

Dear Friends,

As followers of these letters know, about once a year I take an extended trip into America as part of my [quest](#) to get to every county in the United States. A big unvisited patch of Iowa, Illinois and Missouri hung invitingly on my map, across a path otherwise cleared from south to north. It seemed time to do something about that.



So I flew to Omaha, Nebraska, and met my friend Lee Oestreicher (right), companion on some of these journeys, who was waiting for me there with a car. As it was Omaha, we had delicious steaks, steaks to dream about, buttery velvety steaks you could cut with a spoon if you had to, but we didn't have to as they gave us enormous sharp knives. And then, the next morning, we crossed the Missouri River into Iowa.



Pottawattamie was the first county we came to in Iowa, but despite the picturesque name it didn't count, as I had already been there. So we slithered up along the Missouri River, crossing back and forth as needed to get the counties on each side, maximizing our time in Nebraska as we would be



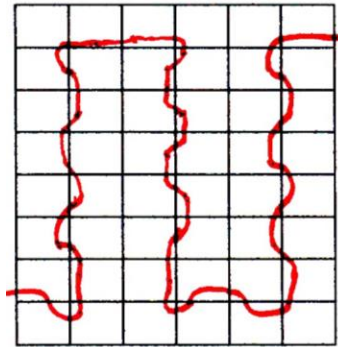
leaving it soon, and even passing briefly into South Dakota before returning to Iowa for the long haul. HARRISON (IA); BURT (NE); MONOMA (IA); THURSTON, DAKOTA (NE); WOODBURY, PLYMOUTH, SIOUX (IA); UNION, LINCOLN (SD); LYON (IA).<sup>1</sup> Sioux City, Iowa, founded in 1854 and the first important city we came to after Omaha, had the gigantic wide streets (right) so often found in western towns, laid out at a time when space did not matter and land seemed inexhaustible. It still seems kind of inexhaustible out on the Plains.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Crossing from Iowa to South Dakota gave me a new state line, reducing to four the number of state lines I have to cross before I get all of them, excluding those few (like MI-IL and NY-RI) on blue water.

<sup>2</sup> In 2010 the *Daily Beast* listed Sioux City as the 14th [drunkest city in America](#). We couldn't really test this out because we were driving.

Then we were off, finishing up northwestern Iowa in a systematic way. I have a technique for the checkerboard counties found in (mostly non-mountainous midwestern) states laid out under the [Public Land Survey System](#). By going



up and down *alternate* county lines I can enter all the counties on a checkerboard with remarkably little wasted motion (see diagram at left). It is possible to drive along, or nearly along, these county lines because the counties are built up of square survey townships, themselves formed of sections each exactly one mile square, separated in Iowa at least by a gravel road and often by a beautifully paved county road. So a determined maniac can check off every county in a Public Land Survey state without going very deep into any particular one of them.

That's what we did for south-central and south-eastern Iowa too, and the same along the Iowa-Missouri border.<sup>3</sup>

Not that we limited ourselves to county lines. We had another dream steak in Rock



Valley (Sioux County), a prosperous, together-looking town where they make trailer hitches and enormous John Deere farm vehicles and other useful things. The county towns of Iowa are often not as wiped-out and devastated as in the rest of America. In Storm Lake (Buena Vista County, left)



we stopped to look at the place I had picked out of an atlas as a teenager to run away to.<sup>4</sup> Very pleasant; trim substantial houses on generously-sized lots; a lovely park around the lake. In Elk Horn (Shelby County, right), the largest rural Danish community outside of Denmark, we went through the [Danish Immigrant Museum](#) and admired the Danish flags decking the streets. We sat on our bridge chairs on gravel roads between cornfields (where a friendly dog stuck his nose in our pockets looking for treats), and ate bacon and eggs in small town cafés where the feedcap caucuses of grizzled farmers met for morning

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<sup>3</sup> We did take a short detour over the IA-MN state line, reducing from four to three the remaining state lines I need to cross. One (OH-MI) is right where I'll catch it when I finish those states on a future trip. But the other two (OR-NV, ID-NV) are in a desert at least 1000 miles from the nearest untouched county. It will be a test of determination to see if I bother going there.

<sup>4</sup> I didn't actually do it, which was just as well as the police would have picked me up in about ten minutes and sent me home, captive and humiliated.

coffee. O'BRIEN, OSCEOLA, DICKINSON, CLAY, BUENA VISTA, CHEROKEE, SAC, IDA, CRAWFORD, SHELBY, AUDUBON, ADAMS, UNION, CLARKE, WARREN.

But for all the parks and trailer hitches and Danish flags, it cannot be denied that the main thing in Iowa is agriculture, and the main crop in Iowa is corn.<sup>5</sup> There is corn everywhere you look in Iowa, corn for eating, corn for Doritos, corn for high fructose corn syrup, corn for animal feed, corn for ethanol.<sup>6</sup> The ears had already been picked from the corn we saw, leaving the residue to be grazed or processed or plowed under in the fields. Corn is planted in cornrows that rippled poetically as we passed by (this effect can be faintly seen in a narrow strip in the center of the picture below).

We arrived in Des Moines just in time to see the Iowa State Capitol and not much else. It is a superb example of the standard design, noble in form and lavish in 19th century decoration. See images on the next page. There were also some very moving paintings – [Westward](#), an enormous canvas (by Edwin Blashfield, 1905) showing pioneers with their



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<sup>5</sup> Iowa is famous for hogs, too. We didn't see a single one, although we sometimes caught their distinctive fragrance.

<sup>6</sup> It turns out that ethanol as fuel creates substantially more smog (from ground-level ozone) than gasoline, as well as requiring huge amounts of water and energy to create and transport (it doesn't run through pipelines). Doritos and corn syrup are not all that healthy either.





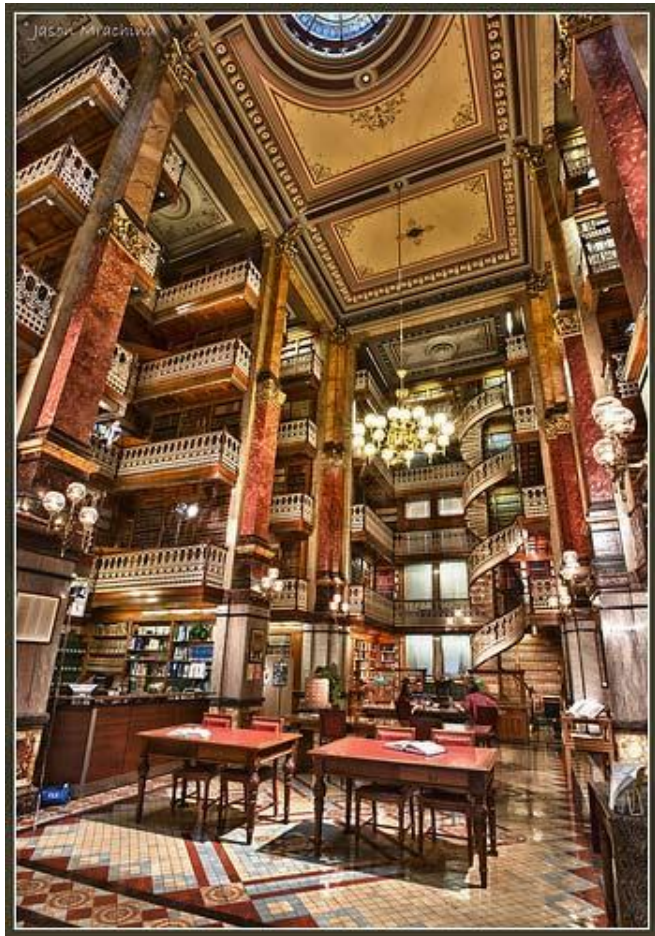
ABOVE: The medal of the [Grand Army of the Republic](#) (the Union veterans' organization) inside the Iowa Capitol Dome. BELOW: A mid-level view of the rotunda.





covered wagon guided by a band of angels, and David Rottinghaus' powerful if sentimental [Honoring Iowa's Heroes](#) (2012), depicting Iowa National Guardsmen in Iraq separated from their longing families by an unbridged river. Shown at right is one corner of the Iowa capitol's magnificent law library, a dream of a library, one of the best examples I've ever seen with its jutting balconies and twisting staircases of painted iron.<sup>7</sup>

For those who doubt that I was ever really there, here is a picture of me on the floor of the Iowa State Senate.<sup>8</sup>



And then it was time to continue across the rest of Iowa. LUCAS, MARION, MANASKA, MONROE, WAPELLO, KEOKUK, WASHINGTON, JEFFERSON, HENRY, LOUISA, DES MOINES.<sup>9</sup> On the next page I show six pictures typical of what we saw in Iowa. In the image of the barn, note especially that the ventilator housing at the top is a miniature version of the barn itself, an Iowa specialty. And then, at Burlington, we crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois.

<sup>7</sup> Impressive though they look, most of the library's books are no longer in use as legal research has switched irrevocably to digital methods. To keep a 50-state law library up to date in hard copy would be astronomically expensive, and it would still be less current and comprehensive and useful than a single electronic source like [Westlaw](#).

<sup>8</sup> We also stopped in the handsome office of Iowa's Republican governor, the vicious right-wing ideologue Terry Branstad, whose latest outrage is a law allowing him to decide *personally and individually* whether a poor woman who wants an abortion paid for by Medicaid has what he thinks is a good enough reason. Rich women do not need to bother with this step.

<sup>9</sup> Des Moines is not in Des Moines County, and Keokuk is not in Keokuk County. Go figure.



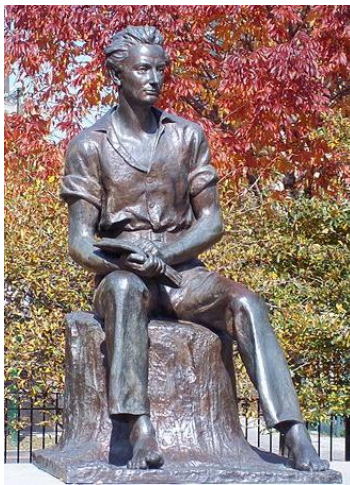


SIX VIEWS OF IOWA



Illinois (seal at left) looks different from Iowa.<sup>10</sup> Same cornfields, but somewhat less corn; lines still straight but less austere. A lot of the cornstalks were still standing, but it looked like more had been reaped for fodder (and the stubble plowed under) than in Iowa, and Iowa's beige replaced by furrowed fields of darker brown.<sup>11</sup> More trees, too, than on Iowa's flat prairie, and more rolling hills (although Iowa rolled too, near the edges by the rivers). There was a more easterly feel. We had had some delays on the road, so we did not tarry at [Carl Sandburg](#)'s birthplace in Galesburg. We *would* have tarried at the Dirksen Congressional Center in Pekin, looking for recollections of [Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen](#) of Illinois, the Republican Minority Leader in 1959-69 – no one who paid attention to politics in those years will ever forget his [voice](#), forming sentences it seemed out of purest molasses, or his perennial campaign to have the marigold named the national flower. But it was Saturday and the Center was closed, so we continued through west central Illinois, aiming for Springfield, the state capital. HENDERSON, MERCER, WARREN, KNOX, CLARK, PEORIA, TAZEWELL, LOGAN.

The great spirit of Abraham Lincoln still lingers over Springfield, in a way it does not linger over Washington. Maybe this is because so many things are named for him there,



and his name and likeness are everywhere.<sup>12</sup> In Springfield you get a feeling for a younger, un-bearded Lincoln, helped along by statues of him as a young man (he was only 52 when he left Springfield for the last time).<sup>13</sup> [LEFT: *Young Lincoln*, by Charles Keck (1945) (actually in Chicago, but better than some in Springfield); RIGHT: *Lincoln the Circuit Rider*, by Fred M. Torrey (installed at Lincoln's Tomb circa 1930).]



<sup>10</sup> The motto in the eagle's mouth on the Illinois state seal reads STATE SOVEREIGNTY, NATIONAL UNION, which at the time of its first adoption in 1819, and up to the Civil War, had a pro-Southern flavor to it. The Civil War settled the constitutional question, but the [motto has continued](#), having been readopted in 1867 and again for the flag in 1915.

<sup>11</sup> One acre of corn residue will [provide grazing](#) for one mature cow for about 45 days.

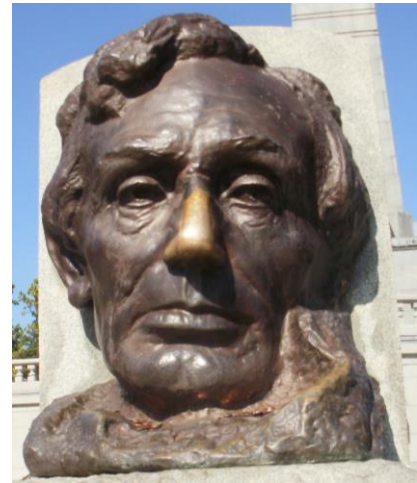
<sup>12</sup> Fifty miles north of Springfield I saw a highway sign pointing the way to two separate colleges, both named for Lincoln.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln didn't start growing his beard out until October 1860, just before the election, when an 11-year-old girl [suggested the idea](#) to him.



Lincoln is our great national *mahatma*, our country's patron saint and martyr. Never having held national office (except for one term in Congress long before) he emerged as the indispensable man in two of the greatest crises of our history – one (the War) he met brilliantly, and we are still suffering today from his having been murdered before he could meet the other (Reconstruction). It could be argued that the assassination of Lincoln was the worst single event that ever happened in American history – the War was coming and could not have been avoided, but the ruin of Reconstruction *could* perhaps have been avoided, and the pieces put back together in a harmonious way. Certainly no one else had any idea where or how to start.

But Springfield's focus on the younger Lincoln (and New Salem's focus on a younger one yet, see below), reminds us that Lincoln's greatness is not just a matter of his national role, but also relates to his extraordinary personal qualities. Reading his writing, or *just thinking* about him, elevates us.<sup>14</sup> Lincoln was profoundly humane in a way most of us can only try to approach; but he was also the canniest and subtlest politician of his time.<sup>15</sup> With virtually no education he made himself one of the greatest writers of the 19th century, and certainly the best stylist ever to speak as President.<sup>16</sup> He was one of America's most influential humorists, whose stories are still being told today. He was a terrific lawyer, too. But there was something else about him personally, hard to identify, that made him, *without trying*, one of the greatest personalities in history, and not just American history either. Not only has every President for 150 years measured himself against Father Abraham, but every American does too, and is better for it.<sup>17</sup> What would Lincoln do? The answer never is



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<sup>14</sup> When Tony Kushner told Doris Kearns Goodwin that he was anxious about devoting the time he would need for research if he agreed to write the script for Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, Goodwin (who surely knows) told him that time spent with Lincoln was never wasted.

<sup>15</sup> In the bronze image shown above, by Gutzon Borglum (placed outside the tomb structure), we get some sense of the depth of Lincoln's empathy and compassion. The nose is shiny from millions of good-luck rubs. The [marble original](#), from 1908, is in the U. S. Capitol. Lincoln's son Robert said it was "the most extraordinarily good portrait" of his father he had ever seen.

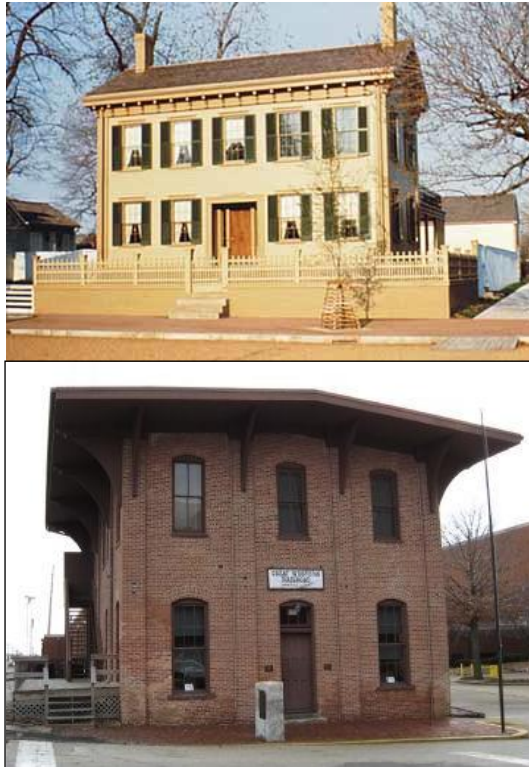
<sup>16</sup> "I am loath to close," he said at the end of his [First Inaugural Address](#) in 1861. "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." Even Ted Sorenson couldn't write like that.

<sup>17</sup> Measuring ourselves is one of the historic uses of saints.



cut a corner, or lie, or chisel, or press for unworthy advantage, or prefer a private benefit to a public one, or take a narrow view over a broad one, or allow opposition to harden into antipathy, or hold a grudge or let slip a chance for reconciliation, or take revenge.<sup>18</sup>

So I toured the best of the Lincoln sites – his [home](#) (below top left), and his elaborate [tomb](#) (below center), and his law office on square in front of the [old Capitol](#) (below right) where he practiced before the Illinois Supreme Court,<sup>19</sup> and the small train depot (below bottom left) where he made his [Farewell Address](#).<sup>20</sup> There were other good things to see



in Springfield too – the ungainly current state capitol (Illinois' sixth one), whose dome was stretched from the original plans so it would be taller than the Capitol in Washington),<sup>21</sup> and the house the poet [Vachel Lindsay](#) (1879-1931) lived his whole life in,<sup>22</sup> and an important house by Frank Lloyd Wright, and some bad things too (a horrible tawdry “Lincoln Presidential Museum”). I could

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<sup>18</sup> All this is not to say that Lincoln was perfect. His racial opinions could have stood some improvement, which might have happened had he lived, and it is impossible to justify his catastrophic choice of the unworthy Andrew Johnson for Vice President in 1864. That is one tragic case where he did take the narrow view instead of the broad one.

<sup>19</sup> Before his election as President, Lincoln was Illinois' leading Supreme Court practitioner.

<sup>20</sup> “I now leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington.”

<sup>21</sup> Highlights: a portrait of Adlai Stevenson as governor, and a larger-than-life statue of the disgusting Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago.

<sup>22</sup> Lindsay is long out of fashion, but deserves another look. My favorite poem of his is [Bryan, Bryan, Bryan](#) (“In a coat like a deacon, in a black Stetson hat / He scourged the elephant plutocrats”).

not visit Lindsay's house (it was closed), and anyway after three days in Springfield (where Lee left), including one day of *shabat*, I was eager to get back on the road.

My first stop after Springfield was 15 miles away in Petersburg, at [Lincoln's New Salem State Historic Site](#), one of the best parts of the whole trip. Lincoln arrived at the new settlement of New Salem on a flatboat in 1831, at the age of 22, fresh out of the wilderness, without much of an idea what to do with his life, and stayed when the flatboat captain gave him a job in his store. Six years later he moved to Springfield, a lawyer and a state legislator. In the meantime he changed from a relatively unformed youth to become *Lincoln*. Soon after he left it was discovered that steamboats could not pass up the Sangamon River to New Salem, which was fatal to the settlement's prospects, and the town vanished like Brigadoon, having fulfilled its historic purpose.<sup>23</sup>



So New Salem was crucial to Lincoln's development, and it has been reconstructed with care and authenticity, and with a taste and forbearance unusual in such projects. There are occasional folks in period costume, but they are working quietly around the place, not acting as intrusive in-your-face tour guides, and you can stay a long while in woodsy



silence on the grounds, visualizing what life was like there in the 1830s. The plan combines structures that were not all there at the same time, but it does not seem crowded, and buildings are widely spaced on their original foundations. If you find yourself within 100 miles of Petersburg, this site is worth a visit.



And then it was on the road again, back through central Illinois toward the Mississippi. Lots of corn still, and winding roads. I stopped in Carthage to



<sup>23</sup>

You could say Lincoln vanished in the same way in 1865, having fulfilled *his* historic purpose, except that he had another purpose right before him when he died.



see the jail where the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith was lynched in 1844 (below), and



continued to Nauvoo where he had led a large settlement. After Smith was killed Brigham Young took most of the group west to Utah, but Smith's wife Emma stayed in Nauvoo and worshipped with the Methodists. Not until 1860 did she get involved in a restructured group (now called the [Community of Christ](#)) that accepted Smith's prophecies but had a more mainstream Protestant flavor. Nauvoo today is divided between the two sects, the Utah-based church holding most of the historic structures,

and the Community of Christ holding the house and gravesite and buildings that belonged to the Smith family.

And finally, back to the River, by one-lane roads in some counties, and then across it into Keokuk, Iowa. MENARD, MASON, FULTON, SCHUYLER, McDONOUGH, HANCOCK (IL); LEE (IA). Keokuk, like many river towns, has fallen on hard times. The old downtown (right) is a shell, with most storefronts closed or occupied by transient businesses like junk shops and nail salons. Keokuk has a hideous modern strip, so it is not as badly off as other river towns like Cairo and East St. Louis. But it is not a healthy scene.

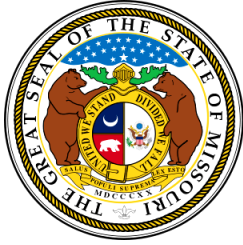


This situation is endemic throughout most of the United States, but as noted less so in Iowa, which to my unscientific eye seems to have more active, thriving towns and cities than the average midwestern state.



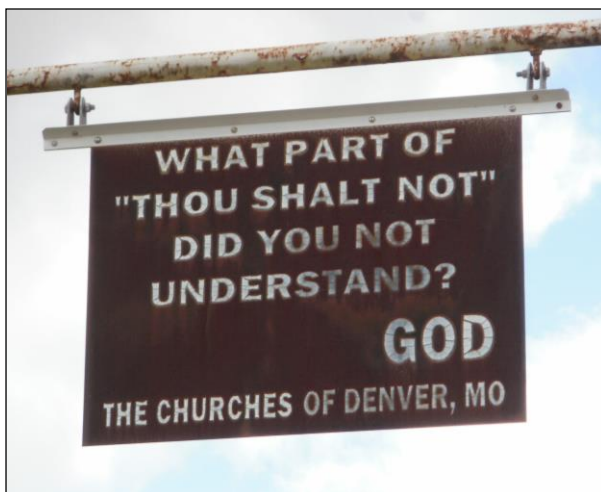
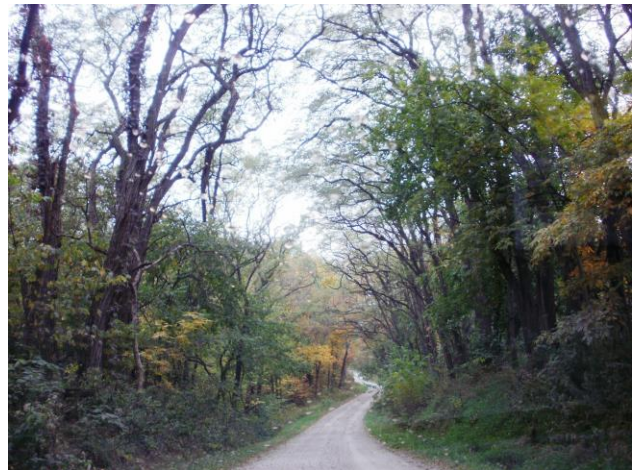
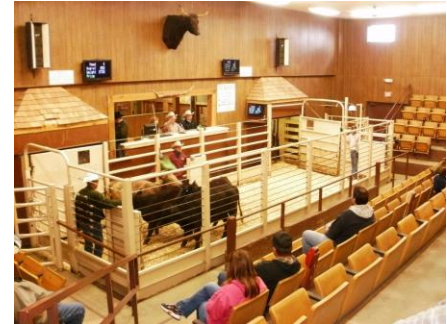
more like an inland sea than a river (above).

After Keokuk I went back into Illinois so I could cross again on a ferry, the *Paul B.*, from Mayer IL to Canton MO. You drive down to the riverbank in Mayer and flash your headlights, and the ferry will mosey over to get you. This privately operated ferry is not free (or cheap), like those run by state transportation departments. But a ferry is always worth the fare, and I marveled yet again, on what was something like my 50th crossing, how wide the River is. By Missouri it seems

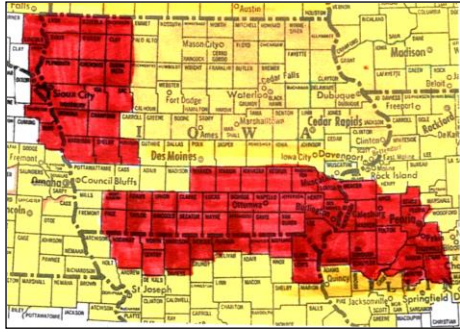


Right across the border Missouri looks different from Iowa or Illinois. Shaggier, greener, less angular, more trees, a feeling of foothills rather than prairie. Accents turn very southern right over the line. I worked my way along the MO-IA state line, hitting all the counties on both sides. Somewhere in Missouri I saw a sign announcing a cattle auction being held *right then*, so I went in and watched as a complex system

of gates and men with swatters maneuvered frightened beasts out of backstage pens, singly or in specified groups, into the display pen and then back where they came from (right). It was impossible to understand more than a word or two of the auctioneer's song, and the numbers I did understand did not seem to match the numbers on the overhead screens. But everyone else seemed to know just what was happening, so I just watched and tried hard not to make any sudden hand movements. It seemed significant somehow that while the auctioneer's call sounded exactly as it had for generations, the auction itself was being managed on laptop computers. BELOW: a few images from the northernmost tier of Missouri counties.

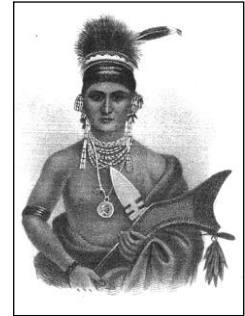






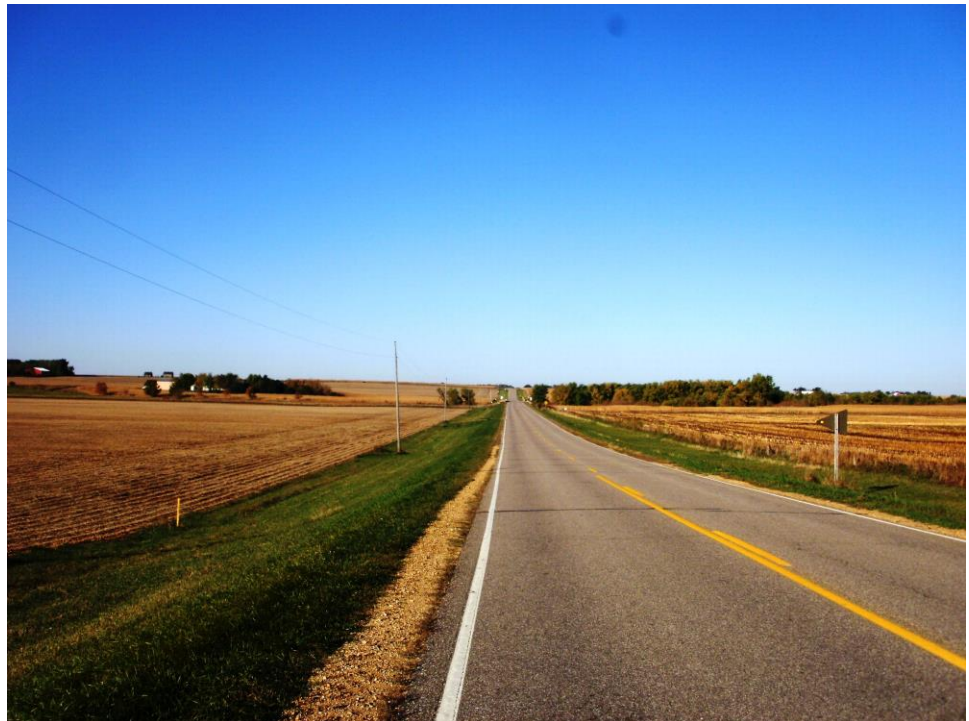
And finally into the last Iowa county, and back to Omaha. LEWIS, CLARK, SCOTLAND (MO); VAN BUREN, DAVIS, APPANOOSE (IA); SCHUYLER, PUTNAM, MERCER (MO); WAYNE, DECATUR, RINGGOLD (IA); HARRISON, GENTRY, WORTH, NODAWAY (MO); TAYLOR, PAGE, MONTGOMERY (IA). Iowa was my 30th state completed (I am one of the few people to have been to every one of the state's 99 counties without running for office). The map at left shows my progress: red counties new on

this trip, yellow done before, white (at the corners) still not yet done. I reached 71 new counties (and 13 old ones) on this trip, bringing my score so far to 2357; over 75% have now been completed.<sup>24</sup> Two more state lines, as noted. Pottawattamie (IA) was my favorite county name, but as I had been there before it didn't count; my next favorite was Appanoose (IA), named for Chief Appanoose of the Meskwaki (right).<sup>25</sup> In Omaha I caught my breath, got some sleep, bought a raincoat (I had left mine in one of 84 counties), went to the movies (*Captain Phillips*, with Tom Hanks: terrific), and finally drove myself to the airport and flew away home. *Finis coronat opus*.<sup>26</sup>



David

November 2013



<sup>24</sup> Why do I do this? Because it's there?

<sup>25</sup> Portrait from A. R. Fulton, *Red Men of Iowa* (1882).

<sup>26</sup> The end crowns the work.