Iowa, were displaced by the flooding and had to leave their family farm to seek shelter. Mr. McIntosh's great-grandparents purchased that land in the early 1940s, and the family has been farming it ever since. Since long before the '40s, flooding has been a part of the history of the Missouri, but in recent years flooding has become more frequent and stronger. With climate change and all of the alterations made to the river, recent flooding is some of the worst in history, and this is likely to continue to cause ruinous losses for operations like Mr. McIntosh's.

Across the country, there is a need to control water supplies because there are consequences to both shortages and excesses of water. As the longest river in the United States, the Missouri River experiences the challenges of both. Many other places in the United States do, too; the problems could arise anywhere. Often, humans then attempt to control any aspects that they can to make water systems and management more consistent.

Human intervention on the Missouri River began in the early 1930s. At the turn of the decade, during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, many farmers in the Missouri River basin lost their crops from alternating catastrophic floods and drought. The net result was that many were forced to abandon their farms. When

flooding continued to tear through the Missouri Basin, in 1943, Congress tasked the [United States Army Corps of Engineers](#) (USACE) with creating a flood control plan for the Missouri River and Basin to help bring farmers back to the region.

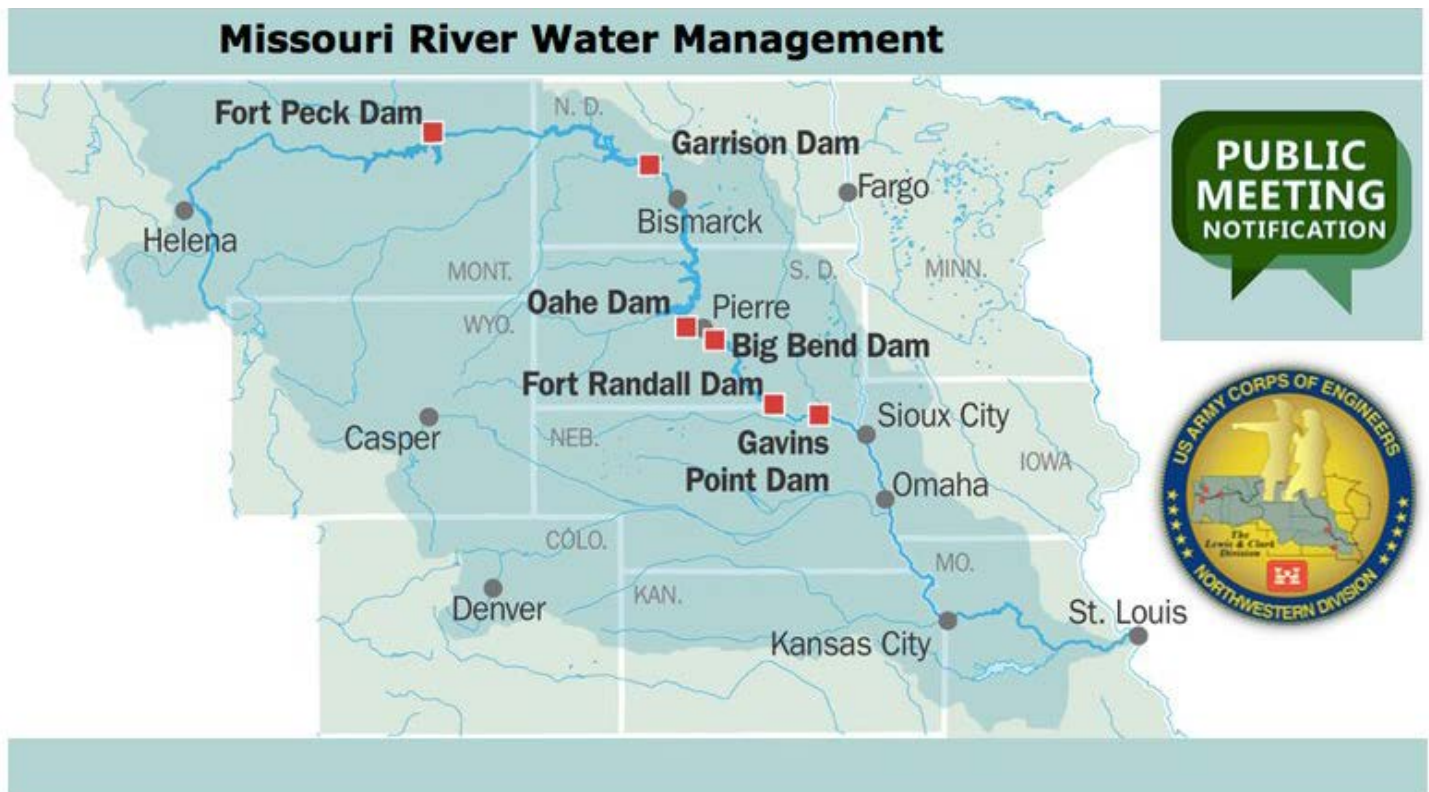
The USACE is a branch of the United States Army that consists of three divisions: an engineer division, a military construction division, and a division that handles civil works. The civil works sector of the USACE focuses on creating and maintaining infrastructure in the United States and overseas. The Corps also provides military facilities for combat zones, as well as conducting research and development of a variety of technologies. On the Missouri River, the USACE is responsible for maintaining the river's waterways, dams, and reservoirs. There are eight main areas that the USACE prioritizes when it comes to these efforts, including flood control, water supply, water quality, irrigation, hydro-power, fish & wildlife, recreation, and navigation. The USACE manages these responsibilities through the [Water Control Manual for the Missouri River Basin](#), which is also known as the Master Manual.

In recent years, flooding along the Missouri River

has been all too common. Corey McIntosh described his experience in an essay he wrote about the flooding in March 2019. According to Mr. McIntosh, "counting the 2019 flood, five of the top ten highest crests of the Missouri River in recorded history have occurred since 2010," and the past 15 years of farming were considerably more difficult than they ever were before. Mr. McIntosh claims that this is because of the 2004 revision of the Master Manual, which deprioritized flood control, making it coequal in importance with the seven other areas that the USACE manages.

"The USACE is tasked with trying to balance eight authorized purposes without any of them holding a clear priority," Mr. McIntosh said in his piece. "Unfortunately, the needs of these eight purposes are almost always in a state of constant tension with each other, with one seldom requiring the same river management practices as another. A compromise approach seeking balance among them rarely truly benefits any of them. The USACE is trying to serve eight different masters while managing to please none of them."

Under USACE's management, Mr. McIntosh said, flooding has become more frequent and intense.



MAP OF THE MISSOURI RIVER REGION COURTESY OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

“In many ways, the 2019 flood [was] more unpredictable and more devastating than the unprecedented flooding that occurred in 2011,” he said. “Most of the rain and snowmelt runoff in March 2019 entered the Missouri River via tributaries below the reservoirs of the USACE dam system. However, more proactive steps by the USACE might have mitigated the extent of the damage.” Mr. McIntosh goes on to say that while the flood waters that the USACE released from a nearby dam did not directly cause the 2019 flood, the Corps’ policies made the impacts of flooding significantly worse. Mr. McIntosh relates how much worse the flooding was in 2019 than in 2011:

“Compared to 2011, we had very little time to prepare for this year’s events. This year, we had to try to accomplish in about three days the same amount of preparations that took us over three weeks in 2011. Also, weather conditions this year, during the little time that we did have to prepare, made it exceedingly difficult to do what needed to be done. Rain and soft roads made it difficult to evacuate grain in a timely fashion. We were fortunate that we had only a limited quantity of grain remaining in storage, and we were able to evacuate it just prior to the arrival of the floodwaters. Many others, especially to our south, were not so lucky.”

In addition to the loss of crops to flooding, Mr. McIntosh also faced financial impacts and destruction to his other property. He says that this stems from a combination of politics and the weather in 2018-2019:

“Severely depressed crop market prices, due to the US government’s ongoing trade war with China, compelled many farmers to keep grain in their storage bins throughout the winter, hoping for higher prices in the spring and summer, banking on a resolution to the trade war in the coming months. Consequently, a greater percentage than normal of grain bins were still full when the unexpected floodwaters came in mid-March. The subsequent rupturing of those bins and the spoiling of the enclosed grain is a devastating loss, which is likely uninsured.

“Crop insurance coverage terminates once the crop has been harvested from a field, and typical farm/ranch property and casualty insurance policies exclude flooding as a covered peril.

“Without a way to salvage or market those spoiled bushels, many affected farmers are facing a catastrophic financial blow, during a time when farm incomes have already greatly eroded during the past few years. Many farm operations were already facing potential net operating losses in 2019, even before this devastation.

Some severely impacted farmers are now facing a loss of income for two years-worth of crops: the damaged grain that was stored from the 2018 harvest and a potential inability to plant a crop in 2019 on land that is still inundated by floodwaters at a date when our normal planting window is fast approaching.

“We sustained some damage to buildings and equipment that we were not able to evacuate. We have likely lost most of the fertilizer that



COREY MCINTOSH STANDS AT THE EDGE OF MISSOURI RIVER FLOODWATERS NEAR HIS HOME IN JULY 2019. PHOTO COURTESY OF COREY MCINTOSH



FLOODWATERS COVER THE MCINTOSH-POPSON FARMSTEAD MARCH 2019. PHOTO COURTESY OF COREY MCINTOSH



MCINTOSH GRAIN STORAGE BINS FLOODED IN MARCH 2019. PHOTO COURTESY OF COREY MCINTOSH

we applied to the fields in the Fall of 2018 for the 2019 corn crop. This is an uninsurable loss of over \$100 per acre. Organic debris (stalks, stubble, logs, etc.) has accumulated up to a couple feet thick in certain fields and drainage systems, with no good method for clearing or disposing of it.”

While the United State Department of Agriculture later did partially compensate farmers for the lost bushels, Mr. McIntosh is not the only one who is critical of the USACE’s original decisions. In a *Des Moines Register* article, “Iowa Farmers Say Army Corps Puts Endangered Species Above People,” published in March of 2019, a farmer who sits on the [Missouri River Recovery Implementation Committee](#), Leo Ettleman, says that “the Corps failed to provide [him] with important information about flooding levels as waters rose this month, leaving it to local levee managers and emergency officials to assess the danger.” “The Corps left us to die,” he said. Since then, Ettleman and other farmers have turned to Congress to change the priorities of the Missouri River’s management to focus on flood control. Mr. McIntosh sums up the situation simply: “The current system isn’t working for anyone.”

Dr. Chris Jones, a research engineer at the Iowa Institute of Hydraulic Research/Hydro Science and Engineering at the University of Iowa, manages a network of university-monitored water quality sensors across the state of Iowa. He also holds that the USACE is having difficulty trying to balance its priorities. He says that many of the problems connected to the floods have arisen because “the Missouri River is a highly modified system.” As he explains:

“We’ve dammed the [Missouri’s] upper reaches upstream of Sioux City [Iowa]. There’s a series of large reservoirs on the Missouri itself, and then there’s many other impounded streams that

are tributaries to the Missouri. These impoundments, or dams [see map on p. XXX, above], are in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Montana. We’ve channeled the lower portion downstream from Sioux City down to St. Louis to try to make the Missouri navigable for shipping. We did these things a long time ago, beginning in the 1930s. And when we did these things, we divorced the river from its floodplain. So now, when there is a flood, it tends to be a catastrophic event. And we’ve tried to farm in the Missouri River floodplain in Iowa and other states, and it’s really difficult to manage these high flow events based on the system that we have, to

try to optimize flood protection both for the farmers and for the cities that are along the Missouri.”

Corey McIntosh sums up the situation simply: “The current system isn’t working for anyone.”

Dr. Jones’s explanation accounts for

why the effects of the floods are so devastating when they happen, and he also says that while he does not agree with everything that the USACE has done, he claims it has been unfairly criticized and is having difficulty balancing all its priorities due to the number of unnatural changes made to the river back in the 1940s that made it more difficult to contain excess flooding.

A third perspective is offered by John Remus, Chief of the USACE’s Missouri River Basin Water Management Division, Northwestern Division. In an interview, he explained that balance is not an accurate way of describing how the USACE functions, and emphasized that, while there are eight authorized purposes, in reality there is only a single priority: the USACE wants to avoid any loss of life due to action by the organization. He said that management can also shift depending on what the hydrological condition of that specific time are.

For example, 2018 and 2019 were large runoff years, and therefore lots of water was coming in and the USACE’s focus was on flood control. Whenever the water level in the river gets lower, raising the specter of



LAND RECLAMATION EQUIPMENT STUCK IN FLOOD-DEPOSITED SAND, DECEMBER 2019. PHOTO COURTESY OF COREY MCINTOSH

a drought, the focus shifts to providing water for navigation and downstream water supplies. As Mr. Remus explains, the USACE is “not prioritizing one [priority] in particular; the priorities haven’t shifted over the last decade or so. The hydrologic cycle has made it appear that there’s been a shift, but there really hasn’t. [The USACE’s] political operations have not changed since 1960. In [the USACE’s] Master Manual, some of our water supply and navigation have changed but certainly not the flood control operations.”

One relatively new major problem—climate change—has forced an alteration in USACE priorities. Dr. Jones explains: “There was the whole bomb Cyclone event, and then a lot of snowpack in the mountains in the headwaters of the Missouri, an overall increase in precipitation, especially in the Dakotas over the last 30 or 40 years. That’s what’s changed. And the system wasn’t designed for these climatic events that we’ve had here since 2011, which was first of the big recent floods.”

Mr. Remus at the USACE concurs that climate change is taking place and that it is not a debatable topic. However, he also suggests that when it comes to mak-

ing decisions for the future, there is still a lot that’s unknown. “Whether we’ve reached a new normal, or we’re on our way to a new normal, that we don’t know, or at least not definitively enough to make decisions with water control management, where we’re learning more every day.” As the system design stands, Mr. Remus said, it “has a certain channel capacity to it that was designed for a certain set of hydrologic conditions that existed back in the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s.”

Additionally, environmentalists argue that not enough is being done for endangered species that live along the river, while some say that navigation has too much priority. There are many species such as the endangered pallid sturgeon and shorebirds that are affected by the changes in the Missouri River. Mr. Remus says that “the mainstem reservoir system and the bank stabilization and navigation project are working as they were intended to work.”

There are many opinions about what should be done to move forward, but no plan suggests an easy solution. Corey McIntosh says that ultimately “Congressional action will be necessary to ensure that flood

control regains top priority among the currently eight priorities for the Missouri River system.” To encourage this action, he suggests that everyone “write and call their elected state and federal officials to express their concerns about the repeated flooding in this part of the world.”

Mr. Remus agrees that Congressional action will be necessary, but cautions that no large policy change will fix the flooding problem. He says USACE already has flood control as a core mission, with policies already in place to mitigate flood damage. The perpetual problem in all this, he says, is funding: “Everything takes money, Congress has to approve it, and when these projects were built back in the 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s, the Corps came in and built the projects... we didn’t have a lot of input from the locals. [W]e’re required to do that now, and that’s a good thing... That all takes time. That takes a lot of leadership on every level to make things happen, particularly when you’re talking about something as large as the Missouri River Basin. It’s just going to take some time, some patience, and people with the patience to see it through.”

Dr. Jones says the Missouri should be allowed to reclaim its floodplain—an option which he admits would not be ideal for farmers, “but if you want to reduce the severity of these floods, you’re going to have to do something [about them], or [else] live with them. You can build the levees higher and higher and higher, and who knows how high they have to be anymore when we have these unprecedented climatic events.”

This being said, Corey McIntosh says that all eight of the authorized purposes for the Missouri River are undoubtedly noble pursuits. However, the recent changes to the operation of the river have departed from the well-established historical precedent in place for many decades when the government actively encouraged and incentivized the residential, agricultural and economic development of the river basin.

“It’s as if a local government encouraged homeowners and businesses to build in and move to a new housing development, but then a few decades later decided that the best use of that land would now instead be to construct a new interstate highway through it,”

he says. “I certainly think that the home and business owners would expect to be made whole for the loss of their homes and livelihoods in the name of a redefined public interest. If creation of habitat and preservation of species is deemed to be a worthy public interest, then the cost of that pursuit should be shared by the public and should not be expected to come primarily at the expense of a select group of private citizens who have only done what the government historically asked them to do.”

There is a long, difficult journey ahead to find the best way to manage the Missouri River. As Dr. Jones says, the USACE has “something over there that’s really difficult to manage, and there’s a lot going on.”

Editor’s Note—As we were going to press, Mr. McIntosh informed us about additional legal proceedings that are currently happening:

In ongoing litigation, a judge in the [United States] Federal Court of Claims has already issued a trial opinion that addresses the detrimental impacts on flood control that have resulted from the revisions the USACE made to its Master Manual in 2004. Judge [Nancy] Firestone states that “in the 1979 Master Manual, the Corps expressly provided that flood control was its first priority, and that fish and wildlife were the last priority.” However, with the 2004 revision of the Master Manual, Judge Firestone found that the Corps must now “always consider the impact of other ... authorized purposes on fish and wildlife because the Endangered Species Act has a higher precedence than [the] other authorized [Missouri River System] purposes,” which represents a dramatic departure from historical priorities. Following the issuance of the 2004 Master Manual, the USACE undertook a program that included modifying and degrading Missouri River flood control structures, such as wing dikes and protective bank revetments, with the purpose of destabilizing the Missouri River banks for habitat purposes.

While it may be debatable exactly how much such river management practices increased the severity of the catastrophic flooding that occurred in 2011 and 2019, Judge Firestone found in her court opinion that practices implemented in the 2004 Master Manual have certainly

led to increased flooding in many years since, including 2007, 2008, 2010, 2013 and 2014 (flooding in years after 2014 were outside the scope of the litigation). Judge Firestone said: “By its actions, the Corps has caused foreseeable water surface level increases and thus more flooding than would have occurred without the Corps’ System and River Changes.” 🌿



COREY MCINTOSH SURVEYS STUNTED CORN CROP AND BARREN FLOODED LAND, JULY 2019. PHOTO COURTESY OF COREY MCINTOSH

Endangered Animals of the Prairie

The Poweshiek Skipperling (*Oarisma poweshiek*)



Status: Critically endangered
Individuals in the wild: under 500

Skipperlings constitute about 150 described species in a small subfamily (*Heteropterinae*) of skipper butterflies (*Hesperiidae*) traditionally found in the states of the upper Midwest and the provinces of southern Canada. Because the Poweshiek skipperling lives exclusively on remnants of native prairie that have never been plowed, in recent years it has all but disappeared from its former range in Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Recent butterfly censuses seem to indicate it can now only be found in fens in Michigan and in Manitoba. According to an [article](#) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, “Today there are far fewer Poweshiek skipperlings in the world than

there are wild giant pandas.” According to the USFWS, additional causes for its sharp decline “remain a mystery,” but may include threats “such as an unknown disease or parasite, climate change or use of pesticides.”

There are still hopes that this little butterfly’s numbers can be bolstered through the efforts of projects like the Minnesota Zoo’s [Prairie Butterfly Conservation Program](#). 🌿



CLICK THE LINK AT LEFT TO HEAR A PODCAST ON EFFORTS TO RESCUE THE POWESHIEK SKIPPERLING, RECORDED BY MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY’S PUBLIC RADIO STATION, WKAR



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CRAIG TAYLOR

Craig Taylor was brought to the Texas Hill Country as a toddler more than six decades ago, and he has never lived anywhere else. His priorities are to live a Godly life, love his family and be a patriot to the USA. He is politically conservative, believes in individualism and self-reliance, and claims to have a blue-collar mentality. He has a degree in Business Administration from the University of Texas, and has worked for Advanced Micro Devices, Motorola Semiconductor, and the Transportation Security Administration. He owns firearms but doesn't hunt, preferring instead to observe animals in their natural habitat. He doesn't like cowboy hats or big belt buckles, but does wear western-style boots, eats BBQ without sauce, and prefers refried pinto beans over green beans. His daily transportation is an old Ford pick up truck with over 300,000 miles on it. He loves living in the woods because of the solitude, quietness and privacy. And because of the darkness, he can still see the stars at night.

Texas's Changing Hill Country

INTERVIEW BY ZEKE TAYLOR

The North American prairie extends from southern Canada all the way down into Central Texas. Texas's prairie includes the Hill Country, which is a very dry shortgrass prairie and, a little farther to the east, the [Blackland Prairie](#), a very rich, dark-soiled, temperate shrubland. The city of San Marcos sits on, and I-35 runs along, the fault line that divides those two types of prairie. Craig Taylor, our Associate Editor Zeke Taylor's uncle, has lived outside of San Marcos and watched the area change for nearly 30 years. Zeke recently talked with his uncle about some of those changes he's seen during that time.

Rootstalk: How have you noticed your little plot of land changing, if it has at all?

CT: I think that the main thing that has changed around this area is the change of populations. I live in the San Marcos area, which is about 30, 35 miles south of Austin. And I think San Marcos now probably has about 50 or 60 thousand people; it has really grown a lot within the last several years. Along with all the other towns along this interstate 35 corridor—Austin and Pflugerville, and on up to Georgetown, and then even south of us down to New Braunfels—San Marcos has grown exponentially over the last several years. [Editor's note: in 1990 the population of San Marcos was 29,072. In 2019 it was [64,776](#)]. East of where I live, we've got this Blackland Prairie. And a lot of that prairie land, which was pastures, all has been bought up by developers, and it's become more urban. They've got pretty dense neighborhoods now that they've built up around those areas. So that has really changed a

lot. Just due to the populations that are moving here for jobs, there's more industry, more tech jobs that are coming in, so that has brought people even from out of state to this area.

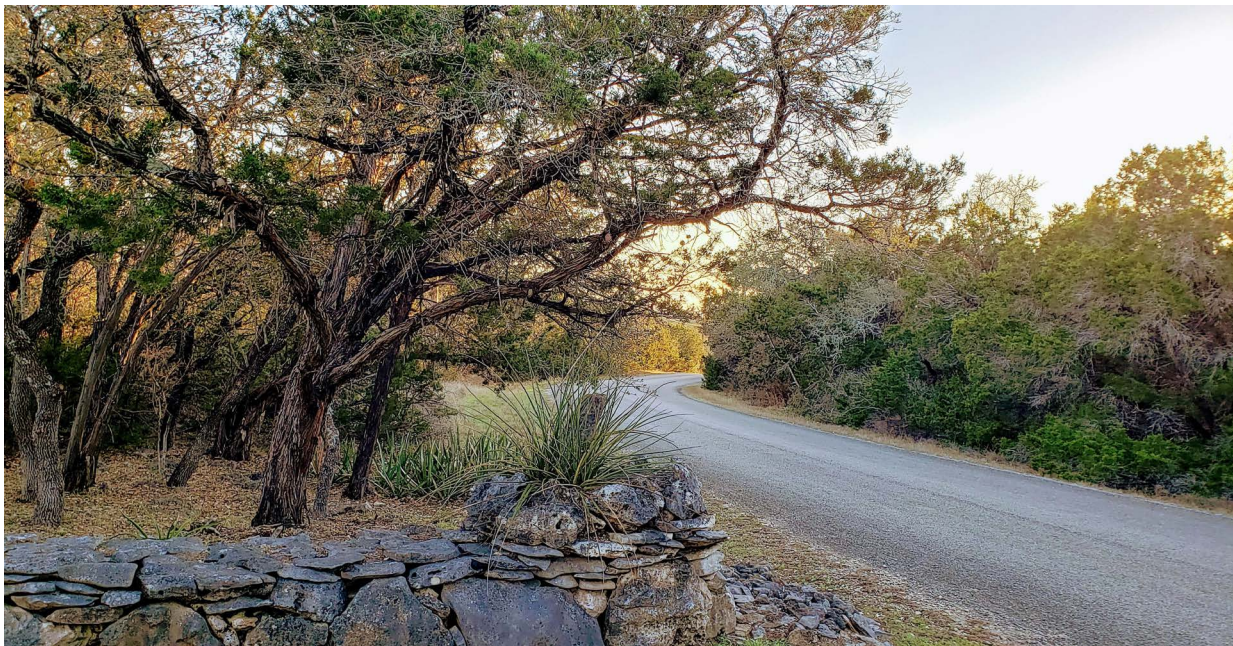
Rootstalk: Are the same kind of developments creeping out towards your property? Or not so much?

CT: Well, not too much around me. But there are some sizable neighborhoods on a little bit further south, I would say. The thing is, you don't have as much development out here in the [Hill Country](#), because you have the hills and the canyons and just rougher places to try to develop, it's just harder for a developer to come in and build a whole neighborhood. So, I think they prefer to go out and buy big pieces of land in the Blackland Prairie and build big developments out there. It's just cheaper for them, and it's easier.

Rootstalk: What about wildlife? You used to tell my brother and me about these centipedes you had that were a foot long and this kind of silvery color on the back with these orange heads. Do you still have those?

CT: We do. We get these [giant centipedes](#) during the summer that come up. And yeah, I mean, they're big. In fact, the first time that I remember seeing one, I didn't even think it was real. I thought it was a rubber toy or something. And we don't have many. But you know, every summer, I'll see maybe two or three of them. Just every now and then. But they're ones that you don't want to mess with because they do bite, they have fangs and they'll probably send you to the doctor if you ever have one bite you. I'm glad there's not that many of them around.

But we do have [scorpions](#), and they are a problem. I have to spray the house twice, once in the beginning of the summer, and then towards the end. You'll see them, they're quite common around here. They're not deadly or anything, but they'll give you a good sting. I've been stung, and my wife, Jennifer, she's been stung too, and it's not fun. But you know this is their habitat. So we just have to put up with them. The other thing I was going to tell you about, I don't know when they came into this area, but fire ants. They weren't here when I was a kid and on up into the 70s, maybe the beginning of the 80s. I



SUNSET APPROACHES AT THE EDGE OF MR. TAYLOR'S PROPERTY.

didn't even know what fire ants were. But I think they somehow got imported to the United States from South America. I think maybe they came in on a freighter, or something on the eastern part of the country, and then they just migrated on west [Editor's Note: [Fire ants](#) are native to South America and were imported, likely in the soil used for ship's ballast, to the port of Mobile, Alabama in the 1930s. Since then, they have migrated across much of the Southern United States]. And it still stays warm enough here that they have thrived. I don't think they'll go too much further west, though, because the weather probably just is not conducive to them living.

Rootstalk: Does it get too dry?

CT: Yeah, probably so. Another one of the things over the years I've seen and seen change being out here, used to you would see more rabbits. You'd see more [armadillos](#), and I would even see, out here on my land, I'd even see quail. And every now and then some wild turkeys. And now they have really dwindled. You'll still see one every now and then, but they're getting to be pretty rare. I've had people tell me that that's probably because of the fire ant infestations that have moved through here because the fire ants are just so aggressive. And so I would imagine these animals have moved out just because they don't want to deal with the fire ants. The other thing that I hadn't seen around here for many, many years, there's a university up in the Dallas/Fort Worth area called [Texas Christian University](#). I don't know if you know TCU?

Rootstalk: Oh yeah, definitely, their mascot is the Horned Frogs, right?

CT: There you go, yeah, they're called the Horned Frogs. Well, see, they used to inhabit this area quite a bit. And I think they had been run out of here due to the fire ants. You know, the Horned Frog or Horned Toad [really isn't a toad](#) or a frog. It's really a lizard. How it got that name of a frog, I don't know. But it's really a wide-body lizard. And that's kind of why they call them a toad.

I don't know when they came into this area, but fire ants...weren't here when I was a kid and on up into the 70s, maybe the beginning of the 80s

Because they're not long and slender like a normal lizard, these things are short and wide. And it has spikes all over the back of their head. So they look kind of like a miniature dinosaur

or something. But they're totally harmless, so I hate to see them being driven out of here. I remember as a kid, you know, chasing them down and carrying them around and all that. You just can't find them anymore. But yeah, they've been run out of here pretty much.

Rootstalk: Well, so on the subject of the fire ants and invasive species, those are not the only ones that have invaded your territory in the last several years. You were telling me a couple of years ago you had some real problems with [feral hogs](#). I know the whole state of Texas actually has some real issues with feral hogs now. Has that affected you at all?

CT: You know, I'd forgotten to even mention them. Yeah, the feral hogs have been a big problem, primarily to farmers. And it's not necessarily that they eat so much. It's just that they are so destructive. They run in big groups. And they go through somebody's place where they have crops planted, and they just uproot everything,



THE VIEW OVER THE HILL COUNTRY FROM CRAIG TAYLOR'S BACK PORCH.



MR. TAYLOR USED LIMESTONE AND TIMBER TO BUILD HIS HOUSE BECAUSE OF THEIR PREVALENCE IN THE HILL COUNTRY LANDSCAPE

they just dig ditches. They get big and they'll tear things up. They haven't been as prevalent up here in the hill country as they are down in lower lands, mainly because they don't have as much of a water source. And, yeah, what I had done up until a couple of years ago—during the summer primarily, when it gets so hot and dry—I used to keep two or three 25, 30 gallon containers out by the house for the deer to just try to give them some more of a water source. Well, and these feral hogs have come up into the Hill Country. They were coming up to get that water and they were digging, and I mean destroying, plants and stuff around here, so I eventually had to just stop doing that. The good thing about it now is that it's been a couple of years and I'm not seeing them on my property anymore. Every now and then I will see evidence that they've been here during the night because I'll find the digging, but they pretty much left my property. But I know they're still out here. Yeah, they're

still around.

Rootstalk: Another interesting invasive, I guess you could call it, that I've been reading about, is [emus](#). And I know you said you had a neighbor who was trying to farm them at one point, is that right?

CT: We knew of some people several years ago that were trying to raise emus. But business-wise I don't think it was very successful. So I don't know of anybody that's raising them now. But several years ago, a friend of mine that lives out here right close to us, his girlfriend was coming out to visit him and it was just after dark. And she turned onto our little road where my place is, and as her headlights kind of scanned around the curve she saw something that she had no idea what it was. Well, it was an emu standing in the middle of the road. I guess it had gotten loose from somebody's farm at one time, it was

just running wild. So, there's even some emus, yeah.

Rootstalk: Are they just out there from time to time? Or not so much?

CT: Well, not so much. It'd be pretty rare to see one. But I think over the years, when people were trying to farm them, you know, some of them would get loose, and they just kind of lived on their own. It's kind of like, there are some people that have much bigger properties than mine, that are raising more exotic wildlife, you know, like deer and antelope from Africa. And we do know, from friends, like a woman that works with my wife, Jennifer, she even has pictures of them in her in her office. These [axis deer](#) and these other big deer that are from Africa, that wandered up into her backyard. So those things are now probably integrating with the whitetail deer. But like I said, she has photos of these African deer grazing in her backyard. And we will probably see more and more of those I would imagine.

Rootstalk: And maybe, because it's a similar climate, it would be easy to raise them out there?

CT: Right. Yeah. This climate and the terrain and all is very similar to parts of Africa. And so they thrive here on their own.

Rootstalk: That's pretty interesting. Well, yeah, I'd be willing to bet that you're right, you'll probably see a lot more of those. What about plant life? Has the vegetation changed much?

CT: Well, you know, another thing I was going to tell you, changes that I've known about this area, not nec-

essarily here on my property, but one of the big crops around here that people deal with are pecan tree orchards. Not so much right here in the Hill Country. But as you get down in the lower area where they have deeper soil, there are lots of pecan trees. That's a good crop. It's been around for a long time, as well as peach orchards. Peach orchards had been known around here for generations. But the thing that I am seeing now that you used to not see, and that people are getting more into, is vineyards. They're growing grapes, because they grow really well in this limestone soil, it's very alkaline soil. So there are some big vineyards around this area. And another thing that people are experimenting with that seems to be doing pretty well, too, are olives. They're

The thing that I am seeing now that you used to not see...is vineyards. ...[A]nd another thing that people are experimenting with that seems to be doing pretty well, too, are olives

growing olive trees. Yeah, those are crops that are different, that historically, people really weren't into, but lately, I'd say over the last, you know, 10, 15 years, they have really proliferated now. All the trees and the grapes. Well, of course, the most prevalent trees out here on my land are the [Live Oaks](#). And I guess, the things that I've seen changing, I always thought that those were really slow growing trees. This is kind of a semi-arid region, they do grow pretty slow. But over the years, I've noticed that the trees that are up closer to my house that I've been able to supplement

the water they get, they've grown quite a bit. They've gotten quite a bit bigger compared to the trees that are out further. So that's the main thing. And we get different weather patterns. Different years, we've gone through some real big droughts. In 2011, we had a really serious drought during the summer. In fact, we had 90 days that summer that were at least 100 degrees [Editor's Note: According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, across

the summer months, June, July, and August, a 92 day period, the average high temperature in San Marcos, Texas, is 94.3 degrees Fahrenheit].

Rootstalk: My goodness.

CT: Yes, 90 days that were at least 100 degrees.

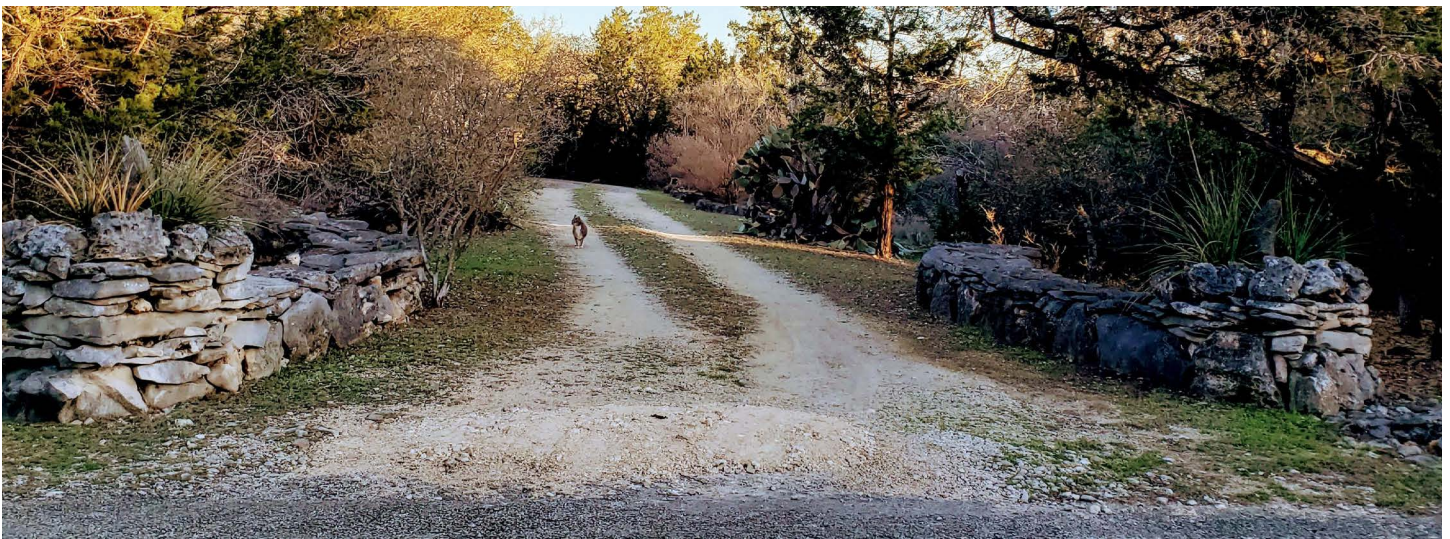
Rootstalk: And I mean, that's almost every day. For a summer?

CT: Yeah. And so the landscape here on my place changed considerably due to that one year. Because a lot of the trees I like that I was able to supplement water for, a lot of the trees right up around my house, did okay, but all the rest of the property there were lots of trees that died and have since fallen over. So that that was a big change due to that year.

Rootstalk: How have the changes you've seen affected you? What do you think about the changes you've seen? Are you concerned, or is this kind

of the way things have always been?

CT: You know, as you get older, you get to be my age, you remember a lot, and you want things to stay the way you remember them. You've probably heard the older you get the harder it is to go with the changes, and you know that's kind of true, I wish things would slow down a little bit, the growth of this whole corridor, it's just been so fast. But I'm a pragmatist, I can roll with the change, it is what it is. The truth is, it really hasn't affected me too much, I have my own place, it hasn't complicated my life so much. I have to admit it's made my property more valuable, so that's nice. If I ever decide to do something else, I have that, and it's made my land turn out to be a good investment, but I'm not really planning on doing anything right now. But I think change has always been a part of this region, it's a real place, and so there's always been some ebb and flow to it. I do wish things would slow down a little, but I've accepted it, things do change. 🌿



A CAT MAKES ITS WAY ALONG THE DRIVEWAY THAT LEADS TO CRAIG TAYLOR'S PROPERTY

Endangered Animals of the Prairie

The Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*)



PHOTO BY STEVE GIFFORD, COURTESY OF THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, TAKEN AT PATOKAH RIVER NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, INDIANA

Status: Critically endangered Individuals in the wild: 85

The numbers of this aquatic bird—at five feet, the tallest in North America—cratered during the 19th century due to habitat loss and unregulated hunting for meat, eggs and feathers. Once this majestic bird nested on the northern prairies as far south as Iowa and Illinois, but its numbers dwindled until by 1941 the flock which wintered in Texas was down to 15 birds. Protection of the crane's wintering grounds and conservation efforts helped the population to begin a rebound, but the number of birds living in the wild is still very slender. The [Patuxent Wildlife Research Center](#), in Maryland, has a successful captive breeding program with 60 birds in it, and more recently, an ambi-

tious project has established a new flock that summers at the [Necedah National Wildlife Reserve](#) in Wisconsin, with young birds raised and then trained to follow an ultralight aircraft 1,250 miles to [Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge](#) in Florida as part of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan to reintroduce a migratory flock of whooping cranes into the East, where the last flock vanished 100 years ago. 🌿



TO HEAR A WHOOPING CRANE'S CALL, CLICK THE LINK AT LEFT. RECORDING BY TOM LALLY FOR CORNELL UNIVERSITY'S MACAULEY LIBRARY



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC BJORN BOYCE

Eric Bjorn Boyce, who is from St. Paul, Minnesota, is a fourth-year Spanish major with a Latin American studies concentration. His major academic interests include human rights in Latin America and teaching English to non-native speakers. At Grinnell he enjoys weekly Film Club meetings, playing in the Zimbabwean Mbira Ensemble, squirrel-watching and napping around campus in his hammock.

Sod House, Green Roof

BY ERIC BJORN BOYCE

“Sod House, Green Roof” is a fifteen-minute video presentation I created for *Rootstalk* that traces the history and evolution of natural and organic architecture in the North American prairie. The short film draws inspiration from documentaries, video essays and personal narratives used to educate audiences about an often overlooked and underappreciated part of North American history. If you’re interested in knowing about old (or even ancient) building practices and what we can learn from them to improve construction today, this short video could change the way you think about architecture and our relationship with the land. 🌿

To link to the video on YouTube, click the [hyperlink here](#).



PHOTOS IN THIS MONTAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) ARE BY ALEXANDER JOHANSSON, I-SUSTAIN, DRU! AND MS-BARROWS, ALL VIA FLICKR



Norse Settlement



Ocmulgee Lodge

SCREENSHOTS FROM ERIC BOYCE'S VIDEO WERE CREATED USING IMAGES FROM FLICKR BY DENISBEN (TOP LEFT) AND DOUGLAS SPROTT (TOP RIGHT), FROM THE BOYCE-VJORNEVIK PERSONAL COLLECTION (IMMEDIATELY TO THE RIGHT), AND VIA GOOGLE MAPS (BELOW)



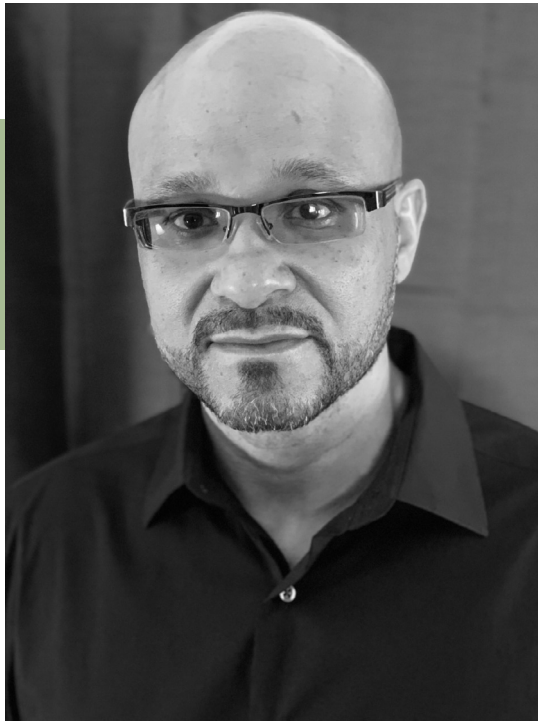


PHOTO COURTESY OF JASON ROSS

Jason Ross was a student in history professor [Michael Guenther's](#) course on *The Progressive Era*, taught as part of the Grinnell in Prison Program. Mr. Ross credits the course with helping him to discover his "passion for political social justice history." Since his release three years ago, he has lived in southeastern Missouri, where he works for DeWitt Company. He is currently enrolled in the Honors Program at [Southeast Missouri State University](#). With his essay, he hoped to bring a tragic true-life event to light in a way that provided a call-to-arms for the reader who values social justice. Mr. Ross has also published poetry as part of the [Iowa Prison Writing Project](#).

**All reference information appears in this issue's "Endnotes."*

Murder at A Midwest School

BY JASON ROSS

In 1945, at Iowa's State Training School for Boys in Eldora, Iowa, seventeen-year-old Robert Miller shoveled coal all day long as punishment for an alleged escape plot. When he tried to quit working because the oppressive August temperature had drained his strength, guards at the school tried to force him to continue and, when he refused, the guards beat him to death¹ with an iron rod taken from a "harness tug."² The local coroner, after an autopsy, ruled Miller's death a homicide.³ The day after the murder, 179 boys ran away from the school,⁴ and the governor of Iowa called in the National Guard to restore order. The National Guard remained at the school for an additional four months.

The boy's murder happened for multiple reasons. Otto Von Krog, the school's Superintendent, was in charge of a system that controlled children through force and coercion. This was also during World War II, when most qualified men of military age had joined the army,⁵ and so Von Krog had to run the school with a staff of unqualified, inexperienced men. Under these conditions of harsh discipline and quasi-military training, incidents like Robert Miller's murder became all too possible.

After Miller's death and the subsequent investigation, the superintendent, the dean of boys, (who directly controlled corporal punishment) and the deputy superintendent had charges filed against them, ranging from conspiracy to second degree murder.⁶ The cottage manager who supervised the dormitory in which Miller was housed and was alleged to have administered the beating that killed the boy, was charged with second degree murder, as was one of the guards who allegedly held Miller while he was beaten. Still another cottage manager who took part in the beating was charged with

assault.⁷

At trial, the guards admitted intimidating Miller with an axe handle while forcing him to work on the coal pile, until he collapsed from heat exhaustion. However, after a lengthy trial, the conspiracy charges against management were dropped, and the charges against the two cottage managers were reduced from murder to assault and battery.⁸ This was despite the fact that numerous eyewitness accounts blamed three officers for beating Robert Miller while other officers held him, and also testified that these same guards denied him medical attention. The murder of Robert Miller is evidence of what can happen when the foundation of an institution is discipline backed with physical punishment. What remains unanswered—which will be explored in the balance of this essay—is why state government allowed this regime to become so prevalent at the State Training School for Boys that, eventually, every aspect of the school revolved around “rehabilitation” through force.

Progressivism's Failed Promise

It is helpful to consider Miller's murder in the context of the Progressive Era in American history. The Progressive Era lasted from 1870-1920, a period during which activists tried, but failed, to remake Americans into better individuals. In his book *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America*,⁹ historian Michael McGerr blames crusaders drawn from the nation's middle class for the failure of this movement. He holds that the Progressives promised a utopian society but delivered nothing but unrealistic expectations.

David J. Rothman, in his book *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternative in Progressive America*,¹⁰ offers a poignant history of the juvenile reformatories, state industrial schools and asylums that were founded during the Progressive Era with the aim of reforming the nation's wayward youth. The abuse that Robert Miller experienced in Iowa was not an isolated case; in Rothman's investigation, he discovered

pervasive abuses—including beatings that went unreported and unpunished, and mismanagement which led these institutions to accept unqualified men and women as staff members, rather than assigning the care of these at-risk children to talented, skilled professionals capable of using appropriate behavior-conditioning techniques.

Ineffective methods of discipline and management are still in use today in Eldora. From the State Training School for Boys' beginning, it has never been properly staffed or funded; shortages of qualified professionals are more pervasive today than they were one hundred years ago. Although children are no longer beaten or forced to shovel coal on the pile as Robert Miller was, today “children suffering from mental disabilities are isolated in seclusion rooms” and—until recently¹¹—“strapped to a table called ‘the wrap,’”¹² a device resembling a gurney one might expect to see in a death chamber. These practices indicate a recurring theme which has plagued the school: an overriding desire for obedience at all costs.

The Industrial School's Origins

The idea for a juvenile reformatory for boys originated with the Iowa State Teachers Association (ISTA),



POSTCARD IMAGE COURTESY OF THE [IAGENWEB PROJECT](#)

which in 1858 sent a letter to the state's General Assembly to establish such an institution. In this letter, the ISTA asserted that "under present conditions, in spite of parents, school and churches, many children are truants, loafers, cigarette smokers, and petty gamblers ... precocious sexual depravity, stimulated by social customs, impure literature, and vicious associations, is ruining thousands of promising youth."¹³ The school that served as the state's answer to this state of affairs was first opened in 1868 in Iowa's Lee County. At the time, such buildings were built in Iowa on leased land, but the state soon realized this was financially disadvantageous. Eventually it was decided that the school should be located close to the town of Eldora, Iowa.¹⁴ Reflecting the spirit of the times, the new school was founded on Progressive principles, with the intention of reforming wayward youth through hard work and educational opportunity. The state legislature appropriated money for construction, which began 150 years ago.

The Industrial School for Boys instituted corporal punishment from its beginning to control boys there. Also, from the beginning, this policy was controversial. In June of 1875, only seven years after the school was founded, allegations were made that its first su-

perintendent, Joseph McCarty, was mismanaging the institution's finances and abusing the boys under his care. In response to these allegations, Iowa's governor appointed an investigative committee which met from April through August of 1875. The school's trustees later described the investigation as "one of the most severe ordeals that any state institution ever endured." In the event, the investigation had barely begun before McCarty resigned.¹⁵ Investigators eventually called over two hundred witnesses and ultimately concluded that "[b]olts bars and corporal punishment may produce fear and command obedience; but never confidence, respect and love."¹⁶

Although the trustees said that they believed the children in the school had sustained abuse, this conclusion ultimately went nowhere. The board abrogated its authority, diluting the impact of its reports by stressing the previous abuse the children had suffered in their family homes. The Board stated: "Most of the boys sent to the reform school have dissolute parents if any.... never have known the pleasure of being respected or trusted."¹⁷

In the end, McCarty's resignation was not a solution to the school's problems, and in fact was clouded by sus-



THE CAMPUS OF THE CURRENT IOWA STATE TRAINING SCHOOL FOR BOYS. IMAGE COURTESY OF [INMATEAID](#)

picious leniency and excuse-making from officials. Legislators came to visit the reform school on a fact-finding mission after McCarty's resignation and met with the new superintendent, Reverend Charles Johnson, who was brought in from the state of Michigan. When Reverend Johnson arrived, he found the school to be in disorder arising from the previous summer's investigation.¹⁸

In their reports, though the legislators repeatedly called for the children to be treated nicely, they defended the practice of punishing them harshly. One state legislator said in his report that "The law of kindness prevails, and punishment is resorted to only when all other means fail to secure obedience to the rules."¹⁹

What these words do not convey is what was defined by the word "punishment." Many different forms of discipline were used. For example, when the Dean of Boys administered corporal punishment, he used a leather strap four inches wide, a quarter-inch thick, and two feet long.²⁰ There is no comprehensive list of the forms of punishment employed, but we do have the legislative and board of trustee's reports that share the same conclusions about physical punishment—that is, that it should be kept to a minimum.

In their aggregate, these practices indicated that an overriding desire for obedience at all costs was permitted to win out over kindness. Public documents²¹ show that the change in the institution's leadership after McCarty's resignation did not also mean a repudiation of violence against the boys. The documentary evidence suggests that the Board of Trustees, and then later the Board of Control that took over regulation of the school in 1900, were either complicit in the ongoing use of physical punishment or else lying about it.

The Board of Control seems often to have had corporal punishment on its collective mind, and to have been conflicted about it. In talking about the methods being used to correct the children at the Iowa Industrial

School, one board member stated, "The Board does not believe that the application of the lash, depriving of food, or the riveting of iron bars on the limbs of pupils has a tendency to improve their condition or assist in their reformation, and requested those methods of punishments

should be discontinued."²² However, in the very same report the superintendent of the school as-

Many different forms of discipline were used. For example, when the Dean of Boys administered corporal punishment, he used a leather strap four inches wide, a quarter-inch thick, and two feet long....

serts that "Very firm and even rigid discipline at times is necessary for this class of young men." This disparity—between the philosophical stand taken by the school's controlling board and the disciplinary practices advocated by the superintendent—raises the question of who truly controlled the school. The Board of Control's public declaration that it was against corporal punishment may have appeased those who thought critically of the school, but in the end the school continued to use physical punishment to enforce discipline until 1961.²³

While it might seem reasonable to expect that Robert Miller's murder provoked major changes in the operation of the State Training School, the state's response to the tragedy was to build a \$250,000 security unit to house students labeled as "unmanageables."²⁴ The implication is that, as far as the state was concerned, Robert Miller's unmanageable behavior was to blame for his death, not the adults who beat him and then denied him medical attention. This is emblematic of the sort of entrenched thinking that came to define the school. Twenty-three years after Miller's murder, an administrator at the school admitted that "Punishments were sometimes deadly, severe and administered out of hate instead of love; boys were sometimes exploited out of perverse needs of grown-up misfits; terrible crimes were committed in self-righteous autocracy. It must be kept in mind, although it excuses nothing, that shocking things have occurred in every human institution, including the church."²⁵ In other words, rather than accepting responsibility for the actions of those in charge—which would

call the whole rehabilitative system into question—the school deflects blame onto everyone else, including religious institutions.

The Struggle for Funding

The State of Iowa paid a flat per diem for each child sent to the State Training School for Boys. The school then used the boys as free labor to work the farm, and the farm products were then sold on the commodities market. The profits from the farm were used to cover operating costs at the school. Thus, receiving a per diem created an incentive for the institution to keep children longer and encouraged the commitment of children who had not committed a crime, but (for example) were merely homeless vagabonds. A review of multiple historical documents indicates that over a thirty-year period, vagrants and unmanageable teenagers were sent to the school at increasingly larger numbers than juvenile delinquents.²⁶ In addition, the institution used a badge system that determined when a student had earned his way out. By

1895, the average stay at the school was three and a half years. Thus, a homeless child could end up staying at the school the same amount of time as a juvenile delinquent.²⁷

From its beginning, the State Training School for Boys accepted children who did not have a criminal record. From 1873-1897, children who were merely vagrants or homeless made up the majority of those committed to the school. For example, in the first two years after the school opened, 65 percent of children sent there were juvenile delinquents, while 35 percent were

unmanageable or vagabonds.²⁸

By 1897, though, the percentages had flipped; 60 percent of the children sent to the Iowa Training School were not criminals, nor did they have a criminal record.²⁹ Additionally, during a two-year period from 1885-1887, 71 percent of the children committed to the school ranged in age from eight to fourteen.³⁰ Being vagrant, unmanageable, young, or homeless were risky occupations for kids in the State of Iowa during this time. The change in these statistics demonstrates that the institution and the State of Iowa were failing at-risk

children. It is possible to make the inference that the administration of the school needed to fill empty beds with warm bodies, and it did not matter that over 65 percent of the boys sent there were not criminals. The school's operating costs were lowered because it exploited children's labor.

In a short history of the school, titled "The Industrial School for Boys at Eldora Iowa,"³¹ the Hon. W. J. Moir, an original member of the school's board of trustees, used



"IN OUR CARE" IS A 1952 DOCUMENTARY MADE BY WOI TV THAT OFFERS A ROSY VIEW OF THE PHILOSOPHY AND AIMS OF THE IOWA TRAINING SCHOOL FOR BOYS. TO LINK TO THE DOCUMENTARY ON YOUTUBE, CLICK ON THE IMAGE ABOVE

a table on the last page to compare 30 reform schools in America. Moir's table showed that Iowa's expenditure on the school's students of \$96.00 per student per year—eight dollars a month—was by far the lowest of the institutions listed. One might initially assume that the low per diem stemmed from Iowa's status as a rural state with a lower cost of living. However, when Iowa's rate is compared with the rates in the states surrounding it—which are also predominantly rural—it becomes clear that every state that has a border touching Iowa spent more money per student. For example, Nebraska

spent \$172.00 per student per year more; Illinois spent \$50.00 more, and Wisconsin \$110.00.³² To offset the low per diem, the State Training School for Boys needed another way to generate revenue and one of its earliest superintendents thought he had an answer.

B. J. Miles was the school's fourth superintendent, serving for over twenty years in this post. In 1883, very early in his tenure, Mr. Miles wrote a one-page article in a book called *Industrial Training of Children in Houses of Refuge and other Reformatory Schools*.³³ Mr. Miles wrote that "public opinion will not tolerate any enterprise, in

an institution of this kind, that will not [bring] revenue [into] the institution.

Our farm of 500 acres is revenue, and many boys are fitted for farm hands on it..."³⁴

Research suggests that Mr. Miles's system of free child labor was successful. By 1885, the State Training School for Boys was producing a surplus of commodities. In a two-year period alone, 1885-1886, the school's farm produced 25,000 pounds of beef, 25,000 pounds of pork, 250 bushels of white beans, 2,100 bushels of potatoes, 36,000 gallons of milk, and \$5,000 worth of vegetables.³⁵ In 1886, a state legislator visiting the reform school suggested "[Forty] cows should be kept for the boys so they can have butter on their bread and milk once a day,"³⁶ apparently unaware that the farm's produce was being sold for support and upkeep of the school.

When considered together, this evidence strongly suggests that three decades after the school's foundation, its goal was no longer reform. The school—originally begun as an institution dedicated to helping wayward youth, and specifically those convicted of crimes—had been transformed into an institution that accepted vagrants, truants, and unmanageable teenagers whom adults felt needed to be corrected, to ensure a viable

workforce capable of providing cheap labor.

In 1898, the Iowa Board of Control was tasked with overseeing the school, a responsibility which before this time rested with the Board of Trustees. The Iowa Board of Control immediately noted major deficiencies at both the State Training School for Boys and the State Training School for Girls and reported its findings to the Iowa Legislature. The Board wrote: "The condition of no other institution in the state has proved so unsatisfactory to the Board as that of the two industrial schools... there are confined in these schools young men

and young women whose presence is pernicious in the extreme and who should not be allowed to mingle among, and contaminate by their presence, mere children as yet unacquainted with crime." Despite the strong

[I]n 1924, District Judge S. A. Clock wrote that the school was only "interested in getting rid of the boys as soon as [its plan]...will allow...in other words they are forced by the state to adopt plans that consider principally what the boys cost and handle them as cheaply as possible" ...

wording in the Board's report, Iowa state legislators did nothing to remedy this problem, and as we will see from future difficulties, failed to correct other issues facing the institution. Instead, the school was permitted to continue morphing into a catch-all institution which housed teenagers and children who had any issue that adults felt must be corrected.

Over two decades later, conditions at the school still had not improved. In yet another report, issued in 1924, District Judge S.A. Clock wrote that the school was only "interested in getting rid of the boys as soon as [its plan]... will allow... in other words they are forced by the state to adopt plans that consider principally what the boys cost and handle them as cheaply as possible." Judge Clock went on to call the state to task for its lack of concern for preparing boys at the school for gainful employment when they left. But while nothing would change at the school to make it into a true vocational training school, the state of Iowa did have another solution in mind.

Military Discipline or Training for a Trade?

It was in the early 1880s that the school began a transition from being an industrial school into a military academy. Cost of operation was one reason: running a military academy was dirt cheap compared to running the school according to its original Progressive principles and purpose. Militarism also taught submission to institutional rules and obedience to military rules and regulations. Because military discipline demands the ability to follow orders without thinking critically, inducing children to follow military instructions made them more docile and compliant. In 1897, Dr. W. E. Whitney, the school physician, sent a report³⁹ to the Iowa legislature which bolstered the opinion that military training was good for children. Dr. Whitney said, “[w]e have been remarkably free from casualties and accidents. This is largely to be accounted for by the introduction of military tactics and discipline.” Thirty years after the school opened, the only jobs available to the children there were manual labor. Examples include farming, playing an instrument, and school maintenance.

These types of jobs helped the institution and kept the boys busy throughout the day and parts of the night, but

when it came time to leave the school, these boys had not been properly prepared to gain meaningful employment or adjust to a changing society.

In 1905, John Cownie, a Board of Control member, would try to help some of the boys leaving the school to find work. He would ask them: “What type of work are you fitted for, the answer would be, well I have

worked in the laundry, or I have played in the band.”⁴⁰ When young boys sent to the training school had earned their freedom, a vast majority did not have the tools to succeed because they had not been taught a skill that would enable them to find gainful employment. Cownie recommended the school change both its focus and its name: “I believe the time has come when the industrial school for boys... should become a thing of the past,” Cownie said, “and in its place let us have the Iowa State Military Academy.”⁴¹ Cownie went on to say that “Military tactics is one of the leading branches taught, the discipline and drill this offered prove [to be of] great value to the boys.”⁴²

Was this change instituted because military training made it easier

to control the boys, or because military training afforded the boys a value—that is, it prepared them for



“THE WRAP,” A RESTRAINT DEVICE NOW OUTLAWED AT THE IOWA STATE TRAINING SCHOOL FOR BOYS, BUT USED FOR MANY YEARS TO DISCIPLINE “UNMANAGEABLE” YOUNGSTERS. PHOTO COURTESY OF DISABILITY RIGHTS IOWA

war? In fact, during the Spanish American War, fifty boys trained in the military companies at the school joined the army, and twelve went into the military band. Cownie could not find a boy a job playing the trombone outside of the military, yet during wartime, jobs for band members became readily available.

The Governor of Iowa appointed Otto Von Krog superintendent of the Iowa Training School in 1922. After he took control, the Iowa Training School abandoned the pretense of running a normal school.⁴³ Von Krog said “The properly disciplined boy is dependable, willing,

prompt and consistent.”⁴⁴

Von Krog used militarism as a tool to exert control over the entire school, and he immediately began a program to

expand military training. Under Von Krog, military drill became an everyday exercise. In fact, Von Krog’s mantra was “Discipline through Militarism.” He also expanded athletics and rewarded the best athletes with extra food and extra merits, which could substantially reduce a boy’s stay in the institution. For twenty years under Von Krog’s control, military drills and athletics dominated the school.

What’s Happening at Eldora Today?

Today, the State Training School in Eldora, Iowa, faces challenges it is unqualified to properly handle. Disability Iowa issued a report, titled “Unlicensed and Unlawful”⁴⁵ which detailed the failures at the school. Specifically, the lawsuit alleges psychiatric medications are administered to students and used as a chemical straight jacket.⁴⁶ Moreover, the school uses restraints and isolation cells as a form of discipline and treatment for children suffering from mental disabilities.⁴⁷ In one instance, a suicidal boy from Des Moines was placed in solitary confinement 53 times, for a total of 1,000 hours, during a seven-month period in 2017.⁴⁸ This mentally

distraught child exhibited suicidal thoughts rather than behavioral problems.

The State Training School for Boys employs unlicensed psychological professionals. In its suit, Disability Iowa alleged the State Training School for Boys uses “a full-time counselor who is referred to as a psychologist, even though he is not licensed as one.”⁴⁹ However, even someone without a medical degree could understand why isolating a suicidal teenager for 1,000 hours over a seven-month period would be detrimental. The question must be asked, then: why didn’t those in charge

[E]ven someone without a medical degree could understand why isolating a suicidal teenager for 1,000 hours over a seven-month period would be detrimental. The question must be asked, then: why didn’t those in charge recognize the danger?...

recognize the danger? In 2017, Mark Day, the superintendent of The State Training School for Boys, strenuously defended the school’s practice, saying boys were

“sent... to us because [other institutions] could not manage their behaviors...we take kids they can’t handle.”⁵⁰ It is striking that this comment is so similar in tone and substance to one made by B. J. Miles, the superintendent in 1887: “[V]ery firm and rigid discipline at times is necessary for this class of young men.”⁵¹ Labeling children as deviant criminals or saying they are out of control allows the state to abuse them without suffering any blowback. The state admits that it does not know how to handle these cases, so it locks the problem out of sight. The State of Iowa pretends to solve this problem by putting children in “unmanageable” cells, using isolation to further punish them.

Traditionally, when children are physically abused, society moves quickly to make sure the mistreatment stops, particularly when the victims are young children with mental disabilities. Society and government share the responsibility of ensuring children are not abused. However, in this instance, instead of directing an investigation into the abuses reported in 2017, Jerry Foxhoven, the Director of Iowa’s Department of Human Services (which managed the State Training School at the time)

insisted that “He [saw] no reason to order a special investigation of the Eldora boys school.”⁵² In fact, on August 8, 2017, a day before Foxhoven made this statement, *The Des Moines Register* ran an editorial⁵³ which characterized the school’s residents as “violent offenders” rather than as children needing psychological help, giving the school and Department of Human Services cover without conducting any independent investigation of Foxhoven’s statements. Also, Foxhoven defended the use of the wrap.⁵⁴ Foxhoven readily admitted that the device was “a scary thing to look at,” but apparently did not find it terrifying enough to outlaw its use.

Since the time the editorial ran, the tone of public discussion of

the school has changed from one of outrage to apathy. Now, government agencies tasked with protecting children are openly advocating the use

of isolation to deal with those with mental disabilities. Republicans in the Iowa Legislature tried to resolve the Disability Rights Iowa lawsuit by removing from the Iowa code references to “treatment” offered at the State Training School and to the “diagnosis and evaluation center.” If this language had been removed, then the state training school at Eldora would not have had to offer treatment to students. However, Democrats in the House adopted an amendment which restored references to treatment and the bill passed the Iowa House 59-38.⁵⁵ The bill also contained language that advocated “rehabilitation through disciplined confinement.”⁵⁶ In his book, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternative in Progressive America*, David Rothman diagnosed the problems with institutions similar to Eldora, namely that discipline saturated every characteristic of the schools. Rothman wrote: “Every sanction had to have its back-up sanction (until punishment degenerated into cruelty), because institutional order had to be maintained, and because one more threat always

had to be available for the inmate who insisted on challenging institutional boundaries.”⁵⁷ That is, discipline had to trump compassion and empathy to ensure that order was maintained, and the system worked. Professionals were unable to manage children, so the institution worked with Republicans in the Iowa legislature to change the law, allowing the mistreatment of children—by locking them in cells and strapping them in the “wrap”—to continue.

Conclusion

In two works published in 2003, *Conscience and Convenience*⁵⁸

by David Rothman and *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of The Progressive Movement in America*⁵⁹ by Michael McGerr, the authors ac-

Despite the fact that rehabilitation through coercion by force did not work 150 years ago, nor 73 years ago when Robert Miller was murdered, it is still being used today at Iowa’s State Training School for Boys in Eldora...

knowledge that Progressive Era reforms like asylums and juvenile reformatories failed to properly rehabilitate children. Robert Miller’s murder shocked the conscience of society, even making a front-page headline in the New York Times. However, those responsible for his murder escaped punishment and went on with their lives as if nothing happened. The details of Miller’s murder seventy-three years ago may have lost some of their urgency, but the fact that those responsible for his murder escaped punishment highlights a pattern of gross neglect and exploitation of children by the school.

What is at stake here is the care given to children with mental disabilities. The “unmanageables” unit built after Miller’s murder—essentially a jail inside of a facility created to “help” children—betrays a misapprehension concerning the way children with mental disabilities ought to be cared for. Rothman insists that the core of the problem is “the incompatibility of custody and rehabilitation, of guarding and helping.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the Director of the Department of Human Services,



"I HAVE WORKED IN THE LAUNDRY, OR I HAVE PLAYED IN THE BAND." THE IOWA INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL FOR BOYS' BAND IN AN UNDATED PHOTOGRAPH, COURTESY OF [IOWA'S TOWN BANDS, 1890-1930](#).

Jerry Foxhoven, and Mark Day, Superintendent of the state training school, in company with at least fifty-eight Republican State Representatives, believe in "rehabilitation through disciplined confinement."⁶¹ Despite the fact that rehabilitation through corecion by force did not work 150 years ago, nor 73 years ago when Robert Miller was murdered, it is still being used today at Iowa's State Training School for Boys in Eldora. Seemingly heedless of the policy's ineffectiveness, the state of Iowa will continue this absurd approach to rehabilitating children, and in another hundred years another history student will find these reports, and write another paper, about another tragedy at this school.

In 1876, after the investigation that ended the first superintendent's career, a report was issued by the Board of Trustees that insisted "Bolts, bars and corporal punishment may produce fear and command obedience, but never confidence, respect and love."⁶² The "bolts, bars and corporal punishment" that were acceptable in the past may have been superseded by seclusion cells

and the use of the wrap, but these methods of discipline are also antiquated, and continue to do more harm than good. Forced reform is not change; it is simply a way in which adults force young children to behave in ways they, the adults, find acceptable. Although the human soul abhors oppression, these methods will probably continue, because it is easy to lock away and tie down what the state cannot control or even understand. Many in Iowa's state government and those in control at the school would probably disagree. They would say they are only trying to help these rebellious youths. In reply, I would ask: why, then, does this debate about how to treat children continue, one hundred and fifty years after the State Training School for Boys opened? To put it plainly, the system failed one hundred and fifty years ago and it is failing today, not because the structure of the school cannot be fixed, but because coercion and rehabilitation through force are the only models of reform that these institutions know. Bolts, bars and corporal punishment may have now been replaced by seclusion

cells and the wrap, but that is not because these methods of rehabilitation are more effective. It is because they are convenient.

The time has come to try something different. Instead of treating children as adults who are in prison, we should treat them as children who have made mistakes. In settings such as Iowa's State Training School for Boys, children need compassion and love because they may never have known that type of kindness in their lives.

The State Training School for Boys does not have licensed psychologists on staff. Full-time counselors who lack doctorates in psychology and would be prohibited from practicing psychology in public are nonetheless referred to as psychologists.⁶³ Instead of hiring people who, however well-intentioned, do not have the skills which caring for these children requires, the state must hire licensed professionals who are specifically trained to treat children suffering from trauma. Additionally, under current laws, the State Training School for Boys is not required to have a state license, meaning it is not subject to regular inspection by the Iowa Department of Inspections and Appeals.⁶⁴ The school should be licensed, and the State of Iowa's Department of Inspections and Appeals should conduct regular inspections. These children are not convicted felons under the law, but have been adjudicated to be delinquents, and will not have felonies on their records when they become adults. Therefore, under no circumstances should institutional control be given over to the Department of Corrections.

Next, the school must shake off its outdated discipline model and usher in a progressive approach that finally, once and for all, ensures that kindness prevails over bolts and bars or isolation and wraps. A new regime must be instituted which offers meaningful vocational programs, and which allows children more freedom of movement, on a campus dedicated to rehabilitation through education. This will restore the school to its intended purpose—that is, to be an institution which teaches and reforms, not a prison that harms mental health.

The school's history shows that punishments, when required, have been "administered out of hate instead of love," and found that boys were being exploited to satisfy the needs of grownups, and were victims of crimes

committed in the name of "self-righteous autocracy."⁶⁵ These words mean something because they convey the significance of these institutions' mindset. When run as this report has detailed, institutions like the State School for Boys do more harm than good. The expediency of running an institution this way has ensured that these practices have continued for one hundred and fifty years.

David Rothman says of institutions such as the State Training School for Boys that "Every sanction had to have its back-up sanction (until punishment degenerated into cruelty), because institutional order had to be maintained, because one more threat always had to be available for the inmate who insisted on challenging institutional boundaries."⁶⁶ As long as this remains the modus operandi of institutions like the State School for Boys, then one day, maybe soon, another Robert Miller story will emerge to shock the conscience of humanity yet again.

Postscript by the author

I was twelve years old when I first arrived at the State Training School for Boys, and thirteen when I left. To say I was scared would not do my fear justice: I was terrified. I arrived at Eldora a young boy and left with more knowledge about crime and hustling than a young boy should have. While at Eldora I experienced abuse and spent over 1,200 hours in isolation, 1,000 of those hours within six months of arriving there. Spending 1,200 hours in segregation at such a young age created an exoskeleton that shaped my future. I learned at a very young age to distrust those in authority and realized nobody but me could get me back home.

I learned that adults can be petty and cruel. I stood 5'2" and weighed 110 pounds, which made me extremely vulnerable, because I had no way to defend myself physically. I lacked the mental toughness to shield my young mind from the relentless onslaught of older boys' cutting remarks. I spent days and weeks crying, wondering why my mom could not come to take me home. The administration claimed I suffered from "separation anxiety" and prescribed me two psychiatric medications. In fact, the only problem I suffered from was being a twelve-year-old child who missed his mom, dad, brothers and little sister. I had never been arrested before being sent to Eldora.



THE IOWA INDUSTRIAL SCHOOL FOR BOYS AS IT LOOKED DURING ITS EARLY HISTORY. POSTCARD DATED 1910, COURTESY OF [IOWA'S TOWN BANDS](#)

Nevertheless, breaking the law got me sent away for over two years.

I often think about Eldora, and about how much that place shaped my future. Eldora made me into a young person distrustful of authorities, who always felt hyper-vigilant, afraid of being alone, and who always pursued affection. When I first heard about Robert Miller's murder, his story gripped me and wouldn't let me go. I have been waiting to write this story for the last thirty-two years of my life, and when the opportunity presented itself, it took me almost two years to complete it. More importantly though, maybe this cathartic exercise will help me purge bad memories, and maybe, just maybe, to heal old wounds. As I finished writing this paper, I had tears in my eyes, yet my tears are not for me; my tears are for the Robert Millers and other children who suffered before me, and for those children yet to arrive at the State Training

School at Eldora. I have been incarcerated for a total of seventeen years in the State of Iowa and there were other graduates of the State Training School in prison with me. That institution abuses young children who grow up with significant behavioral problems.

The State Training School began as an idea; one which Progressives hoped would change children's lives, to make their lives better. This idea morphed into something contradictory to its intended purpose, producing aggression, hatred, and fear, not love, kindness and respect. Ultimately, children suffering from psychological disabilities may grow up hating authorities, and the aggression they were taught as young children may manifest itself into adulthood. 🍃

Endnotes

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“MURDER AT A MIDWEST SCHOOL”

¹John Farmer, employee of the State Training School for Boys. Interview conducted at the school by Grinnell College student Emma Cibula, April 24, 2017.

²John Schrock, interviewed by the author at Newton Correctional Facility. August 31, 2018. Mr. Schrock is an Amish farmer who has worked with draft horses his entire life. Mr. Schrock said that a “harness tug” is a heavy strap, two-and-a-half inches wide and half-an-inch thick, that is used in harnessing a horse to a wagon. This strap passes over the horse and hooks to the singletree of the wagon. Schrock also said that a chain or metal piece 12-14 inches in length connects to this strap and it weighs about five pounds. It was this metal piece, in the form of a rod, that was used to beat Robert Miller to death. He insisted that in 1945 the harness tug would have been made entirely of metal and thick heavy leather, rather than being made from nylon, which is more common today.

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