On Prairie Loam: Impressions of History and Farming in Iowa

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U.S. Highway 30 ties Iowa together along an east-west line, one of many such concrete ribbons festooning the state. 30's route in Greene and Boone counties covers a generally flat terrain, with some waviness from the occasional rise. Several towns lie along the truck route — Jefferson, Grand Junction, Beaver, Ogden, Boone, and Ames. The cropland is generally flatter in the northern half of the state than in the southern, except where a river has cut a wide channel guarded on either side by bluffs. The farmers have availed themselves of the flatness to raise their crops, and they may thank the Wisconsin glacier for the level ground. Their debt is the greater for the soft soils that formed from the glacial drift after the grinding, cracking, polishing ice sheet melted northward.

30 descends the west bluff into the Des Moines River valley a little west of Boone, its concrete wagon-path slipping easily down the east-facing slope through a bulldozed cut, with seeming disregard for the steepness of the slope — down to the flat, fertile bottoms. South of the highway someone with Colorado fantasies clouding their Midwestern vision cleared a spot on the slope for a ski run, giving rise to a not entirely serious phrase, "Ski Iowa." The run faces north and a bit eastward to the far slope, and further beyond lies the remnant of an old mining community, Logansport, located on the right bank after the river bends west, then north, then back east. The old coal town exists only as a memory, except for a steep-sided pile of tailings and the name of that stretch of the Des Moines, Coal Valley.

Teetering on the brink of the riverbank at Logansport (so much so that the annual spring floods for several years running have carried away several more lateral feet in May and June) rest the remains of an Indian village, belonging to a culture that the archaeologists call "Great Oasis." No white person ever met a member of the Great Oasis culture, for they disappeared around the time of Columbus. Columbus has a venerated place in our history and oral tradition; Great Oasis does not. Instead, mystery surrounds those people, and no archaeologist has yet found solid evidence of their dwellings; and their fate is unknown — did they move westward and become a part of some more familiar tribe? Or did some enemy drive them from their cookfires at breakfast and burn their crops? A thousand years from now no archaeologist will need to ask such questions about us — everywhere around him or her the crumbling foundations of our homes, the disfigured forms of our trucks and tractors, the ruins of our churches, and the weeds that followed our plows from Europe will remain as seemingly undecaying and not altogether silent witnesses, and the pops on his or her radiation counter may also testify
of our fate. After half so long the Great Oasis people can barely be distinguished from the dirt they once tilled.

Within eyesight of the ski-slope lie the village remains of still another pre-European group, named “Oneota,” again by archaeologists, who seem bent on naming things and people who might rather remain nameless. Despite reasonably good material evidence of their bark-covered huts, their chert arrowheads, their stone axes, their cooking hearths, and their garbage pits, and a fairly certain connection to a living tribe, no archaeologist has suitably reconstructed their daily life, except to say that they had a substantial commitment each summer to gardens. Did they pray over their crops? Did the corn-spirits talk to them? What did the women talk about as they pinched pots? What enemies did they fear?

As gardeners, they must have been masters. Much of their food came from corn, beans, and squash, which they stored in pits to get them through the winter and spring. Unlike the sodbusting pioneers who displaced their cultural heirs, the Oneota could till only the softer, blacker forest soils along the rivers, for their plow was a fire-hardened stick, pointed at the end, and their cultivator, a bison shoulder-blade with whetted edge lashed to a branch. Still, they raised enough crops and hunted enough buffalo each winter to ensure their survival, until the Sac and Fox, displaced from their own Wisconsin homeland, pushed out the descendants of the Oneota, the Ioway. Joining in this westward flight ahead of the talking sticks, the iron horses, the ox teams, and the new-frangled horse-drawn implements were other tribes of wolves, elk, prairie chickens, and passenger pigeons. No human alive ever saw a passenger pigeon in flight, though some of the older cottonwoods undoubtedly held some in their branches; the Ioway fared a little better and live today in Oklahoma, forgotten by all but themselves. The Ioway must have preferred the old ways (surely the Sac and Fox and the prairie chickens did, too), for many spurned the steel plows that government agents provided.

In the days of the Oneota, no “plow zone” existed on the Iowa prairies. The archaeologists who meticulously trowel their ten-by-ten-foot squares down to the village remains encounter at about ten inches depth an interface between the plowed upper soil and the undisturbed lower soil. The “plow scars” are sometimes visible as long patches where the structure and color of the disturbed soil differ slightly from the adjacent undisturbed soil.

But before there were ever plow scars in the prairie topsoil, and before the Mississippi River delta was so large and fertile with Iowa silt, the tangled roots of the big bluestem, switch-grass, and sidegoats grama held the sixteen to twenty-four inches of dark, loamy topsoil rooted in place. A number of mice, shrews, and pocket gophers, hundreds of prairieflower species, thousands of kinds of insects and spiders, and billions of earthworms called this their fossorial home. The roots and worms aerated the soil. The grass grew tall, so tall that its seedheads obscured a horse’s vision, while the rider, able to see somewhat further, contemplated the prairie flowers and what lay beyond. The firm sod under the steed’s hooves occasionally gave away to the mud and stagnant water of a “buffalo wallow,” a pothole that collected rainwater on the flat glacial soil. Horse and rider found themselves up to the stirrups in dank water, with the spongy, decaying cattail leaves giving a false sense of bottom and releasing putrid swamp gas into the otherwise pure prairie air.
It is hard to picture the first plow that cut furrows in the prairie loam, all the
more so when one has sat in the cab of a hundred-eighty horsepower John Deere
and watched the plow easily turn six black-soil furrows at a single pass. The tractor
is a much more obedient and trainable beast then the ox, as well as stronger and
maybe even more maneuverable. But the ox’s chief advantage was his cheap
maintenance — the farmer raised the corn and let the pasture go to seed and that
was nearly it. There was none of this dollar-nineteen-a-gallon diesel fuel and sky-
high repair costs. In the heydey of the ox team, the central Iowa sod was so
dense and interlaced with twining tallgrass roots that one Iowa farmer hitched his
own and several neighbors’ ox teams, making twelve oxen in all, to a single
walking plow in order to power the one moldboard through the mess. The farmer,
likely as not, cursed the oxen for their stubbornness and lack of haste while he
guided the plow to the right depth. The agricultural mastery of the sod could only
follow on the heels of the Industrial Revolution, for no wooden share could slice
the roots like steel, and the grasses would have retained their firm grip on the
soil.

After the initial sodbusting a single ox team sufficed to draw the plow, laboring
under the weight of its basswood yoke and the sharp reminder of its slavery, the
gad. One or two farmers, perhaps even the farmer and his wife (prevailing social
roles necessarily have rarely applied strongly among farmers), managed to keep
the plow steady in the ground and the oxen from munching grass instead of pulling.
Oxen always tended to be more selfish about their exertions than the more
agreeable, but weaker, horses who followed and replaced the oxen inside of three
decades.

The main impetus for horse-powered farming came from the East, where the
Industrial Revolution chugged and clanked at full steam to produce mechanical
means of accomplishing more work in less time. McCormick’s reaper and the new-
fangled seed drills required a more agile beast for motive power, as did the plethora
of horse-drawn farm implements that came after — sulky plows, check-row
planters, hay rakes, manure spreaders, cultivators, hay loaders ... all
manufactured from eastern iron ore with the heat of eastern coal, both mined from
below the life-giving topsoil that the heat and iron ultimately tilled. Under such
speedy and effective tools the soil submitted to twice-yearly plowing, which
replaced the worm and the root as the chief aerator of the soil, and to annual
manuring, courtesy of the very draft animals who aided the whole process. The
manure took over the work of the decaying prairie grass stems and the droppings
of the rodents and prairie chickens. The prairie chicken retreated westward to the
Great Plains, its territory taken over by the Asian pheasant and his relatives, who
adapted more readily to the grassy fencerows, the open cropland, the idle pastures,
and the dwindling forests. One cannot see prairie chickens in Iowa any more; they
were “extirpated” in the last century. A personal acquaintance with the birds
requires a trip to one of the border states. Where the tallgrasses still grow and
the joe-pye-weeds still bloom in Iowa there is a sense of mournful pining for the
beat of the chicken’s wings. Sadder still is that there is so very little native prairie
left to mourn the chicken’s statewide demise. As fragile as the flowers of the
blue-eyed grasses that grew there, it gave way to the imported plants whose custom
is to remind all onlookers that a plow has sunk here.
In retrospect it seems that everything was done by the horses between 1870 and 1920, although any old farmer who has pitched hay onto a rack or picked corn with a hook and tossed it one ear at a time against the bangboards will strongly disagree. But when one pictures farming in that time, horses occupy the imagination, and the humans seem rather incidental. Horses had a longer stint of usefulness than oxen on the Iowa sod. No old tobacco-spitting farmer clad in faded coveralls and sitting on the bench outside the drugstore in town remembers oxen, although his grandfather might have related a few stories about them. Numerous, though, are the men who guided a walking plow or trundled over the clods on a sulky or bounced through the checked rows on a cultivator with one eye on the team and the other on the thunderhead in the west.

Oxen have little or none of the romance of horses — putting on an ox-yoke has little of the ritual meaning and complexity of harnessing a team: first the collar, then lay the harness on, then fit the hames and buckle the hame strap, fasten the breast-strap, buckle the belly-band, stretch the martingale back and snap on the quarter-straps, slip the bridle on, and attach the driving lines, thence "Git up!" to the water trough, then "Back! Back!" up to the implement, drop two links and hitch the inside traces to the single trees, then the outside traces. Most old-timers could have harnessed a horse half-asleep on a pitch-black night if the need arose, and sometimes it did, especially when the Tin Lizzies couldn't handle the thick mud or glare ice.

With stubborn, slower oxen there was more time to think between pasture and field, but the changes in farming over the years have successively left less time to think — the farmer who thinks much while planting today has crooked rows and losses when combining in the fall, or tears up corn plants with the cultivator, or takes dirt up into the combine rollers and gets a deduction at the elevator. A century and a half ago a crooked row looked bad, but that was all. The farmer's son might hit a corn plant once in a while with his hoe, but his thoughts were likely on leaving the drudgery for a more exciting life anywhere else, and neither on the fruits of his labors nor on the gifts of the soil. The pioneer had ample opportunity to think with every blow of the axe at a tree trunk or of the maul at the splitting wedges; the chainsaw drives away thought with its stinging smoke, choking smell, and deafening noise. The horse-farmer could think while cultivating, provided that he keep somewhere in his mind the fact that horses tend to stray a bit, and provided that he could tolerate the jar and jolt of the clods and the heat of the sun. Only one practice of modern agriculture leaves space for an appreciable amount of contemplation — bean-walking — and that only if the walker can stand blistering heat and feet. The beans themselves, on the other hand, bereft of their companion smartweed, nightshade, dogbane, and butterprint, and like these weeds immigrants from far-off lands, probably sense a deep, sorrowful solitude not filled by the presence of their fellow clones. Thus a weedy beanfield might seem happier than a clean one, and the 6 a.m. arrival of contemplative bean-walkers a rude awakening to the July loneliness.

The days of the Oneota, the ox-teams, and the sulky plow have gone, and few read the accounts of the archaeologists or the diaries of the pioneers to recapture the small appreciation of those lives that might still be had. In a world where time is reckoned in microseconds and billions of years and distances measured...
in thousands of an inch and light-years there is no room for the thrust of the digging stick, for the patient plodding of two oxen in yoke pulling a plow through the fertile loam, or for corn-picking with a hook. There is a profound and unrealized emptiness in the soul of every person who has relied solely on internal combustion for transport and Diesel fuel for food. It is this age's emptiness of having filled the inner vacuum with too much and not the right kind. It is the emptiness of having lost a sense of the past and the vision of how things were, and, perhaps, some small idea of how they should be. It is a suffocating loneliness.

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