

Dynasty

After a few minutes of tacking through square corners on gravel and dirt roads, I am back to Highway 2. No need to look at the map for this. It would be impossible for anyone between here and the Allegheny mountains to be lost for long, if only she had a compass or a good sense of direction. The secondary roads over most of this large midcontinent are straight and follow section lines.

Directly behind me, past the line of rain, this dictum fails. The ranch where I grew up is at the nearer edge of the Nebraska Sandhills, one of the most unpopulated areas in the contiguous United States. Roads in this region are where you find them. There are stories no older than I am about people who lost their bearing in the Sandhills and ended up wandering in large circles until overcome by exposure or thirst. Butcher in his history of Custer County also tells a story about this from the pioneer days. What gives coinage to these stories is, I think, an odd sensation that most people have felt as a child, but few as adults. It is the feeling of looking around and not wanting to be where you are, but not knowing which way to go to get where you want to be. It is the child whose hand slips away from the protective custody of the parent in a large store. It is the occasional sailor who has always trimmed within line-of-sight of some shore until he is one day caught in a heavy fog at a distance too great to hear the sounds of land. It is the sense of utter abandonment. The uniqueness of the state suggests that it should have its own word. Let us call it *coup d'horizon*.

The Sandhills have pulled this trick on me. I would be out walking and suddenly realize that I did not know which way I was going. The wind-shaped hills at every box of the compass would reach in to confront me like the walls of a large prison, one section of sand ridges as like to the other as two waves on the sea. Coup d'horizon grabs you in the gut first, so it is a subtype of panic. But it moves quickly to the head. A lightness, almost a dizziness, pervades the region above the ears. The sensation of confinement reverses during the upward flow. Your eyes try to focus on the horizon, but the land seems like a vast rubber sheet that is being stretched to the points of infinity in every direction. The sky begins a tugging match with the earth to pull you apart at the neck. You have a sudden desire to be as near to the ground as possible. People have been known to start crawling. The stereotype of the thirsting man scabbling at the desert sand may have its origin from some storyteller's memory of a coup d'horizon event. Travelers in large deserts must know this feeling intimately. And when do sailors who leave the sight of land stop being seized by this sensation an hour out of every port?

The whole experience is unpleasant in the extreme. Many of the first settlers in this region who kept journals have described it. The trapper Jim Bridger, when asked if he had ever been lost, is supposed to have replied "No, but for several weeks I didn't know where I was." Trapper Jim was not contradicting himself. He knew where he was in terms of map features. It was coup d'horizon he was remembering. Civilization had let go of his hand.

The day has begun to warm up. The next stop is over two hours away. My safety line of ancestors is there where I can reach it, though, so I can let my attention relax for a while. I set the cruise control and begin the next leg, from Mason City to Grand Island, moving southeast. Grand Island, one of the towns blessed with the interstate, is still an hour away. The scenery that begins to roll by is mostly river valley topography, though there is no real river here, just creeks paralleling, then moving off to join, one of the Loup rivers to the north and south of my line of travel. The country around here has sections that are pure Sandhills, but these are leprous spots on a gentler terrain that does not, for the most part, show wind-shaped landforms. I have always been perplexed how the map makers have been able to draw a line that shows exactly where the Sandhills begin. For some years I fancied that it was on the very land that was my family's ranch west of Broken Bow, since the soil on our land moved from a subirrigated sandy loam to pure Sandhills sand when you traveled across it from east to west. I realize now that this can happen anywhere this side of Grand Island. Even up in the middle of the desolate Sandhills region there are fertile arteries along the streams. And here, five miles in any direction, pockets of Sandhills can trap the moving car. These topographic moves are all analog transitions overlaid with the digital delineations of a cartographer. "Sandhills" means nothing in an inch by inch analysis. Even the edge of a lake, so clear on a map, fractals down to micrometer meaninglessness when looked at too closely.

The first real change in the landscape happens as I move into the broad Platte River valley. I missed the transition. But I have watched for it before, with all my attention, and still couldn't catch it. Instead of hills around me, I now see a flat stretch of land in three directions, so wide that I can't see the hills on the other side. If this were my first trip, I might think I had entered an immense plain. It is this valley, I have always assumed, that gives Nebraska its reputation for being flat. The westward interstate, following the Oregon Trail for long stretches, tracks down the Platte valley for most of the length of the state. Unless you notice the hills rising to the north or the south whenever the interstate wanders from the valley center, you would think that the whole state was like this valley. When people find out that I am from Nebraska they often comment on the experience of driving

through the state to points west: “I thought the state would never end! We started in Nebraska in the morning, and by the time we stopped we weren’t out of it. It was as flat and featureless as a pancake.” It does not occur to them that they might have been driving up a long fairway too wide to show the roughs.

The first European-Americans who came through Nebraska also used this river valley. The earliest groups were just passing through, heading west for furs and gold. They welcomed the wide chute, since it gave them a chance to see hostile bands of Indians as they approached. It was a corridor through which the cavalry could, by skirmish and treaty (used indifferently), secure safe passage for the moving trains of wagons. This is, I assume, the reason that the ancient trails, and the modern roads following them, pass as nearly down the center as the meandering Platte River allows.

Nebraska was boring for the ones heading on west, to judge by their journals. Some of the first settlers also noted this effect. Willa Cather, in one of her books, writes of coming to Nebraska as a young girl: “The only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska.” She is one of the few locals who made it big without the aid of television or movies. She wrote most of her books after she left Nebraska.

I read, years ago, that Nebraska has one of the most extensive drainage systems in the United States. There are more miles of rivers and creeks here, carrying more water, than in almost any other place. You would expect some kind of Eden, but the subtext is that the rivers and streams carry the water *away*. And, for long stretches of the year, hardly any water flows through the creek beds. Probably no land on earth is better watered to less effect than this. The Platte, which I am now approaching, is, according to the local adage, “a mile wide and an inch deep,” but today the water volumes of spring will make it look like any of the other strong, deep rivers farther east. Before crossing the sand beds of the Platte system I skirt the edge of Grand Island. Soon I am on Interstate 80, heading eastward, toward Lincoln. I won’t make Lincoln today: another station will interrupt the pilgrimage in about an hour.

This is partly a collecting expedition. There is nothing about a pilgrimage that contradicts the urge to bring back souvenirs. The typical pilgrimage in the middle ages was also a time for collecting. The shrines were surrounded by vendors of relics and other memorabilia of the sacred places. Pilgrims to Canterbury would buy tokens and wear them proudly in their hats for the rest of their lives as a sign that they had been on pilgrimage. The knight who went to the Holy Land would return burdened with items of local color from the places through which he passed. I will be a pilgrim, but I will also collect.

Those who do genealogical work collect ancestors just as birdwatchers collect bird sightings. Birdwatching is supposed to be the single most common hobby in North America. For how many millions is there a thrill in being able to add just one more check to a life list? I believe, however, that genealogy may be a more common (if less healthy) hobby than birdwatching. Genealogical hobbyists collect dead ancestors with a fervor that makes some birdwatchers seem downright lackadaisical. We have our own life lists. They are pedigree charts with four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great-grandparents, and on up. At each level are boxes waiting to be filled with names, dates and places. A count of my life list shows that there are now thirty-two names from my great-grandparents on up (Most people know about their parents and grandparents without a lot of research. Most birdwatchers get robins, blackbirds and sparrows by looking out the window.) Of these thirty-two upper level ancestors, the names of nine were available to me from others in my immediate family. So twenty-three of them I have collected on trips like this. That is nothing, however: some genealogists have collected hundreds. So, although this pilgrimage is not just about collecting, I won't complain if I pick up the occasional sighting. Birdwatchers have been known to swing their cars to the side of the road and tear off across fields of briar and cocklebur on the chance of single bird. My friends know to indulge my passion for visiting courthouses and genealogical libraries on cross-county trips, even if they can't understand it.

Ancestor collecting can be done carelessly, or it can be done with sensitivity and finesse. It is hard to explain to someone who does not know our art, for example, why we count one set of circumstances as a nearly certain indication of a sought relationship and at the same time discount another set. You learn to smell connections where they can't be seen. You feel your way through a maze of documents, learning to palpate the legal jargon of wills for the tumors under the skin, tracing the edges of family secrets with your probing fingers. Discrepancies in dates reveal themselves to you like out-of-balance statements to auditors. Social relationships are followed detective-like down the tracks of lodge memberships, land transfers, and probate records. Some of this is an innate skill, but the full sensitivities are acquired through long exposure, catalyzed, I am told, by an enzyme found in the dung of mites who feed exclusively on the dust from century-old ledgers.

And there are ceremonies that are observed, enough to delight the loftiest high church mind. Heraldry, though not my cup of tea, is still part of the hobby, and peerage is one of genealogy's parents. But the act of collecting is itself the subject of socialized habit. Genealogists tend to own postage scales, for example. They know well the ritual of going into post offices and, to the dismay the clerks, trying to buy international postage

coupons. The wait for the morning mail is a complete ceremony in itself, and the subject of much in-group humor. Those who do genealogy must learn forms of speech used with employees in the courthouses and record offices. Everything they do gets written down and ends up in three-ring binders or manila folders. Charts are drawn to the standard forms of record plan, family group, pedigree, and Ahnentafel. Middle names are never skipped. Genealogists know how names get transformed into nicknames, converse fluently about the child-naming patterns of the various immigrant groups, and keep soft-lead pencils and blank paper in the car for tracing gravestones. They can load a microfilm reader faster than a projectionist can thread a projector.

This trip is not, however, a genealogical collecting trip, any more than a pilgrimage is a sight-seeing tour. But I can't help collecting, and the tools I will use to get along are the tools I have learned as a part of the hobby, so it may be mere quibbling to try to separate the means and ends in actual practice. At the conceptual level, though, the distinctions matter. At all costs, the mind of the pilgrim must be maintained through the dust and the trials of the pilgrimage itself. Trinkets are one thing, self-understanding is another.

It is time to move along the rope to the next stake in my safety line. In Mason City I was looking for my grandfather Arthur. There I had hardly crossed the edges of living memory. At the next stop, I will visit the family in which Arthur was raised. This is the family that was displayed in the Butcher photograph. The father in this family was *Henry Luther*, the mother was *Elizabeth Cline*. Before we have finished with them, these names will take us across half of the United States.

I did not know either of them. They were gone many years before I came on the scene. They are known more in caricature than as real and intimate individuals, even to many of my aunts and uncles. Henry and Elizabeth have the privilege of being patriarch and matriarch of a line of descent in the narratives of family history. I don't fully understand how such designations get bestowed in the otherwise seamless flow of generations. The special treatment of a single generation as the source of a family line runs counter to our intuition—any pair, you would think, could be treated as the head of a line. This is not how it happens, though. One couple becomes a nodal point, a thick subtrunk of the family tree that supports all of the subsequent ramification. Nor is this an artifice of the genealogist. In this respect the genealogist is a servant of the oral tradition of families they are researching. I call this effect *dynasty*. As the word is traditionally used, dynastic status among royalty is changed when there is a major shift from a direct line of descent. This is not what I mean by it here, since no shift of bloodlines is involved. What I am talking about is the

effect produced when one couple comes to be considered to be at once the culmination of previous and less visible lines of descent and at the same time the head of a renewed line.

One way to achieve this effect is to have a lot of children. This may be how Henry and Elizabeth mounted the dynastic ladder. Of Elizabeth's fourteen live births, eleven went on to have families of their own, and several of the children's families were also large. In the current family history, 1300 of their descendants have been chronicled. But there are dynastic heads who had small families, so this can't be the full explanation. Status and wealth also seem to matter. It is as though the constant reference to these people in the years of their influence ("It's all right, I'm the nephew of So-and-so.") prepares them for later canonization. I think we can rule this out in Henry's case, but I have seen this effect in other lines. It also seems to matter that the dynastic person or couple were responsible for moving the family away from the family home. Any immigrant to the United States, no matter how insignificant in wealth or status or how few children they had, is automatically a candidate for dynastic head. The westward push across the Midwest in the last century was responsible for a significant reshaping of family trees. This factor comes into play in the case of Henry and Elizabeth Luther. They made their ancestors disappear by transferring a new family through several states in less than forty years. It was a sleight-of-hand that left them at the top of the family totem. Of their thousand descendants, only a handful have any chance at being considered for dynastic status in their own right.

The place I am looking for is in Saline County, about thirty miles southwest of Lincoln, Nebraska. Oral tradition refers to the towns of Friend and Wilber, but I have since learned that these were two distant, and equidistant, post offices. The place of interest is a farm between the two towns. It was the place where Henry and Elizabeth stayed the longest—fourteen years—on their way to central Nebraska. For the majority of their children, it became their native home. The place where a child is living when she is ten, they say, is most likely to become the place that she will claim she is "from." Because of this domestic imprinting, earlier and later homes become transient locations. Henry and Elizabeth left Saline County when half of their children were over ten. The move effectively divided the large family into two subfamilies. My grandfather was in the first half of the family. Though he was born in Kansas and left Saline County when he was fourteen, Saline, wherever he lived and moved after that, was always the place he was from.

I will start from the town of Wilber, since that is the county seat and the location of the records I hope to find. As I leave the interstate and head south, I see that I will arrive on the lunch hour. No point in heading straight to the courthouse. In these small towns, there is often a single

person who can help you, and they take their lunch hours seriously. I grab a sandwich in one of the town cafés. I can feel the stares of the local people. This town is off the main road. Real strangers are as rare as hens' teeth. If I stayed here more than a day someone in town—the waitress, the clerk in the courthouse, the librarian—would make it her business to know my business, and the tale of it would spread within hours through the unofficial security network. I take no offense—it's just the way these things work in small towns. After telephones were installed in the farm area where I was reared, every hitchhiker was traced through our community by a cascade of phone messages. Before that it was a series of child runners flying over the back pastures. But the rule now seems to be that everyone gets a day's grace if they want it. Since I'll be gone tomorrow, I don't respond to the friendly eye contacts.