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Prairie Postcards: Wisconsin, Illinois, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma (1980-83)

Excerpt from *WordSmith – Writing a way home* (ISBN 1-928928-06-4) by R. Thomas Collins.
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Introduction to “WordSmith”

WordSmith—Writing A Way Home is the follow-up volume to *NewsWalker—A Story for Sweeney*, which dealt with my time as a reporter working at the *New York Daily News*. At the conclusion of *NewsWalker*, I described how the newspaper strikes in 1978 had placed a cloud over the paper’s future. It was at this time, while I was considering the impact the paper’s financial condition had on my future, that I received a phone call from a priest in Hartford who was calling on behalf of my father. I had been estranged from my father for some years. With the encouragement of the priest, I called my father and learned that he had quit drinking and that he wanted to reconnect and make amends. The last few paragraphs of *NewsWalker* describe the sequence:

We talked often from that point on. I was eager to learn about our family history, and he took to the task aggressively, giving me bits and pieces, names and dates, which I would use to learn more from official sources and records. He’d ask about work and, in time, I came to tell him about the ins and outs of life at the newspaper.

*I mentioned that Mobil had made an offer for me to help edit its employee newspaper. Dad had worked in labor relations for General Motors during the 1940s and early 1950s and understood strikes, slowdowns, appeals to labor arbitrators, arbitration hearings, work rules, job classifications. I described how frustrating it was to be caught in this period of uncertainty. I also told him how much I had loved newspaper work and the thrill that went with learning things for the first time. He knew business realities and understood the pressure that newspapers like the *Daily News* were under. He knew life inside a corporation and what employment in a company like Mobil would mean for me.*

At one point, as we were talking about the merits of the job offer, he asked: “Wouldn’t it be interesting to know how news gets made at the source?”

It was an offhand comment, made in the context of a larger conversation about how information is generated, how the public perceives news and how anyone can know the truth of a matter. But the comment stuck. It would be interesting to know how the day’s

economic news gets made. I also knew that inside such a corporation, I might find more than simply the source of the news. I could enter the world where my dad had toiled. If there were demons there, I'd learn their nature, test their strength and, in the process, perhaps my own.

In August, I resigned from the Daily News with handshakes all around and a few regrets I'd just have to live with. I walked across Third Avenue and into the mouth of the corporate goliath, pen in hand.

What I found would be another story.

Field Guy

I. BREAKING IN—REGION

May 6, 1980, Milwaukee, Wis.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—I came home Friday after a first full day at 600 Woodfield Drive, Schaumburg, Illinois, my new place of business, 25 minute drive from my new residence, 1007 Newberry Lane, Mt. Prospect, feeling like a transplanted daisy among the pansies, so to speak. Like the time last summer my new boss's boss at Mobil walked by my office and saw me reading the newspaper. He said he didn't want to see people reading the paper after 9 a.m. I mean: what the...?

I am seated on the 8th floor of the Sheraton Mayfair Hotel, 2303 North Mayfair Road, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where I am staying May 5 through May 10 while on a week-long orientation to the ways and means of a marketing district, wearing a Mobil cap I purchased for either Lee or Micah (the other is on the TV) at an OG&L service station (Mobil Owns the Grounds & Leases it to the dealer) in Waukesha, Wisconsin, 10 miles south of here.

Said OG&L was only one stop among, say, a dozen during a nine-hour, 100-mile ride with a marketing representative in the Waukesha, Jefferson, and Columbia counties territory. I'm a bit punchy. This trip is the first week-long leg of alternate week-long legs that will take me every other week to L.A., D.C., and eventually on shorter trips of one or two days to Augusta, Kansas; Kansas City; Joliet and Cicero, Illinois; and other such industrial spots.

I'm not sure about being a corporate gypsy. I am 100 miles from my family, which is 987 miles from anyplace they have known as home, while I wonder if I can make it another day. Do people really do this stuff for a living? My consolation is that all this is grist for the mill. I got to thinking on the hour-and-a-half drive up here to German/Croat/Serb/Ukrainian/Italian/Polish town that all I need to do is take it all in as raw material. The other consolation, of course, is that I am getting paid real money for all this; like a research grant from Mobil Corporation (British voice tones, please).

I wonder whether the smell will ever get out of the '78 Skylark (maroon,

NY license plate No. 9-NYP-89). I know exactly where our new dog, Curley, that cute bundle of 11-week-old fur that he is, discharged as we crossed into Indiana at 6 p.m. Saturday, April 26. Check the map, because it was then that I decided that we'd all had enough and would stop for the night. The town chosen turned out to be Angola, Indiana, population 5,000 in the winter, 15,000 summer, in the rolling lake country equidistant from Ohio and Michigan. We ate in a spot on Crooked Lake called the Captain's Cabin, where Sun Oak and I had one of the best beef meals ever imagined. Really! No credit cards please. Personal checks okay. Seasonal clientele, you see. We stayed in a small place called Fretcher's off Route 69, because the Holiday Inn with the heated indoor pool was filled, thanks to a convention of farm machinery salesmen. The kids were distracted, after being disappointed about not getting the pool, by the "magic fingers" installed on one of the twin beds in the small wood paneled room. Cost was 25 cents for a 10-minute shake. We all agreed it felt good.

Our trip to Chicago was 17 hours driving time but took three days. When we arrived, I knew Sun Oak would appreciate some good treatment so we stayed for two nights in the Marriott Lincolnshire, which would cost Mobil 88 bucks a night. The family, Sun Oak in particular, deserved it. Sun Oak has put the shoulder to the wheel making the Mt. Prospect abode a home for us all. By the time I left Monday morning, six days after the closing, we already had hung curtains, opened all but one or two of the 40 boxes, changed a damaged toilet seat, and hung towel racks, and I had fallen off a step ladder only once, and nearly broke a foot when I dropped a discarded kitchen counter on it on the way to the garbage heap, and generally wondered whether this is what life was going to be about with the corporation.

While the house was becoming a home, Sun Oak is learning where Euclid, Kensington, Central, and Wolf Streets are, where Randhurst shopping center (off Rand) is, and what a Jewel Supermarket and an Osco Drug are. Osco is where they sell the beer. I also got myself a new wardrobe—three slacks (brown, brown, and blue) and two summer-weight blazer jackets (blue and brown). Boring, but they are larger, to fit the physique, and conservative, to fit the job.

Here in Milwaukee I am learning about marketing, which is most interesting and is defined at Mobil as the process by which the integrated Mobil Oil Corporation sells its products to the public. I no longer work for Mobil Corporation. I work for U.S. Marketing & Refining, part of Mobil Oil Corporation. What I'm learning now is marketing; refining I'll get later. I work in the Central Region of USM&R, which is divided up into eight districts. Wisconsin is one district, and is one of the best run. Charlie Smith is the DM (district manager), responsible for the sale of more than 150 million gallons of product a year, in sales revenues of similar millions of dollars. He

has a staff of about 20 or so. Efficient, no?

About 14 of the staff are marketing representatives, or reps. They each supervise about 40 accounts: an account consisting of either a 1) an OG&L (Mobil owns the ground and leases it to a dealer), 2) N stations (where the independent dealer owns the grounds), 3) agents/consignees (which are Mobil commissioned employees and operators of bulk plants which deliver motor oil, heating fuel and gasoline to OG&Ls, Ns, homes, industries or farms) or 4) distributors (which are not commissioned employees like agents/consignees, but are rather independent business people with franchise districts they service themselves). Distributors purchase about 75 percent of the product in Wisconsin. Mobil Oil Corporation makes 3 cents a gallon or so. After that the distributors make whatever the market will bear, say, 7 cents. Marketing reps, by the way, are salary group 14 and despite this relatively modest level, they call the shots and are eager to progress business. Many are young and eager to move up the ladder, others are relative old-timers and the able-bodied workers of the oil bidness. I rode with one of these bulls today, Don Sorels, who started as a marketing rep as a youngster, moved up to area manager (salary group 16), back down to marketing rep at age 60.

Sorels gave me an interesting day. I saw bulk plants ranging from 5 million gallons a year in volume, a consignee job, to an 850,000-gallon-a year distributor job, the larger one looking like an overgrown still in a Wisconsin cornfield. I saw a tank wagon, 1,250 to 1,000 gallon capacity, built by International, and a transport truck, built by Kenilworth, capacity 8,900 gallons. The tank wagons are used by the bulk plants and distributors to make deliveries to OG&Ls, Ns, and homes; the transports (a tractor towing a trailer containing 8,900 gallons) to make deliveries to the bulk plants, distributors, or large deliveries to the OG&Ls.

I visited Waukesha, Oconomowoc, Watertown, Hudson, and Reeseville, the last being a swelling on the road, population 451, where an N dealer sells about 2,500 gallons a month as a sideline to his lawn mower repair and sales business. He is going to the dealer convention in Las Vegas this summer and wanted to sign up today. The rep was pleased because the dealer, Karl Kuntz, is account #4 to sign up so far; when the rep has signed up six dealers, he himself is eligible to go. The cost is \$100 a day for four days. The Marketing Department runs on goals and sales, personal and otherwise. The marketers' meetings remind me of my visits to pep rallies at Oakwood High the Friday afternoon before the night game against Trotwood, the archrival. Rah-rah. Go-go. Sell-sell.



May 26, 1980, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—These people really are different. They work for a living at jobs and in places that would cause

me to consider the possibilities of a high window, a monastery, or fur trapping in the Canadian Northwest. I guess they are used to it. I'm not.

If this is Memorial Day it must be Mt. Prospect, Illinois. I can tell because my kids are here and Sun Oak is working on the barbecue in the backyard, where I will be going shortly to eat ribs. Being home has its advantages. The fact is, I know Milwaukee and Wisconsin, Seattle and Bellingham in Washington, and Los Angeles better than I do Chicago.

The previous section was written in Milwaukee, after a day riding with an aging marketing rep. The rest of the week I rode with other marketing types, area managers as well as reps. They are all under pressure. Marketing is grown-ups playing intramural sports, or frat house contests. The same thinking. Only it's for real. They take it seriously because their livelihoods are at stake. Moving the synthetic motor oil Mobil 1 is the big chore. You make your quota by selling, and you're safe. You don't, you aren't. The customer hears that the high-priced oil saves 10 percent on gasoline consumption and as such is advertised as "The Oil That Saves You Gas." But to the sales force, as an area manager explained, "Mobil 1 is the oil that saves your ass."

Of side interest: Field PR guys—at salary group 19—outrank the marketers, who start at salary group 14 and work their way up to group 16. The district manager, a guy who moves products worth \$150 million a year, is a salary group 20. They also distrust outsiders. PR guys from New York HQ aren't on the team. Part of the reason I'm spending the time visiting these people is so that they will see me as part of the team. Maybe it'll work.

Setting aside the fact I was away from home and the family and stability for a while, the week in Wisconsin was good. I got to see a new area. Wisconsin is beautiful: rolling hills, farmland, and lakes everywhere. Not too much ethnic diversity, though. Mostly Northern Europeans, Nordics and Poles, Czechs, Slavs, and the like. By the way, the German, Ukrainian, and Polish immigrants to Milwaukee made great brewers and still do. Milwaukee is a fine town. And they drink their beer. Plus they drink it by the case. I saw a marketing study of people's buying habits in Wisconsin; the average sale of beer in Wisconsin is a case and a half. That's 36 12-ounce containers—a lot of brew.

After the week-long Wisconsin tour, I was set for a week of relative relaxation in the Woodfield office filling out expense forms, organizing my stuff, being anal-retentive and getting my crap together, and learning what I could at the Region HQ. I had stacks of internal memos to write, expense forms to submit, and the like. I was getting bills at home and needed the money to pay them. Winter, my predecessor in the Woodfield job, walked in and said he just got a memo from Operations about my week's orientation with them. Operations is a part of Marketing, whose job it is to get the product from the refineries to terminals (light product gasoline and #1 and

#2 heating fuels) or into lube blending plants (heavy products such as waxes, motor oils, greases, various grades of lubes for a myriad of customers both commercial and wholesale) so it can be sold by the Marketing Department. The Operations and Marketing departments work very closely. So, when my blood pressure got back to normal, I said I'd needed to get some paperwork out of the way. My solution was to work late each night, so I've been adding two hours to the end of each day.

On Monday the 12th I went to the Light Products Control Center (LPCC), which receives orders and schedules the deliveries from terminals in the Central Region to customers. There is a heavy use of computers. And a constant eye on the allocations from the feds about what the customers are permitted to get. It is a logistical nightmare, and possible only with computers and telephones and long distance printers in remote locations. A marvel, actually. The region is huge. There are some 3,000 customers, perhaps two dozen terminals in towns like Milwaukee, Sauget, St. Louis, Kansas City, Sioux Falls, et al. They receive their daily marching orders from a computer printer in their offices, all coordinated by the LPCC in Woodfield. The product terminals are connected to the various refineries by barge or pipeline. Some have exchange agreements with Amoco, Texaco, Exxon or whoever. We buy from them in areas where our pipelines don't go; they do the same someplace else.

On Tuesday, I drove to Milwaukee, 90 minutes away, with a rookie hire, an MBA from the University of Chicago who recently was promoted to senior financial analyst (salary group 14) in the Controller's Planning and Product Economics (P&PE) group. We spent a day at the petroleum products terminal on Jones Island near Lake Michigan. It was cold. We got a day-long orientation, gauged tanks, and watched the testing of incoming, stored, and outgoing products.

In the afternoon, I did a tour as a helper on a transport during the delivery of an 8,900-gallon load of gasoline to an OG&L in suburban Bloomfield. I worked the hoses into the fill hole; or rather the hoses worked me, and maintained the pressure in the various trailer compartments as we dropped the load. (Get the jargon?) It was exhausting.

On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, I went to the lube blending plant in Cicero, Chicago's answer to Long Island City, about an hour's drive from Mt. Prospect. At the end of each day I drove to Woodfield to complete and sign the expense forms I'd need to get my bills paid on time. They were long days.

The lube plants blend heavy products—motor oils, waxes, and greases—and package them into drums, kegs, pails, and cans. They warehouse the products and deliver them by Mobil trailer or common carrier all over the country. At Cicero, the high-speed canning line can take up to 2,000 cans an

hour, fill them with blended product, seal the lids and pack them into 24-can cases, all automatically. It takes three men to work the machine. Mobil 1 is blended in St. Louis and Woodhaven, outside Detroit. Cicero handles the other motor oils. The products are blended in kettles, 10,000 gallons or on in-line blenders. They draw from storage tanks, one of 166 on the property, blend the “mouse milk” into products as specified, then send product into product tanks for packaging later. The atmosphere is oppressive, dirty, smelly, and dark. The vapor from the product stays on the pipes, collecting dust. The grime is incredible. The slippery cement floor was treacherous. I was warned to wear dirty clothes.

Cicero is an oppressive spot. The people who work in the plant are “operations.” They are production types, hard-edged, undiplomatic, and direct. One guy, Marty Britten, reveled in posing as a tough guy with a mad on all the time. He wore a cowboy hat and boots to work. He smoked too much, drawing each puff as though it were the first of the day, deep and long. He smashed the butts into the tray or under his boot onto the floor. He swore, acted as though it all were such a chore and a pain. But he loved it. He loathed “Region” and “Headquarters.”

“I’ve turned down transfers. Don’t want any part of it,” he said. “Office work! Yuck! You can have it.”

And, of course, I do.



I had a full Saturday at home before taking off on a Northwest Orient DC-10 wide-body to Seattle on Sunday, the 18th. Again I was off to spend days with people I don’t know well. I was feeling sorry for myself. Then, as we flew over the Snake and Columbia Rivers, the pilot advised all on the flight to look to the north and see Mount St. Helens erupting. Wow! What a sight. The ash, a brownish black, was pumping from the top of the mountain, two and a half times as high as the mountain, into the sky. The ash spread as far east as the eye could see. The terrain was ruined. The rivers wound north and south into oxbows, in the valleys between the peaks. It was awesome. Only later, when I watched KING-TV, an NBC affiliate in Seattle, and saw the videotape of the event did I get a scope of just how devastating this event was. The view of the volcano gave me a bit of perspective on my little problems. Corny, but true.

I was picked up on Monday by Jim LaPorte, the west coast PR guy, and a free-lance photog from L.A. who was a pal of LaPorte from their days with Occidental Petroleum. It rained the entire two-hour drive north to Bellingham, outside of Ferndale, where we were going to do a profile on the anniversary of the Ferndale refinery. The Pacific Northwest is like a tropical rain forest without the tropics. It was lush and green, rugged mountains

and smooth valleys. Tremendously beautiful. Puget Sound, a huge body of water, is majestic and busy with shipping. Quite a sight.

In L.A., after LaPorte introduced me to Holland, the Western Region general manager, we drove to get a tour of the refinery in Torrance. Serious doings in this place, very serious. I saw the fire site where three died last fall. The 80,000-barrel product tank, which had erupted, now looked like a huge rusted beer can that had been stomped on.

“A meltdown,” the environmental guy said. Eerie place. We walked in the dike where one of the dead guys ran to and collapsed. Over yonder was where the 19-year-old girl was burned to death. She was a civilian driving on the public road through the refinery when the vapor erupted. A fourth guy was saved when he ran into the wind, to the north.

“He was lucky, the vapors were past him. The other two guys just ran in the wrong direction and the fire engulfed them,” the safety guy said.

LaPorte explained L.A. is an instant town. In L.A., where Mobil has its offices, is a downtown, with height and malls, pedestrian walkways, neat hotels that could double as sets for *Star Wars*, and a pedestrian walkway where LaPorte and I walked, looking for all the world like Anglo cops. From a revolving cocktail lounge on the 30th floor of the Bonaventure hotel, before dinner Thursday, I saw how the town was laid out: entire neighborhoods grow up in a few years, only to disappear a few years later. Ethnic neighborhoods are the rage, with the Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese all staking out an area of town for investment and staying with it. Kim in South Korea knows that Park from South Korea has bought at 6th Street and Anglo Avenue in L.A. He doesn't want 8th Street and Anglo, he wants the next lot at 6th Street and Anglo. The result is real estate prices around 6th Street are stratospheric while 8th Street remains a slum.

Of course, the mountains and the L.A. basin determine the air, which is foul. Really! I was congested for days afterward. I saw a home near the Torrance refinery, across the street. It was a shack. A one-floor ranch, one-car garage, two bedrooms, living room, kitchen, backyard patch, air foul, cheek by jowl with neighbors. It sells for 100G's. I counted my blessings.

The four-hour flight home in a 727 was jammed. The Avis line was 45 minutes long. I left at 1 p.m. L.A. time, got home at 8:30 p.m. Chi time. I was so tired I was fighting back tears.

2. EXPLAINING THE MOVE

June 7, 1980, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Barnard)—Mobil offered me this opportunity and I'd signed up for a few years anyway, so I might as well go and see what I can learn. So we sold the home in Upper Nyack, purchased a home in Chicagoland, and moved out of state April 24, driving 977 miles west and relocating in Mt. Prospect. The Newberry Lane house is

about twice the size of the home in New York. Twice everything else, too, including work. The mortgage interest rate—15 percent. Can you believe it?

Sun Oak has put shoulder to the wheel and is turning the house into a home. The place was vacant for about four months because the previous owners had an “executive transfer” arrangement with the company, which provided for its purchase by Merrill Lynch. The market here is depressed, forcing values of homes down, so we got a good buy. But the work! Wasps were nesting in the storm windows when we got here. None of the shrubbery had been trimmed in years (the previous owners apparently not wanting to take the time) and the lawn a mess. To work we go. Within a few days, we found the washing machine leaking and the sink not draining; \$380 later all is well. Whew.

Since late August I have been at Mobil. Newspapering had lost its romance and there was this tempting outfit a block down East 42nd Street making all these nice noises about opportunity. So there I went to work on the Corporate Public Relations staff in the Publications section, as a writer/editor on *Mobil World*, a monthly newspaper, and *Overview* magazine, a semi-monthly. What a shock! I was used to the relatively free-wheeling, raucous, and profane atmosphere of the *Daily News* and I was now with a bunch of Corporate PR types, who sneeze into handkerchiefs, and say excuse me.

I was expecting to stay in that job perhaps two or three years and then see what happened. I was just getting accustomed to bringing my hanky with me to work when, in December, I was asked if I wanted to take a PR job in either Los Angeles or Chicago. I would have to say yes to both; they would decide which. Sun Oak counseled what the hell, why not? So I said I'd do either, though I'd prefer the Midwest because it's cheaper and closer to family and friends. Christmas and January passed; then came the word: Chicago.

The job is officially titled Public Relations Advisor, Central Region, United States Marketing and Refining Division, Mobil Oil Corporation; a fancy title for spokesman for Mobil in the Central U.S. It's neat. My “clients” include marketing managers and operators in Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Michigan; the Mobil Credit Card Center in Kansas City; and refineries in Augusta, Kansas, and Joliet, Illinois. The idea is that I am the guy who the public talks to if something happens of a public nature involving any of Mobil's above operations. That includes disasters, such as explosions at refineries, or contributions to the Chicago Lyric Opera, or telling a politician or two that chicken manure won't solve the energy crisis. To do the job, I've had to educate myself. For the past two months I've been traveling to Mobil operations in Texas, Washington, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and will yet go to Kansas and our refineries. The oil

business is complicated and heavily regulated. Learning what the company does and how the government responds is a tall order. There is a lot to learn.

My wife is trying to remember what I look like, and my kids wave as I fly by.

For the moment, I'm in Illinois, getting reacquainted with the family. Sun Oak is hard at work on the house, getting it into shape, working on gardens, shrubbery, furniture, painting, etc. The kids are making new pals. Lee finished her kindergarten year at her elementary school in Mt. Prospect. Micah has taught himself how to ride a two-wheeler. He starts kindergarten in the fall. Both will be swimming in the River Trail Park District for Cook County's Olympic sized pool (family fee \$26 a year), a five-minute walk from home. We are about 25 miles northwest of Chicago, close enough that commuters may want to pick up our place when we move back east. The terrain, by the way, is flat. I feel like I'm living on a bowling alley. The subdivision where our home is located, called Camelot, of all things, is on a former cornfield.

3. KANSAS HEAT

June 30, 1980, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—I've survived a heat wave to stop record books at 1980 for four score years. My record is intact. Houston—tornado. Beaumont—flood. Seattle—volcanic eruption. Los Angeles—earthquake (2 days after departure). Now Kansas—heat wave. What's next? I walked around the Augusta refinery, not for long, in 110-degree heat. Let me tell you, that is hot!

It's been going on for 14 days now. Over 100 degrees in the Southwest. People are dropping on the streets, in their homes, even in hospital beds. Cattle are going to slaughterhouses before their time. Chickens are dying by the millions before they can become fat enough for Frank Perdue. But the farmers are happy. In southern Kansas it is harvesting time. And for a Kansas farmer the warm, dry weather is like fresh fish to a tomcat.

The combines are running 20 hours a day. They are turning in record crops, which won't be sold to the Russians, though the grain merchants may sell Canadian wheat and other grains, that's okay. I mean after all, a profit is a profit, right? The farmers seat themselves in International Harvester/John Deere/Massey Ferguson machines that are the envy of the eating world. During 20-hour days, the farmers work in air conditioned/stereo-equipped/safety-roll-bar/plush padded splendor, sipping Old Style beer, made in Wisconsin. They are happy as farmers can be; those who risk their capital worth and that of the banks and their neighbors every six months to put in the crop. It is coming up and they are happy.

But they are also using up a lot of fuel, which is giving the Resale Marketing people fits. The government-ordered allocations to farmers are

based on their use two years ago, right? Well, now they have been slowly converting from gasoline to diesel fuel. Fine, everybody wants to save gasoline, right? Only the refiners are having a hard time putting out the right formulae of diesel in the quantity the farmers need now. After all, harvest time (the highest use period for farmers) two years ago wasn't in the period of June 23 for 10 days, it was some other time. So, they've got problems. The refinery cut now is 60 percent diesel, 40 percent gasoline. It used to be 40/60. Government regulation rides again!

Which brings me to Wichita. Things are up to date in Kansas (City too, but more about that later). You see, there is this hotel where Rosalynn Carter was forced to flee in the middle of the night because of a fire two months ago or so. On the 8th floor they have a concierge who takes care of you. Including finding out who has a reservation for what night, and providing stationery and matchbooks in your room with your name on them. Pretty neat. Wichita is an old cow town, converted by the airplane manufacturers into the airplane construction/assembly capital of the western world. The population is about 300,000 in Wichita, largest in Kansas, which isn't saying that much.

But it's quite a going town. Lear, Cessna and Beech are king. Boeing ain't bad, either. The land is flat. The sky reaches until sight is impossible. The rolling hills are slight inclines on the roadways. Wichita is also the Kansas oil producing capital. The people in Kansas produce oil and make money. They like oil and money. They like small oil companies and large ones too. After all, they are making money too. You drive down Kellogg Street east of Wichita to Augusta, and you see the giant praying mantis-like pumpers working the stripper wells, churning out \$200 a day for some lucky farmer. Of course, our leaders in D.C. have seen fit to tax these small outfits like the majors; the windfall tax makes their incomes subject to be cut by half. Really, sometimes things can get screwed up. It's like in New York when the elderly on the Grand Concourse eat lunch from a cat food can.

In Wichita, Kansas, a western town near the Oklahoma border, it's hot, too. Reading the papers and watching TV, it's all the talk: damn, it is hot in the Southwest. In Kansas City, temp 105 degrees; Wichita, 110 and 109, respectively, the two days I was there. I mean, that is hot. They talk western talk there, too. Like howdy pardner, and stuff like that. They don't punch cattle anymore. They assemble airplanes, produce oil, and harvest wheat. With the hot dry weather, the crop at its height in that stretch of territory (the first level of longitude ready for harvest in late June-early July) the farmers, the guys who buy the huge International Harvester combines, well, they were happy. The crop was dry, full, and it wasn't rainy. Anyway, this is all to explain why I am wearing a 10 gallon straw cowboy hat I purchased in Wichita, at Sheplers, the world's largest western wear store. My hat is size

7 5/8 (that is big!). I feel neat. I always wanted one of them big dudes; now is all, I look like one. But I'm wearing Nike jogging shoes, too. So how about that for mixing my clothing metaphors?

I was in Wichita because it is so near to Augusta, the Mobil refinery town in the middle of Kansas. Augusta has a population of 7,000; employees of the refinery number 200, annuitants still in town number 300. Each of the 500 has two others attached to family unit, on average. That makes 1,500 in Augusta dependent in one way or another on the refinery. Something NY HQ calls the tea kettle! Only it puts out 50,000 barrels of product a day (BD). Joliet puts out 200,000 BD by comparison. Beaumont nearly 400,000 BD. Which makes Beaumont big, not Augusta small. In Augusta, Kansas, the refinery is the biggest bullfrog in its pond. In Kansas City I toured the Mobil Oil Credit Card Center, a marvel of technology and organization. Only a couple of day jaunts here and there, a few days back in NYC which is going to be like a vacation, and that will be it.

When I get into my predecessor's office, I'll be happy like a bandit riding over the ridge after holding up the stagecoach to the fort with gold in my saddle bags. After five weeks or so on the road, seeing the USA and the oil world according to Mobil, I am beginning to make connections—such as a barge unloads crude to a refinery, which makes products and then sends supplies by pipeline to terminals, then to distributors/agents/consignees, then to OG&Ls, Ns, and SOI/SMIs (company-owned and -operated stations), then sold.

Much of all this is regulated by Uncle Sugar, through the DOE, EPA, or various state agencies. It is also administered by a corporate bureaucracy that would be envied in France, populated and staffed by people who vary in quality and depth of knowledge from the lowliest computer terminal operator in the credit card center, to high minded social realists, like the security and safety people, to the salt-of-the-earth types, like the refiners, to the over-the-hill frat house guys in the Marketing Department. It is quite a show. More than I ever envisioned.

Mobil Oil Credit Corporation is a vast operation, processing more than 50,000 purchases a day. But get this figure. There are so many holders of Mobil credit cards that MOCC receives 5,000 change-of-address orders from customers a day. A day! Plus letters about purchases, phony dunning notices, allegations about \$1 a knuckle men, and letters from customers saying you can come get paid only on even days for two hours in the middle of the day when the green flag is in the window. Some wiseacre in L.A. thought that one up. They've got a machine there that reads credit card order copies. Reads them! Then translates them, prints a coded message on each at 90,000 strokes a minute, and sorts them into piles. The tickets move through the machine at 25 mph. Incredible.

Kansas City is one of this country's great towns; a million people in the metro area. Missouri, where most of the industry/commerce/residences are, is wet. Kansas is dry. No mixed drinks. They get around that by the "club" system used in Europe. You pay a fee to join the club, or buy the bottle, and you pay them to get the mixed drink, or have a bartender pour and mix a drink from your bottle. Got it?

Regional tidbit: St. Louis, a fine town, old German, beer drinking, eastern, industrial, having its troubles, like Detroit, Newark, Cleveland, has built a huge arch to portray the city's heritage as the "Gateway to the West." Which was great. Only St. Louis wasn't the gateway—Kansas City was. Kansas City is the country's first "western town." It has called itself the "Gateway to the West" for years. 'Cause it was. Wagon trains and river commerce stopped there on the way west, not in St. Louis, which saw its earliest visitors mostly south to New Orleans and north to Chicago. So here is St. Louis with its arch, paid for 90 percent by the fed's urban renewal people, and to the west 300 miles is Kansas City screaming bloody murder.

Truman must have been turning over in his grave, coming from Independence as he did, the town cheek by jowl to Kansas City, Missouri. Today, Kansas City, Missouri, must comfort itself by having T-shirts and caps printed calling itself "Heart of America," which it is. Only you should hear the things Kansas Citians say about St. Louis. They would curdle milk.

4. WORK MUSEUM

July 5, 1980, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—There is this notion here in Chicago that I am beginning to acquire and cannot shake. It is that Chicago, and the Great Lakes industrial area, is where America, post WWII, is really at. We may be about to enter another era, say the Southwest stretching west to the coast of Southern Cal. That's not my interest here. I want to focus on my epiphany that Chicago is where the United States, as I've known it in my lifetime, is today: industrial, innocent and on its ass.

This comes to mind because of a visit Sun Oak, the kids and I took to the Museum of Science & Industry. In New York City, such an institution couldn't exist. It isn't trendy or effete. It doesn't have anything to do with high art or the latest wave in music, theater, film, writing, communications, publishing, and fashion—blah, blah, blah. Instead, the Museum of Science & Industry features food, machines, coal, petroleum, health, automobiles, railroads, aviation, mathematics, computers, etc. Dull stuff. Only it's important.

Exhibits are put together with extraordinary skill about the agriculture business. There is an International Harvester combine right there you can damn near sit in and begin to operate! There is a coal mine you go into, where you see what it is like underground, say about a mile. There is some 10-minute "Tunnel of Love" ride; only it's by Amoco and about the oil

business, with lights flashing showing solar power and how the sun started the whole process. There are exhibits that show how eggs are important, and where they come from. There is an antique locomotive you can sit in. There is a GM exhibit about the development of the automobile, and an explanation of how the internal combustion engine works. The U.S. Navy has an exhibit about Sea Power, with a mock 1800s Old Ironsides you can walk in, cannon and all, and a bunch of multi-media exhibits about how submarines work. They even have a captured German U-boat, which for 50 cents you can walk into and look around.

You could spend a day at each exhibit. We only spent a day in the whole place. I was drooling by the time we left. This may have had something to do with the fact we had eaten a double vanilla scoop hot-fudge sundae in a real antique ice cream parlor on the recreated downtown Chicago Street circa 1890s, and I was eager for a glass of water.

But I think the reason I was going on at the mouth was because I got a picture of what the museum was saying. Here in Chicago, they think that industry, agriculture, and the growth of the nation are important. It is not dull. It is exciting, it is worthwhile, it isn't something to sneer at; it is, after all, what our economic life is about. Is this a simple lesson? Yes, but one that New Yorkers have forgotten. At least the NYers I know, mostly. Back East it's government programs, foreign policy, where's mine, have I got the right designer jeans on, am I going to the right bistro? Here, nobody thinks about that stuff. Here is where the work gets done. Which is why the Midwest gets such a knock. The people here are working the machines, growing the food, and doing the economic "engine" work that allows all the swells back in NY to wonder whether it is worth it all, on a cosmic level and all.

This was brought home to me by how much the automobile industry problems are having an effect here. The Great Lakes industrial region is as dependent on the automobile—on sales, its success—as a junkie at East 108th Street and Second Avenue is on his hit of hop.

I visited an ordinary factory with a commercial marketing rep a few weeks ago. I thought the place, Crane Packing Co., was some kind of meat-packing joint. No. Packing means packing seals, like washers, or seals for water pumps. Crane makes zillions of them. Perhaps 400 people work there, turning out the little doodads that go into water pumps in this year's Chevys, Pintos, and Horizons. The lapping machines, which grind the seals to within a millionth of an inch, use a Mobil lubricant. The problem is the auto industry isn't selling the cars, which means they don't need so many pumps, which means that 100 people in Crane Packing were recently laid off. They aren't handed maps showing the cheapest, fastest way to Texas, though they should be. They are told: tough times and we got to let you go.

Then there is the guy at Appleton Electric. They make conductor boxes

used in construction of buildings, homes, offices, and factories. They can't get the right kind of people to work their lathes anymore.

The purchasing agent said: "The old days you get some German or Polack or Lithuanian, and he cared about his work. His machine was always clean. He brought experience to his work. You could depend on him."

The agent, who was explaining why he was giving up the superior lubricant Mobil made for the machine at a price of \$1.05, to purchase the inferior lubricant a smaller competitor sold for \$0.99, said: "I got to cut costs. Don't tell me how your stuff will actually save me money" (which it will, as proven by the Commercial reps who do studies that would earn them a Ph.D. at Cal Tech for each account). "I don't care. You know the kind of people I got working on those lathes today. They break the machines before your lubricants have a chance to save me money. They don't give a shit about the work. The machines are filthy. The work is shoddy. They don't care, and they are members of unions demanding more and more money for worse work. I mean, does it make any sense to stay in Chicago? In (Racine) Wisconsin we got a better labor force. We're getting out."

Mobil lost a customer. Chicago lost a factory. You can substitute any town south of the Mason-Dixon Line for Racine. The only reason they're going north is that's where the Germans, Poles, and Lithuanians are. Besides the lost business because of the recession, the mordant construction industry, and low demand for fuel. It is sad. What does it all mean? I just know that the Great Lakes industrial north use to run this country. Now it is a new world. The Japanese make better cars, cameras, doodads. Germans make better steel. Koreans are better at construction (witness the Mideast construction contracts). The Koreans, Japanese, Singaporeans, Hong Kongers, and countless other nationals are like the old Germans, Poles, and Lithuanians.

They may not know a lot about the machines at first, but when they learn, it's money in the bank. They work their asses off. Their families are better off; capitalism is working for them. Here? The world is changing. Industries are moving elsewhere so they can survive. They are going south mostly. Maybe it will take a few decades but the trend is inevitable. And, in its way, it is just. The rot is in these towns up north. Only there are people here, and they are hurting.

Now, still on the serious front, is the good news: farming. And farm machinery. Man, now there is an area where the U.S. is in great shape. Carter's answer? Refuse to sell grain to the USSR! Maybe he's got good reason. Only it's not working. The dealers, the guys who move the grain from point A to point B, are still permitted to trade with the USSR, according to a USDA ruling recently. Only they must use somebody else's wheat, corn, rice, barley, etc. Effect? Kansas, the Dakotas, Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois,

Montana, Idaho, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana are pissed off. The Soviet markets will be taken by the Canadians and Aussies.

The harvest in southern Kansas was great. The northern harvest this season—in northern Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas—was wiped out by the heat wave and drought. Corn was cooking on the stalk in Iowa, popped corn, if you will. The heat wave was bad, bad. But there have been political and weather problems before. Farmers are used to it. The biggest gamblers in the U.S. aren't found in Las Vegas, Reno, or Atlantic City. They are in farmhouses in the central U.S. They'll come back. They can produce more food per acre and more protein per planting, and make more money, faster and more efficiently with less cost, than any farmer anywhere ever.

The machines used by the farmers and manufactured by International Harvester, John Deere, Massey Ferguson are the envy of the world. They are terrific. They ride like Rolls Royces and in one day do the work it used to take 100 men a month to do. In the USSR it takes 1,000 farmers, using machines still made of wood, to do the job of one American farmer. The U.S. machines have technology perfected in the space program. Deduction? U.S. farming is the giant. Manufacturing is on its ass. Relocation and dislocation of the American economy is inevitable, political realignments perhaps, a war or two.

All this from a visit to the Museum of Science & Industry, which couldn't even get a subscription list in New York City, the capital of the world. Then again, maybe I'm just full of it. Just because I think that the Midwest is an interesting place, and that I'm ready to take a shot at the New York *I-want-mine* crowd, doesn't mean I don't want mine.

6. PRAIRIE STORMS

July 9, 1980, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—What happened shortly after dawn this morning is a good example of what I've been learning about. The past few days have been mostly muggy, still, and hot. Occasionally the Canadian air would win over the hot, muggy air from the prairie. But such victories were few. I had kept all the windows on the second floor, where we all sleep, open that night and the fans going. It wasn't warm enough for the air conditioner; it can suddenly get cold in the middle of the night. AC is costly and both kids had had colds recently. So the AC was off, the windows open; the fan pushing around what little breeze there was.

I had slept relatively fitfully from midnight on, your normal toss and turn. But at 6 a.m. the wind was no longer at my back; it was coming suddenly and forcefully from my front through the open window facing west.

The sun was up, the sky covered with a high gray cloud that stretched from horizon to horizon. We live on a former cornfield, which is flat, flat, flat. The homes around us, like ours, are two-story jobs, and the trees are about 15 years old and tall enough to look grown but not so old they dominate the horizon.

From the second-floor window I can see the horizon from ground to ground, a huge sky, that so dominates the view to be the most impressive and awesome part of the vista. The wind woke me up. The air pressure had changed, and the light from the recently risen sun was dimmed. The rain started slowly, but was whipped around by the westerly wind so that I had to get up to shut the windows within an inch and a half of closed, so the western side of the house, the front side, wasn't drenched.

Sleep now was impossible. A storm was coming. The light grew dimmer, the wind more fierce. The breeze through the small openings in the windows was strong enough now to blow around the magazines scattered around the floor. Now the winds were up to gale force. In the distance, there were flashes of light, quickly followed by a low rolling thunder. It was close. Now it was probably 6:06 a.m. I lay back in bed, eyes wide open, waiting. The weather here has taught me a few things, mostly that it is something to respect. Within minutes the noise and flashes of light were simultaneous. A streak of light, a bolt, flashed outside my window, just a few blocks away. It was followed shortly by a crash of noise so I violent I thought the windows would shake

from their bindings. I got up and moved to fix the window quickly; afraid to linger too long, not knowing when the next flash of light would occur. I scanned the horizon for what I feared most: a tornado. I saw nothing.

I crawled under the bedcovers once again, drew them to my chin, and waited. The lightning and thunder were more frequent now, shaking the house and making me realize for the first time why some people are afraid of lightning. It was overhead, directly above our home, where my two children and wife remained asleep. I lay awake, waiting. Then by 6:15 a.m. it was past; now to the east. The wind was abating, and the sound of thunder was distant and more rolling, as though it was spread over a longer, wider area. My clock radio went off, tuned to the news/sports/weather.

The weather man, seated in the Merchandise Mart in the Loop, in downtown Chicago 25 miles to the east, was saying that a storm was coming in from the west and that it was bringing with it high winds and rain. It was the storm that had just passed. I listened to the weather and music for a few minutes more, knowing the storm had passed, and now fighting off sleep.

But that 15-minute episode illustrated what it's like out here. The changes, particularly the winds and rain, are abrupt and violent. Tornadoes are as common around here as earthquakes are in California, and occasionally they kill people. Days after we moved here, someone was killed a few miles south of us during a tornado that just happened to touch down on her home, not her neighbor's!

It is so arbitrary, so quick, and then it's over. Final. Like a hand from the heavens reaches out and grabs a few innocents every once in a while to remind others just who is in control. It works; because it is so without warning. All of a sudden, it occupies the entire sky, completely consuming your world. Then it is over.

I mentioned this to natives, and they shrugged. "You should see how it is in Kansas, out on the prairie where there is nothing for miles to break up the weather. Bub, I tell you..."

On the night of July 3, a massive electrical storm, and again with gale force winds, swept through this area, killing one boy, who happened to pick up a live electrical wire, and knocking down trees that crushed cars and homes. That was the clip you saw on the network news from Mt. Prospect. A car down the street from us was bashed in pretty good by a falling maple. A Russian olive tree in our backyard split. We were planning to cut it down anyway, so no biggie. But the remains of that Russian olive joined dozen of other trees at the side of the street Monday for the garbage collector.

What am I getting at? In the flatlands, the weather is different. Back East it is more predictable, perhaps. It can be just as troublesome in season but not so abrupt, and people don't die every week or so from a tornado, falling trees, lightning fires, or downed power lines. Do they? I can't remember it like that.

A few homeless people in a blizzard will freeze. A car swamped on the Saw Mill or Route 22. But people having their homes destroyed just like that? A storm which leaves their neighbor's places intact. That's different. But that's the way it is here. No big deal. Must be the air pressure or something. Maybe sunspots. The moon doesn't pull my tide the same way it used to.



July 17, 1980, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—To remind one what forces are in control, perhaps two dozen electrical appliances in this house haven't been working for 32 hours, 10 minutes. On Wednesday at 4:37 a.m., a whopper with gale force winds and high electrical intensity passed over our house. The battle of the cold and hot fronts. I feel like Poland watching the Germans and Russians. The fight may be interesting to watch but it's ruining the flowers. The question now is what to do with the five slices of steak, two chickens and assorted other previously frozen goodies which were cooked by Sun Oak this afternoon because they had thawed. We will be eating leftovers for a month. Of course, I shouldn't complain.

There are others in the Chi-land area who are still without power now at 6 p.m. Thursday, a day and 14 hours after the storm. Com Ed types are on the radio saying it will all be taken care of, not to worry. I know better. As an ex-newspaperman and current PR guy, I know how the game is played. It is a story when 1,000,000 customers are out. When it gets to "only a few scattered outages continue," it's not a story. The repair crews go home, the heat is off. They need a deserved rest and the remaining 1,500 homes can just wait. The weather out here is rough!

The weather remains the Big Story here. Five inches of rain Sunday night. I still shudder at the lightning. Monday night there was lightning and thunder from about midnight to 2 a.m. Scared the hell out of me. I wonder where the kids are all the time. I'm even having dreams about tornadoes; driving down the street away from home, seeing two huge black pipes in the sky and forced to pull over and ask strangers if I can hide in their basement with them. How about that for dreams? See what climate will do to you? My '71 Skylark, the one without the air conditioning, is going to get traded in. I drove 45 minutes each way to the Cicero lube plant Tuesday in 110-degree heat. That is the last time I do that without AC. I went to a dealer last night and started pricing out a new car.

8. OKLAHOMA

April 28, 1981, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Norton)—I'm pretty non-chauvinistic when it comes to U.S. towns. I think they all got at least something going for them. Even Indianapolis. It's got a fine circle at the center of town, a fountain, a capitol building in the background, and relatively clean streets. Sure it's deserted after 6 p.m., but hey, these folks are homebodies.

I like the idea of Oklahoma, even if it didn't work out for the Indians. Oklahoma is an Indian word meaning "red people." I've read a bunch about the place, the days of the Nations and I.T. (Indian Territory), as it was called until a few decades ago. The cattle drives from Texas crossed the Red River into the Nations and had to cut their herds to pay off the local Indians who weren't real pleased with the beeves trampling the flowers and whatnot. All things being equal, the Indians wouldn't have had to worry about it except they had been forced there from the East to begin with.

But to the whites, there are the Sooners and the Boomers. Sooners being those who staked out the land they wanted before the land rushes, then ran their horses around the hills all day long to come into the land office with their mounts all lathered up and say: Hey, I got here quick and found this real fine spot I'd like. See, I followed the rules, my horse is exhausted from the running. Guys like that were called Sooners. Boomers were the townspeople who came to the towns that boomed up overnight. The state is the place of the white man's land grab. A less than honorable legacy, to be sure, but full of lore nonetheless.

Oklahoma lacks the discrimination against Indians you'll find in, say, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. In Oklahoma, after all, most whites are part Indian anyway. Plus the tribes that still run their reservations, Cherokee, Shawnee, Cree, and others, are pretty high-tone folks. The Cherokee were the first to put a school on the frontier, publish a newspaper, and other such civilized stuff. They even had their own constitution. Very modern type folks. Consequently, Oklahoma is as friendly a spot for Indians as exists on the continent.

I had flown out of O'Hare to Oklahoma City on Monday, April 20, landing at 1 p.m., and Manning, the PR guy based in Texas, picked me up at Will Rogers International Airport. The ground is reddish orange. Looks strange, as though everything is under some kind of solar eclipse or something. Flat. Derricks all over the place, with the gooseneck pumpers. Driving down the street there are houses, then where a house should be on a lot is a black derrick and a pumper with a sign: Phillips 66 Well No. 228-A-4.

There's a white derrick on the front lawn of the state capitol building.

Downtown, though, there isn't anybody around. Must be in the office buildings, 'cause there are virtually no pedestrians. The Sheraton Center is quite a mall, but it's nearly empty. I wasn't feeling well, it turned out, so I don't trust my impressions. But I felt as though I was on the moon. Very different kind of place.

All this is buzzing in my head, still is as a matter of fact. I got some kind of 24-hour bug in Oklahoma City, and Oklahoma City now is a separate reality. It's a town, all right, but not much of one. Of course, I spent most of my time there either flat on my back in the hotel room, or propped up against the back of the john, moaning. There was a portrait of an Indian chief on the wall of the hotel room. I didn't dare turn off the light, for fear I'd lose my way to the john. I kept staring at this portrait. He'd stare down at me as if to say: Gotcha, paleface. Not a fun 12 hours.

This trip and reactions occurred because of what one individual in Mobil did months ago: give somebody the impression that Mobil would give them \$3,000 for a talent contest. This surfaced in a letter being sent around the region by a community leader named Linda Finney about her talent contest. Right there in the letter from Finney, the one she is sending out to all minority types in the mid-continent region, is the statement that Sam Saxon of Mobil Oil Corporation promised Mobil would give \$3,000 in prize money. \$2,000 for first prize, \$1,000 for second. Hell, Miss America doesn't win more than \$10,000 in out-and-out prize money. Can you imagine \$2,000 for some tap dancing kid from Oklahoma City?

I sent the thing to Manning and asked what he thought, since it was his territory. He called and said we would have to get to Oklahoma and sit down and find out from her what was going on. Of course, all this would be worth more than \$3,000 in plane fares, overnight stays, meals, time spent et work, etc. Go figure. Finally, before the trip I chatted with Sam Saxon to find out just what he said and didn't say. Sam was nearing retirement after a lifetime in human resources working as a kind of contact man on chores that the management didn't want to deal with. He was a very nice man, but a bit ineffectual and had a very hard time making a definitive decision. It was clear he had not been able to say no to Mrs. Finney. When we talked about the history of this Sam was so nervous. Sweat was on his lip. His hands were fidgeting. His voice quavered. I spent most of the time trying to assure him that he wouldn't be tossed out the window.

"Don't worry about this," I said, "I'll take care of it. Don't worry." He smiled.

As he was leaving, he said, "Well, you must realize that this could have long range negative implications. And there is money around for this kind of thing ... I really think we should work hard to get her the money."

Unfortunately, this simply isn't the real world. In order to get this money, the new GM, Lane, would have to move the equivalent of heaven and earth to spring the bucks loose from Fairfax. The bean counters would never pass on this. Never. No way. I know this after being here only a year. Sam's been here 25 and still doesn't know what will or won't fly.

In Oklahoma City, Manning and I went to the Freedom Center to meet with Finney. It was a dump. Imagine an old concrete block service station in the black section of Oklahoma City, next to a low-rent taco stand, across from a KM service station, no asphalt drive, red soil, windows blocked up because of recent sniper attacks, only one entrance, the front, and inside are hand-me-down broken sofas, chairs, rugs. The smell is terrible. This is a community center.

Finney's a bit of a windbag—savvy, but a windbag. She's a schoolteacher by profession, and loves the sound of her voice. I liked her. She admitted there is a difference between "corporate talk" and "people talk" and that perhaps she had misunderstood what Sam said. On the way out, after promising that she wouldn't give Mobil a hard time over the fact we weren't giving her the money (she didn't have an IRS number, making a grant impossible), she said: "Well, maybe next year we can get together. I guess this is just like they treated the Indians, breaking treaties..."

It was later that evening I got the pip. Mobil's nice and all that, but man is this place heavy, like a weight that you carry around and finally it just crushes you. It a corrupting thing: Mobil does things this way; therefore you do things this way. Don't rock the boat, go along. You are handsomely rewarded if you go along, very handsomely. But what does all this do to you?

I like things the way they are supposed to be. Moving to Illinois made me realize just what I am: a knucklehead who's moved around a lot. This outfit thrives on people who move around so often they finally don't have any home but the company. I want to go home.

9. TRANSITION

May 8, 1981, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—The year has gone by very quickly. In the sense that you don't know where time goes to. Does it really fly? We've had our July 4, Labor Day, Halloween, Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays, winter, spring, summer, fall and all that goes in between at least once now in Illinois. It's a fine spot. Really. We've gotten used to the anchor people now, the radio jocks, and the traffic patterns. I've even learned my way about Chicago itself, where we go every month or so to a museum, store, or whatever.

Micah and I went to Wrigley Field last Saturday to watch the Cubs play Atlanta. Micah is a Cubs fan, as I have turned out to be, watching him. He's

got a Cubs cap and a warm-up jacket, and in a while I suppose I'll be buying a glove, ball and bat for us to play with. Fun. The Cubs even won. Their record is 4-18. Lee is in Girl Scouts, swimming at the Y, and the best student in her first-grade class. Micah is swimming, and though nearly two years younger than Lee, he is in kindergarten and also doing top work (this all much to my surprise, by the way, since I was a lousy student).

Spring is beautiful here. Our yard is lush and green, plenty of flowers that Sun Oak worked hard putting in, last year and this. Tulips, roses, and all manner of posies and patooties. It's been wet, and I've been mowing like a madman. Getting three lawn bags full of clippings each Saturday. That is a lot. Aside from all this bucolic splendor, all of us miss the East. We're kind of homesick.

Part of it is simply the structure of this job. I know deep down that I won't be spending my life here. Fact is, we could get called back East anytime now. It probably won't be for another year or two, but it could come next week. This expectation is preventing us from making the adjustment here, economically and emotionally. We aren't budgeting any major improvements to the house. We aren't really getting mixed up in local political or civic affairs. All because we might be gone real soon. Nonetheless, life goes on. The job I've been getting a firmer handle on. The newness has worn off.

People in marketing at Mobil transfer so often that even though I've been here a year, I'm considered an old hand by the newcomers. I'm not in marketing, of course, but the people I work for are. They are a strange lot: positive mental attitude nuts, sales oriented, goal oriented, achievement, go-go, smile-smile. I consider myself in the tradition, basically, of the storyteller, writer, communicator, pamphleteer, and propagandist—spinner of words for the sake of eliciting an emotion, mood or conviction.

Marketers, however, are more in the tradition of the snake oil salesman—selling something as if it were other than it is. Different outlook entirely. So I don't have too many people I feel comfortable with at work. The guys I can really talk to are in L.A., D.C., or NYC. I do a lot of phoning and letter writing.

I also am beginning to see where this corporate life could get stale. Corporations are marvelous human organizations. Truly. Only they are so structured and so mannered that the collective weight of the place can genuinely get to you. There are rules and codes of behavior and conduct that are easy to live with. But they are still rules and codes, and after a while they can feel very confining. Particularly if you like to see yourself grow. I can foresee down the road, maybe in a year or two, when I will feel like I can't grow anymore within the corporation. Maybe I will be lucky enough to get promoted enough so that I always feel as though I am growing, in job responsibility, areas of interest, financially, etc. But after being here a year I already

am beginning to feel that I have stopped growing. Sure, I'm getting seasoning and experience. I'm getting good at doing what I know how to do. But in a few months, it will become so repetitive I won't like it at all. I know enough about myself from my experience in the newspaper business to know that if I don't move along, I'll want to get out.



July 1, 1981, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Norton)—I was in Virginia yesterday talking with my boss and having a nice lunch at a French restaurant, where the food was delicious but gout-producing, on a jaunt that got me up at 4:45 a.m. Central time, arriving in Virginia at 10:30 a.m. Eastern time, back in Chicago at 6:30 p.m. Central time and home at 7:15 p.m. Long day.

A corporate gypsy...flying hither and yon, driving all over the Midwest, all in the name of making sure everyone gets the message according to the Big Oil/Mobil edition. Here it is nearly Independence Day, though there's no independence for this hack. Working in harness, getting slowly frustrated, wondering if all this big-time corporate mumbo-jumbo is really worth it. Would the world care at the end? Will Mobil go out of business, pay fewer taxes, make less money, and discover less oil? Doubt it. The bottom line is the bottom line, as the budget boys say: money.

Not that it's much, though it's better than newspapering. It's steady, regular pay, with tax deducted each month, a paycheck stub, a W-2 when needed, Social Security, corporate savings plan, health insurance for the family, etc. It pays the bills, whether or not Mobil really needs my good efforts/advice/counsel and anxiety.

"Don't worry, Collins," the boss said, "you won't be there forever. You got a future with the company and in this department [Public Affairs]..."

Just don't expect to move for another year. So that is it: I'm trying to figure out in the worst way how to get east, and I'm told, hang in there kid, you're doing great, we need you there, and don't expect to get out for another 18 months. When I'd heard there were going to be people moving from one job to another, I figured, hey, I'm antsy to move back.

I came home, angrier than a fox whose chickens went to Florida for vacation. Then I sat down, had a glass of wine and a chat with Sun Oak, felt the breeze and knew it's better here than 3 a.m. on 42nd Street in New York City talking to cuckoo birds, or 88 days on strike. Then I began to chill out.

I mean, come on. Sun Oak has turned this house around about as much as possible given our budget, we are here long enough to be settled in and getting antsy. Maybe we're going to get called back?

But it's too neat. I want to get back too much. It's not going to happen, my saner side kept warning. Does that change the anxiety? No.

I said to Sun Oak today, "You know we get back to New York and

within a month, having lived here for a year will seem like a dream, as though it only happened like a mistake, or didn't even happen at all."

I looked around our backyard from our porch furniture, where I'd just eaten lunch, watched the Canadian prairie's cool 30 mph wind blow our willow like a huge spinnaker in Buzzard's Bay, heard the neighbors playing around their pool, known our kids are at a chum's playing games and riding their bicycles. I think: This ain't so bad. In fact, it's kinda nice.

12. TOPEKA

February 19, 1982, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—Topeka is the capital of Kansas, the state's third-largest city. Today you can't get there from here. At one time, say between 1850 and 1875, Kansas played a central role in the growth of the country, first as Bleeding Kansas, where the South and North tried out their ideas and weapons in a dry run for the Civil War. Later came the railroads, the cattle drives from Texas, the wars and extinction of the Plains Indians—Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux—as the immigrants came by the tens of thousands at the invitation of the Central Pacific and the Sante Fe, whose agents in Europe passed out free tickets. After that the growth of the farms on the tracts picked up by the Lithuanians, Germans, and assorted other Nordic types who came there to build and be left alone.

In fast order, these pious immigrants turned Kansas from the dynamic center of all social and economic development into one of the most stable and hard working—if boring—cultures in the country, completely without the sizzle to the steak. But they had plenty of steak; they could eat a lot, pray the way they wanted, raise their kids healthy and straight, and to hell with the rest of the world. After 1880, Kansas closed its doors and today sleeps, eats, educates, works, grows, and lets everybody in Chi, Kansas City, and the two coasts make all the noise.

This is such a refreshing change from what I have watched in my three plus decades, I kind of like the place. The state is straight ahead, not to the right or left, just straight, no nonsense, clean. But boring. Wichita has about as much temptation as any place in the state. Kansas City, of course, is mainly in Missouri. The Kansas side of KC is more of a bedroom town for Missouri. The real Kansas starts just west of the Kansas City border. Say, at Topeka, which is about 60 miles away.

I went to Topeka last week. The Kansas Petroleum Council was having a meeting, and I wanted to schmooze with the district manager for Mobil, who is president of the KPC, and also to see what the others in the industry were doing about the divorcement/open supply bill approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee last November, and which Mobil has overreacted to, shouting to all our customers (who are more than prepared to believe we lie) that if this bill passes dire things will happen, such things as the end of branded gasoline, credit cards, advertising, and marketing as it is practiced in the U.S. today by Mobil and other major marketer/supplier/refiners.

Our message is that unless you Mr. Dealer/Distributor/Customer write your senator and make sure this bill is defeated, and this thing does pass, we will be forced to change the way we do business and you may be out of business quick. If you want to be a Burger King franchiser okay, do what you want. But if you want to continue to make a living by selling Mobil branded products, you better do as we urge. We can't tell them what to do; that's illegal. But we urge plenty good.

I wanted to get to Topeka to find out if the other majors and independents were telling their customers the same thing. I find out they weren't. Uh-oh. This means if Mobil keeps up this campaign this bill could fast become a vote on Mobil yes or no. On that basis the Senate would vote Mobil no, meaning we are doing precisely the wrong thing.

Boy, I tell Brown, my new boss, from Topeka, I'm glad that this is a Fairfax program, not something I cooked up. Brown, who agrees with me, is now working the halls of the Fairfax to sink a bureaucratic rival, whose idea this all was and at the same time show that he (Brown) ought to run these grass-roots deals from now on. Brown is an operator, savvy and effective in the division infighting.

Anyway, to do this kind of work I had to get to Topeka. I took a late flight out of O'Hare because I had to work and got to KC International about 6 p.m. or so, and had a half-hour layover to get a Frontier 737 (same Boeing that just went down in the Potomac) to Topeka. Fly time 25 minutes. No sweat.

I had no idea what I would see when I disembarked. So as I got off the airplane, I was hit by the wind—meaning no modern Jetway stroll into a warm terminal—but instead a walk down the stairway to the snowy tarmac. Floodlights illuminated Forbes Airport (Topeka's gateway to the world) and, holy mackerel, I thought I was in Dayton 20 years before. The terminal looked like a set from a World War II movie—looking like a Quonset hut, which is technically wrong but symbolically accurate. Concrete block-house is more like it. Small, squat, peeling yellow paint.

I walked through a small door into the terminal building, which had the design, decor and maintenance of a garage. The first human beings not with an airline I saw were two gents—both white—standing by the door. One, in

his late 30s, wore a dirty red stocking cap, had a gaunt unshaven face, missing teeth. He was short, lean, his jeans were ragged and dirty, tight fitting and covered the tops of his cheap, beaten-up cowboy boots. He had a stare that told me that if this were 44th Street it was time to cross the street to the other sidewalk pronto.

Standing next to him was his partner, early 20s, just as thin, about 5 foot 6, though his clothing was a bit cleaner, neater; fastidious, in a way, for this kind of soul. He wasn't wearing a jacket, despite the freezing temperatures. His faded denim jeans were tight. Around his waist was a huge belt and large buckle; from his belt loops hung those chains that have keys or wallets on the end, favored by truckers and bikers. This fellow wore a blue-checked flannel shirt, with the sleeves rolled up mid arm showing a clean set of long johns, which also showed at his open collar. His face was this pale pink, as gaunt a face as I've seen. His blue-brown eyes were bugged, set in such a way in his skull that he looked demented. His hair was an orange-blonde, very thin and neatly combed. Atop his head sat the most appropriate cap I've ever seen, a blue and white mass-produced cap with an adjustable head band, cheap netting around the back, a folded cardboard visor and a white crown which said in bold relief: *Red Neck*. These two airport habitués were, it seems, Topeka's answer to skycaps and cabbies. Oh, boy. Welcome to Topeka, I thought! Home to inbred hillbillies and river swamp morons.

I've been reading about the Civil War lately. I'm filled with thoughts just now of what those men in the Blue and Grey must have looked like or what they had been. I got an idea about the Yankee farmers like my great-grandfather. But the Johnnies? I read an Illinois corporal's description of his captors at Andersonville, the regiments from Alabama and Georgia. He described them as possessing a physical appearance that created a picture in my head that precisely matched those two Topeka boys. When I saw those two at the airport, I feared I had entered another century. It put me off balance all night.

I had a good meal, by the way, at this French joint at the Topeka deluxe convention center, a Holiday Inn HoliDome, which is the attraction nowadays being so new, and for any small town not a bad joint. Only this is the capital of Kansas, and the big do is a Holiday Inn! I drove around the city the next day, it's old, decaying, has an absolutely glorious governor's mansion and state capitol building, where that famous John Brown mural is. I toured the building for an hour.

When it was time to go I went back to the airport to the counter of Capital Air Lines, which my ticket said was running my flight back to KC, a city more firmly in the 20th century. I went to the Capital counter and asked this very distracted and bored mid-20s lady to check me in.

"How much do you weigh?," she asked as she punched my ticket and wrote on a clipboard.

“How much do I weigh?” I said, not quite sure I’d heard her right.

“Yes.”

Hoo-boy. I was in trouble. I told her about 200 pounds. She asked how much my bag weighed. I said I didn’t know but I was going to carry it on and didn’t want to check it in.

“Oh, we have no check on. There’s no room.”

“No room? How big is this plane?”

“Oh, about five passengers.”

I burst into nervous laughter, scared out of my wits. Five passengers! Would I be required to pedal, I wondered? How strong is the rubber band? Every cheap airplane joke I could think of, I said to myself. Absolutely terrified.

I got on a half-hour later. One other passenger sat in the co-pilot’s seat. A bag boy, whom I had seen earlier, loaded my gear into the boot. He was about 23, and wore blue jeans, a floppy sweater, and had long hair and a wispy mustache. He could have been a younger brother to one of the sky-caps I saw earlier! After he loaded my gear, he walked over and got into the plane. He turned out to be the pilot!

I had the back seat, which could fit two people my children’s size. I realized that the airplanes used in commercial transportation are well used because passengers don’t really feel like they are flying. In this little Cessna, on the other hand, there was no question about it! I could see the full 360 degrees, look at the wing above my head and see it shake; flying at 3,500 feet at 140 mph, you know what is happening. You see the rotor blades of the propeller in front of you out the window. You feel the wind move the plane up and down. Great fun. Like an amusement park ride that lasts a half-hour.

And the landing! We flew across the Missouri River, and in front of us were KCI (Kansas City International)—a very large airport—and this huge runway. I saw the pilot start to take this little thing down toward the runway, and closer and closer... you feel the thing land. Just great. The pilot was excellent, despite his junior status.



15. NEBRASKA

January 7, 1983, Chicago, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—The states are near bankruptcy. Several years of low tax receipts, inflation, high unemployment, factory layoffs, higher prices, et al. They are broke. This year the legislatures will be convening and trying to figure out how to raise money to pay for balancing state budgets, which many states require in their constitutions.

They intend to turn to oil. How is Mobil organized to meet this challenge? Are we listening to voices from the field that say that we need help? Have we put together state PACs, gotten management attention and support for our efforts, staff, and the rest? Are we budgeting money into lines that make it easy for us to join farm or business associations and pay \$200 membership dues so that we can become part of the state's business establishment? Are we dispatching local managers to become active in state chambers of commerce, on governors' advisory commissions, and on joint industry/government efforts to solve mutual problems? Has management in Fairfax or NY seen this as an active thing to pursue? No. Lip service, yes; money and manpower, no.

Item: The United Taxpayers of Wisconsin, a very influential anti-tax group that has helped us lobby in the past, sent Mobil's Milwaukee office five

invoices for a \$300 membership last year asking us to pay our membership bills. The bill never was paid because it was out of the budget cycle. We have to budget items like memberships 18 months in advance. If they come in at 16 or 17 months prior to their need, it is too late. Special allocations of \$300 are denied. The membership budget line for 1983 was reduced 30 percent because of cost containment. District managers in the states who are asked to participate in business associations, etc., are reluctant because we refuse to pay our bills. What do we do? We get excited seven days before the legislature is set to vote on a bill that could make us non-economic in the state! We get career threatening investigations ordered from corporate headquarters to determine how come we didn't know about this and do something.

In my area alone, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, probably Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri are going to consider legislation this year that could make it uneconomic for us to be in business in those states. Have we budgeted any money to take care of programs and memberships, PAC contributions, etc? No.

Now, the company keeps guys like me here. They have an OGC office, which hires lobbyists in state capitals. We haven't had much luck getting lobbyists with heads on straight. The guy hired in Lansing last summer is a former member of the legislature. He is a lawyer. He has a good equation with members. He hires out now. What happened? He helped delay anti-credit card surcharge legislation in September, but he said that Mobil didn't pay him when he submitted his November bill, so at Thanksgiving he told all his pals in the legislature to pass the bill Mobil opposed. It got within two votes of passing! We rushed around like madmen to get the thing killed. We had the benefit of having the facts on our side in the issue. The bill would have been unfair to refiners and quickly cost drivers too much money at the pump in inefficient operations. Even the *Detroit News* agreed, and after I told them about the bill they printed a nasty editorial. The editorial was read into the legislative record and in fact helped change the tone of the debate to such an extent that I am still hearing nice things about how wonderful and effective I am.

But who's kidding whom? It was luck. Pure and simple. Are we geared up to really participate in the public debate about issues like taxes? How come we depend on fruitcake shakedown artists to get our way? I have been working on this problem. And realize now that it is probably hopeless. I have lost faith, nearly, in our ability as a commercial enterprise to do anything other than a knee-jerk *anti* reaction in the public debate.

This was brought home last week on the trip to Lincoln. This was a dinner hosted by the Nebraska Federation of Business Associations for all the incoming members of the state legislature. It is kind of a first day thing in Lincoln. The Nebraska Petroleum Council (NPC), the state affiliate of the American Petroleum Institute, is a member of the federation. Mobil's

District Manager in Omaha, Bill Caswell, is chairman of the NPC's executive committee. He and the NPC exec director invited me down. I went. It was wonderful. It was held at the Best Western motel/hotel complex on O Street in downtown Lincoln, which looks like Des Plaines, the town between O'Hare and here. The buffet was okay. The shrimp a bit rubbery; but the ham was delicious. The movers and shakers of Nebraska were there. The Petroleum Council hired hand is a large, loud bore who drinks too much. Caswell is a jewel. His wife, too. They are in their late 50's. It was her first outing after breast cancer surgery.

Caswell is an old Magnolia Petroleum guy from Fort Worth. His culture is Texas; never did get on the HQ program. Caswell is grass roots, and does all the things I listed earlier without being asked. He is in a state where he can do it on his own and not tell anybody who might tell him not to. I encourage this so he tells me, and lets me participate. The dinner consisted of introducing all the business and farm people, then introducing all the new legislators attending, a few funny comments about each, and all very friendly and nice.

The entertainment was a group called the Oakdale Hat Dancers of Oakdale, Iowa. The emcee provided the music by playing a portable tape recorder into the podium mike while four guys with faces painted on their midsections and their arms and heads covered by huge "hats" walked around in time to the music. The music was a lively tune that featured whistling. The faces painted on the men's stomachs had red lips around their belly buttons so their belly buttons appeared to be puckered lips. The eyes were their tits and the noses and eyelashes, cheeks and ears were painted of their torsos. The hats were very large, of course, and came down just below the men's armpits so for all the world they looked like short men with huge faces. The "arms" were attached to skirts that were shaped like suits. As the music featured whistled segments, the fat ones stood in the center and make their bellies go in and out as though their "lips" were whistling. The bouncing blubber made the entire effect so funny I laughed until my cheeks ached. I'm telling you they were hilarious.

This was as corny as I have ever seen any place. But in Lincoln it fit. With dignity, too. There was a prayer after, some lighthearted funning about people's golf games, and how small the towns were where they came from. There was serious talk about farm prices and the Russian wheat embargo, and grain storage prices and costs and bankruptcies. There was talk about how farm implement equipment isn't being purchased. Fuel sales were down 30 percent in our business because planting is down now because of over-supplies of wheat. People were pleasant, well fed, and respectable. Light hearted on lighthearted stuff, serious about their work and businesses. Their smiles were without a shadow; a hello how are you was genuinely said.

"Nebraska people are the salt of the earth," the young emcee said, fully

believing in what he said as the truth, which it was.

Caswell saw me glance at him and he gave me a wink, a knowing nod that these people are AOK, aren't they? I nodded my head. Afterward, he came up and said, "This is where it happens, Tom, everything. Here. And you think those guys in headquarters know that? Hell, no."

16. KANSAS

February 11, 1983, Mt. Prospect, Ill.: (Journal, copy to Dad)—The romance of Kansas history grabbed me three years ago when I first went to Wichita and went into that place called Sheplers the World's Largest Western Wear store and got that Stetson. I was so taken I got the energy to write a pulp western, *God Dogs*.

Last year, I flew to Topeka on the Capital Air Lines puddle jumper, so this year I drove from Kansas City, Missouri, to Topeka, about 70 miles. Kansas City is a very with-it modern metropolitan city. The capital of the mid-continent. As NYC is to the East, L.A. to the West, Chicago to the Upper Midwest, and Dallas to the Southwest, Kansas City is to the mid-continent. It is up to date. It also has the mob, so you have a reasonably active nightlife; social, cultural sophistication to rank with other major cities, and lots of history. But when you get out of metro KC you get into the real world—Average America.

The drive through northern Kansas along the Kansas and northern Missouri Rivers is a treat of rolling hills and farmland, vast, now snow covered, overcast, giving a dirty white look to everything. A bit bleak. In the spring, summer and fall it would be simply beautiful.

I got in Tuesday afternoon for a Wednesday noon and evening do, and return Thursday morning. The problem with Topeka is that you have to get there when the transportation says you can, and can't-get-there-from-here kind of place.

I found the town about the same as the visit of last year. But the people are a bit more with it than those of Lincoln, where they have a kind of stand-back-and-let-the-world-come-to-them attitude. In Kansas they are willing to go out and get the world and make it come to them. This must be the state's karma.

The mix of Kansas is only a bit older than 100 years. The first to show up on the land called Kansas were the Asian immigrants about 10,000 years ago, then, say, 400 years ago came the Spanish conquistador Coronado and a priest, who was later murdered by the Kaw Indians he moved in with to convert. The next group were the displaced Indians from the Appalachian region kicked west by Jackson and his genocide squads who took Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, southern Ohio and the rest who simply said to the natives there: move or die. They went to the Indian Territory, which was Oklahoma and southern Kansas.

There were also the Arapaho and Cheyenne and the Comanche from the western portion of the not-yet state. Then came the drive to organize the territory by the railroads, cross country, types, the Pikes Peak discovery, the immigrants, cow towns of Hays, Abilene, Wichita, Dodge and Ellsworth. They only lasted for about two decades because the Volga/Germans, Mennonites, Scandinavians, Germans, Irish, Yankees and the rest that came with the homesteaders and railroaders shut the wild towns down and clamped down a brand of prairie Puritanism that exists to this day.

The state is dry. Home to Carrie Nation. The Puritanism masks a hatred of idleness that has its roots in the cow towns, never quite tamed. The best example is the liquor laws. Liquor cannot be sold or consumed in public. Therefore, it is done in private. To be private in a public place you have to join a club. Clubs are everywhere; there are A clubs and B clubs, C and D clubs too, probably AC/DC clubs too for that matter. Anyhow, to join such a club you pay 50 cents and you can buy and consume a beer in a club, which in fact are public places and look for all the world like bars because that is what they are, only they aren't because this is Kansas and they are clubs because Kansas is a dry state and wants to remain so. Understand?

Liquor in Kansas is sold by the state in state liquor stores, which tax them as a sin tax. They are state liquor stores, but they look for all the world like the liquor stores in New York or Illinois. But they aren't because you can't sell or buy in Kansas, unless of course the liquor is sold by the state. This causes gymnastics for drinkers in Kansas.

The dinner with the Kansas Petroleum Council was held in the top of the tallest building in Topeka, 14 stories. I am getting used to these do's. The evening with the legislators was similar to the Nebraska event. The legislators have a decidedly homespun look and feel to them. In fact many act like rubes. They are ill dressed, unkempt and ordinary. They are insurance salesmen, not too hard working lawyers from small towns, real estate salesmen types, home-makers, nurses, a few businessmen, primarily from the Wichita area, which is an industrial center: meat packing, aircraft construction, largest in the country.

At first I was somewhat troubled by their appearance and behavior. One of the legislators had introduced a bill the day before which called on the state to create "Kansas Gas Authority," which would condemn petroleum fields and have the state go into the gas producing business. All this to counter high costs of natural gas. Bad idea.

A legislator who also disapproved of the bill said near me: "Let's call it the Iran Bill. This sounds like something they would do in Iran." The guy who introduced the bill is about 30, an academic type, lawyer, an innocent, a Republican from a very small town. The guy who called it the Iran Bill is a businessman from Wichita who is a Democrat. So much for traditional party alignments.

After a while, I talked with most of these guys who represent their neighbors in the state legislature. Most are simply people. They are as smart or dumb as any anywhere. One fellow who looked like a farmer with K-Mart clothing in fact was an owner of producing oil wells. He was smart as a tack and we traded talk about the spot price in Rotterdam and on the Gulf, and he was asking about how Mobil's so-called "Aramco advantage" was looking now that the spot price was lower than OPEC posted Saudi light. I mean this guy was smart. The rep from Augusta was a decent fellow. Not too swift in the conversation department, but all in all okay.

By the end of the evening I realized that democracy is like a religion. You either have faith in people or you don't. The don'ts like things like Socialist control. The nasty types are into control too, only from the right. But if we let people like those in that Holiday Inn reception room make their own decisions, in my view we'll be okay. They are people who can make a reasonable judgment when presented with the task. Made me feel very comfortable, and distrust the rhetoric of the various Boy Wonders of the world who would manipulate facts to try to hoodwink birds like this.

Then again, they see through the hype and simply ignore it. Such comments from me, of course, are heresy. Only I figure the simple truth is always the best way. Give the people facts, tell them the likely consequences, and my guess is that you will bat more than .750 and be a winner. Leave the sizzle to the soap salesmen, not natural resource producers and manufacturers.

Like I said, I kind of like these people, the Kansans, I mean. They are straight. They have humor. The folks from Nebraska are a bit like witnesses to the craziness to the south, a bit more the stay at home type. But the Kansas folks will mix it up. Consider the bellboy who delivered my breakfast to my room Thursday morning. I had called room service at about 6:45 a.m. and was very hungry. I had not taken the time the previous evening to eat dinner. I had hors d'oeuvres at the reception and wanted to watch *Winds of War* instead of eating another plate of pasta. So by dawn I was hungry.

I ordered one egg, three pancakes, juice, two containers of coffee, and a bunch of bacon and toast. The kid came to the door and was holding this tray, I looked at him through the peephole, and saw him holding it up and standing straight in front of the door.

As I opened the door, it was as though I had raised the curtain. He immediately perked up his expression, made like he was in a club in Vegas, and said, "Well, I'll just take this back since you're not hungry." With that he fashioned his body in a Jackie Gleason imitation with an away-we-go movement as if to leave down the hallway. His timing and tone were perfect. I broke into laughter, it was so funny. I had ordered so much food; and he was clever enough to tease me and do it in a funny way. A wise ass type, with a sense of humor. How can you not like folks like this?

I dropped into the Kansas Historical Society Building near the capitol, which I toured again. They had exhibits in the rotunda—Future Farmers of America, Future Homemakers of America—where the overall message was great stuff: this is the real world, join clubs and be with the crowd and learn why it is important to grow food and raise kids and let the East and West Coast jerks laugh. Who cares, because this is the right way to do things.

The Historical Society had a museum room, where I spent a half-hour. Old weapons, hoes, Indian artifacts, stagecoaches, historical portraits of the “Pistol Packing Newspaper Editors” (heaven forbid), a memorial to William Allen White, an old umbrella that once shielded Lincoln from the rain, and a copy of a program from Ford’s Theater with blood stains on it, which had been used to prop up Lincoln’s head after he’d been shot. Remarkable. There it was: Lincoln’s blood!

The rotunda of the capitol remains majestic, a memorial to those people I was talking about. There is a huge landscape-mural portrait of John Brown there, the one with him holding the Good Book scripture in one hand and a “Beecher Bible” in the other, and forces from the North and South fighting behind him. By the way, I’d studied the days of Bleeding Kansas leading to Civil War, but never realized that the entire eruption of violence about slave-versus-free in Kansas in 1856-59 cost 55 lives. Given the issue and the carnage that would follow, I never realized so few lives were lost during that notorious period. Abolitionist PR made plenty of that!