

States of the Union

GROPING FOR INTIMACY

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

HERE ARE a few diurnal notes on a crazy trip I took recently to Marshall, Minnesota, where several hundred rural people gathered to plot the overthrow of pessimism. The occasion was a "Rural Life Institute," which the organizers described as "an ambitious, seven day inquiry into the possibilities for rural people to control their shared destinies." I made several speeches there and also attended smaller sessions of the board of Rural America, a Washington-based group that preaches equity for those 60 million Americans neither urban nor suburban.

Emerson would have enjoyed the conference. It was filled with brave declarations on the virtues of self-reliance. The leaders of villages that had long suffered from waning populations and eroding economies were urged to pull themselves up by their own one-horse harness straps.

Decentralization was the small town talisman that everyone—liberals and conservative alike—appeared to be counting on. One speaker went so far as to credit Andrew Jackson with having decentralized the Federal government—a reading of history that might surprise Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Yet few

such cavils show up in my notes. I was happy among friends; what helped me rise from my bed each morning was not politics but collegiality.

Saturday: I am sitting "at the gate" waiting for the loudspeaker to give me permission to board the plane. Near me are a young man with a beard and a young woman with a tennis racket. The man speaks. "I used to think that God was the whole ball of wax," he says. "But lately I've come to feel that love is the only thing."

"I know exactly what you mean," says the young woman.

We queue up and file into the plane. The man sits in 8B, the woman in 12F. They may never see each other again. In *The Fall of Public Man* Richard Sennett complained that people nowadays no longer treasure their privacy. "They are constantly groping for intimacy," he wrote. And to think I doubted him!

At the Avis counter in Minneapolis I watch the girls in their red uniforms go ga-ga over Harry Reasoner, who is renting a Volare. "Darn it," says one, after Reasoner has departed. "I should have asked him for his personal autograph." "But you have it," says the other. "It's on the contract." Another ABC lesson in intimacy.

Sunday: Some 40 of us are sitting around tables joined in a long rectangle. The chairman asks us to cope with "the goals" of our organization. Someone answers that we are here to take over the country; someone else says that's all well and good, but our first priority should be to get at least 50 new members.

It is a very long session. Earlier today as I strolled through this ultra-modern campus (Southwest State University—SSU—a branch of the University of Minnesota), the sky was a sparkling Minnesota blue, and there were redwinged blackbirds flitting through the tall grass by the road. Now it is afternoon in a windowless room; our words are wingless.

To pass the time, I play "Titles," a game I have invented for occasions such as these. The idea is to locate an authentic-sounding book or story title from out of the flurry of phrases being uttered, and then to assign a suitable author to the title. A good example comes my way, courtesy of Orissa, a delegate from Washington state.

Orissa is telling us about her efforts to organize a grassroots group in her farm community. "I tried to get a respected leader—someone everybody else would follow—to be the first to sign up. And I had him ready, but wouldn't you know it? someone else beat him to it, and it was Herman, the biggest loudmouth in Quincy Valley. Well, that was the end of that."

I write on my yellow pad, "'The Biggest Loudmouth in Quincy Valley' by Bret Harte."

A moment later a friend across the room quotes Bernard Shaw: "He who believes in absurdities commits atrocities." I pencil in the title and add "Ionesco"; then I cross out that name and substitute "Delmore Schwartz." Two good titles in a single afternoon—a fair catch.

Monday: Tonight some of us have gathered in room 259 at the Ramada Inn to play poker. Twice within the hour I draw a king on my last card to an inside straight. Ernesto, a friend from Las Cruces, New Mexico, is the chief victim of my luck both times. He

turns to me and says, "You are playing foolishly tonight." Coming from the gentle Ernesto, the words seem censorious.

Later, in the lobby, I run into a farm couple from South Dakota who say they heard a speech I made in the afternoon and have some questions about it. We find the bar and I buy them a drink. My companions are youngish, bespectacled and remarkably stolid—less gaunt but nonetheless true versions of Grant Wood's famous portraiture. Tactfully they tell me that my speech, in which I must have waxed sentimental over the joys of rural community life, was dead wrong.

"It's not like that at all," the woman says. "People in our town don't share and they don't care. You couldn't even call it a community."

"It's worse than she says," the man explains. "We got a situation down there where farmers are going under—they can't make ends meet. And whenever a farmer loses out—goes bankrupt, I mean—all the neighbors seem overjoyed. It's like a happy occasion."

It is the woman's turn again: "You talk about community. Back home that's just another name for malicious gossip. Oh sure, if someone dies, the neighbor will take a casserole over to the widow. But that's about as close to community as we ever get."

We have a brief dispute over who will leave the fifty-cent tip. The woman settles it. "Let him pay for it, John," she says to her husband. "He's got the money." It occurs me that I have been groping for an easy intimacy among strangers whose lives have been hard and fiercely private. They have never drawn a king to an inside straight.

Tuesday: I must say a few words about this shiny, windswept campus on the prairie. It was built a decade ago, near the end of the academic boom, with space for as many as 1,500 students, but the enrollment since then has never reached half the capacity. The buildings are of brick and glass; they have been set down in the pasture at odd and unfamiliar angles to each other, and they are interconnected ei-

ther by glass-enclosed bridges or by concrete tunnels.

In the middle of all this there is a small, paved plaza surmounted by a dome that rises from the sidewalk like a transparent bombshelter. The dome serves as a skylight for a subterranean lounge in the student union. This room seems to me to typify much that is both right and wrong with the campus design: It is undeniably spacious and elegant, and just as undeniably out-of-keeping with the surrounding town, a place of square frame-houses furnished with comfortable, hand-me-down furniture.

The disparity of landscape between town and gown is not just an architectural problem. It raises questions about the SSU experiment. Troubled by flagging enrollments and nagged by cost-conscious legislators, the school two years ago hired as president a former state secretary of agriculture, Jon Wefald, who promptly announced he was transforming the institution into a center for rural studies. "At most campuses today you can major in urban studies," he noted. "My feeling is that now is the time to set up a program so our young people can major in rural studies as well."

The rural approach seems to be paying off. Enrollment is up and so is faculty morale. But the rural residents of Marshall are paying their university scant attention. The young woman behind the Ramada registration counter told me she once tried to sign up for a course at SSU, "but I couldn't find the right building. And there didn't seem to be anybody who could tell me."

Still, the idea is appealing. It makes sense to assemble some first-rate intellectuals to study the riddle of rural America. Tonight I am munching popcorn with some of those scholars, sitting around Joe Amato's living room. Amato teaches history at SSU. The talk is light and learned. Intimacy abounds. I am having a fine old time.

We are not above exchanging sectarian jokes, and the one I like best goes like this: Two nuns, who work as nurses at the local Catholic hospital, are driving along the highway when

they run out of gas. They decide to walk to the nearest filling station, but the only container they can find in the car is a bedpan. So they carry the bedpan to the filling station, have it filled with gasoline and take it back to the car.

As the nuns are emptying the contents of the bedpan into the gas tank, two Lutheran ministers happen to drive by. One minister stares at the nuns, shakes his head and says to the other minister, "If only our people had such faith."

Wednesday: It is about 6 A.M. and I am driving into the sunrise, heading back to the Minneapolis airport 150 miles across the state. The road is straight and empty, a constant, gas-guzzling temptation. The corn that whizzes by me on either side of the road is not yet "as high as an elephant's eye," but it is a rich, deep green and upwardly mobile. An Iowa farmer once told me that on quiet nights in mid-July, standing in the middle of his cornfield, he could actually *hear* the corn growing.

"What does it sound like?" I asked.

"Creaky," he said.

The towns I drive through or around offer with their names a litany of love and history to one who was born and schooled in this state, but who has not resided here for a quarter of a century: Echo, a sonorous dot on the prairie; New Ulm, site of the 1862 Sioux massacre; Sleepy Eye, named unaccountably for one of the chiefs who led the massacre; and Chanhasen, a singing name for a once-upon-a-time village that has lately been subdivided for people who commute to Minneapolis. (But I may be up to my old tricks by eulogizing Chanhasen, forgetting the gossip and the malice, forgetting the hard days that were lived there before suburbanization.)

I am in the airport now, dropping my keys at the Avis counter and looking around reflexively for signs of Harry Reasoner. Then up the escalator and down the Blue Concourse to Gate 29. With my fellow would-be passengers I sit in silence, once again a stranger among strangers, awaiting flight.