Sandy Bluffs Rural Fair

Many of the towns and hamlets where I grew up, in Cayuga County in the heart of the Finger Lakes, had annual fairs or festivals in the summer, called Firemen's Field Days. They were always fun and could be counted on to present a genuine slice of Americana. I'd like to share a memory of one of them. I'll give it a made-up name so as not to impugn the place or its residents in case I inadvertently present a less-than-flattering image of the event, which is not my intention. Since this is Erie Canal territory, let's call it something evocative like "Sandy Bluffs."

Okay, so, the Sandy Bluffs Rural Fair took place over a weekend in August one year in the mid-1970's. As I recall, it was in every respect typical of the rural fairs held all over the region, which I'd been attending most years since I was a kid. But the thing that struck me about this particular one which prompts me to write about it years later, was how the organizers had obviously not tried to present it as more sophisticated than it was. Quite the opposite. They had deliberately promoted it to capitalize on its rustic rural nature. The rusticity wouldn't be a *drawback*, it'd be a *draw.*

I'm sure this wasn't the first time the organizers of such events had taken this approach, but it's the first time I'd noticed it. That's probably because, having gone off to college and ventured for the first time away from the locale in which I'd been brought up, I was a step or two removed from my old vantage point and was now seeing the event through the lens of sociological observation as well as simply enjoying it for the fun event it had always been.

First, they'd called it a *Rural Fair.* They didn't try to pretty it up with quaint terms like "Olde Tyme" or "Faire," they just let it be what it was. A good move, I thought, for rural it was: I don't think I recall ever attending an event that was this rustic in setting, this countrified in atmosphere, and I'd lived in these parts all my life. The recently cleared brush had been tossed into the weeds at the periphery of the area that'd been cleared for parking, where it lay moldering in the August sun. Work-sullied pickup trucks were parked at crazy angles wherever they'd happened to stop. A forest of cab-mounted CB antennas helped set the rural tone. So did the aroma of barnyard manure from the nearby farms. What topped it all off was the location: a dirt road off a dirt road, surrounded on three sides by inhospitable-looking scrub woods.

Don't get me wrong, I love the country, and have always felt comfortable there, and I'd been to dozens of outdoor rural events and had never complained about the mud or the weeds or the bugs or the porta-potties and I wasn't complaining now. Those are the simple taken-for-granteds of a rural event. But this venue seemed somehow *more* rural, *more* primitive, if that was possible. The image it conjured in my mind was that of an isolated frontier settlement where the veneer of civilization was thin, the line between the civilized "within these confines" and the untamed "out there" tenuous, even porous. You had the sense that danger of some unspecified sort lurked just beyond the brush line and that solidarity with one's fellow fairgoers, or at least staying within sight of them, was the only way to keep danger at bay.

I know this was all just my mind spinning historical "how-it-must-have-been" scenarios now that I'd lived away from home long

enough to erode the routines I'd grown up with, and whatever haphazard and/or whimsical psychological forces were overseeing my mood that day were trying to impose some order on all these disparate thoughts and images. Anyway that was my mindset as I strolled around the grounds, stopping at the booths and attractions and making the most of the socializing opportunities as I ran into old friends.

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Part of the festivities of the fair was a softball game, which was just about to get under way. And one of the aspects of that game was a social dynamic that played into, or perhaps was amplified by, that nature-versus-civilization contrast I mentioned. Namely, there seemed to be a noticeable difference between the folks who lived here in the Sandy Bluffs area, which was about as far out in the boonies as you could get in Cayuga County, and us "city slickers" who lived nearer to Auburn (modest in size but still the largest city for miles around, and the county seat) and weren't so overwhelmingly rural in our livelihoods and backgrounds. There was a definite vibe that seemed to recognize this contrast, this disparity between the "local, rural, and proud of it" attitude and anyone who might be suspected of disparaging it. I'm not saying there *was* any disparagement or assumed superiority on the part of the city-mouse element, my element, toward our country-mouse cousins, I'm just surmising that it may have *felt* that way to the country dwellers, and if so it would have been only natural for them to get their backs up. Maybe that's one reason why the home team in the softball game – the Sandy Bluffs guys, primarily guys with farm backgrounds – were

so quick with their comebacks when some of the guys from our team started getting lippy during warm-ups, commenting on the home guys' supposed rusticity or deficit in refinement. Our guys'd only meant it in fun, but the home boys seemed to take it to heart.

So there was our team out in the field. I was a spectator, leaning on the fence, talking to my brother Paul who was warming up at third base. Monster Man was at shortstop, Peen at second base, ZaZa on first. C-Roy, Polak, and Josh made up the outfield. Blob was catching. Some guy I didn't know was warming up on the mound.

My brother was explaining the ground rule for foul balls hit into the pony rides. "The pony guy keeps the ball. It's a forfeiture. He says he has to discourage hitting the ball there, otherwise the ponies might throw a kid or something." Bird came up alongside to listen. He was soon joined by Meatball, then Suey, then two more guys I didn't know. Then they all turned away to confer with Blob about game strategy.

So here we were, I and a bunch of guys I'd grown up with or gone to school with. Now that I was spending three quarters of my time away at college I felt positively citified by comparison to what surrounded me. At school I had friends from cosmopolitan cities and affluent communities as well as some overseas students, and I'd spent time in Europe during a semester in Vienna. I'd traveled to London to compete in an international debate tournament, which I'd had a hand in organizing. Yet there was no divide to be bridged here, and no snobbery, on any side. I'd never felt that any of my college friends looked down on or condescended to me because I came from a small town or because my family had modest means or I hadn't done this or that. They all welcomed me with blank-slate neutrality

and assessed me according to how I conducted myself and treated other people. Which was as it should be. Likewise with my friends from Sandy Bluffs and Throop and Port Byron: nobody assumed I'd gotten all full of myself just because I'd gone off to college and tried on some new thoughts and ideas, any more than they assumed that about anyone who for whatever reasons was trying on new thoughts and ideas. As for my friends who hadn't gone away to school, they'd found or were pursuing success and fulfillment in other ways including family and careers and military service and the arts and studies at places of higher and/or vocational learning either here or wherever circumstances and adventures had taken them. So aside from some occasional friendly kidding, nobody derided me for going away to school, and I certainly didn't look down on anyone for coming from, and remaining in, these parts. I don't think I could have lived with myself if I thought I'd turned into that kind of arrogant, superior-acting jerk.

There was also no issue of having to maintain a split personality. That was crucial for me. It was true that I straddled two cultures, but so do a lot of people. I had pledged not to chameleon myself into a countrified good ol' boy when I was home just to fit in better, nor to act more sophisticated than I really was when I was back at school (which was well-advised – it's impossible to "act more sophisticated than you are" without giving yourself away in a hundred embarrassing ways). Fortunately this turned out to be easy, because nobody in either sphere expected anything of me, or of anyone, other than that they be what they are. Yeah I lived in two worlds, but they weren't worlds apart, they were hardly apart at all, and I had friends in both spheres. *Good* friends, who not only didn't

require me to act any particular way, they would've been disappointed if I had. That's one of the foundations of the friendships I'd formed with people from both spheres of my life, some of which I'm lucky enough to have maintained all these years (fifty-plus and counting) later.

Now about this culture-shifting, or code-switching, or whatever you or I or some sociologist wants to call it: I'm not saying it's unique to my situation. Far from it. A lot of the people there that night — and let's face it, people everywhere — have a similar thing going on. Many of us routinely shift back and forth between social or cultural milieux (sorry, I didn't want to have to use the "m-word" but it was the best fit I could find) in different settings, sometimes out of necessity, and when I think of the burden that minority or marginalized groups such as Black or Hispanic Americans face in having to negotiate that stuff *every damn day* with some pretty heavy consequences if some hothead doesn't like the way they present themselves, I can only shake my head in awe. So I'm not claiming to have been unique, or uniquely perceptive, I'm just saying the Fair was an instance where this came into play.

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I believe I started this thought with an observation about the primitive condition of the fairgrounds and the imposition of just enough of a veneer of civilization on it to make it work for the duration of the Fair. That led to a reflection on the gulf, if there is one, between "citified folk" and "hicks" (and I use both terms with great affection). So maybe the whole thing was all the time about boundaries: how permeable they are, or should be. And how fragile

and precarious the wall is that we erect between the worlds we inhabit, just as the delineation between unimproved nature and human-created comforts is precarious, sometimes so much so as to be scary.

Not that any of this had been on my mind when I'd hopped into my car and headed over to Sandy Bluffs for a simple evening of fun and socializing. I guess I'd just somehow worked myself into a hyper-contemplative mood that evening. There is after all such a thing as overthinking a thing, and once you set your thought processes in motion they can be hard to rein in.

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Well that was quite a meander, wasn't it. Let's get back to my point. And I did have one… I think….

On the evening under discussion, although the guys on both teams were giving each other a hard time, they were all solidly comfortable with who they were: decent, hard-working, interesting, multifaceted, fun-loving young guys who happened to live in this particular patch of America's glorious boonies where we'd all grown up. John Mellencamp said it pretty well:

♫ *Well I was born in a small town*
And I live in a small town
……..
I've seen it all in a small town
Had myself a ball in a small town
……..
Got nothing against a big town

But my bed is in a small town
And that's good enough for me
……
I cannot forget where it is that I come from
I cannot forget the people who love me
Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town
And people let me be just what I want to be

Small Town, © John Mellencamp 1985.

This festival ground had been temporarily carved out of these dark woods and murky creek bottom and after a few days would revert to them, but in the meantime it allowed us to part its underbrush, gravel over its mud, and set up a brightly-lit space within its confines to conduct our amusements. Pursuant to which, the ballplayers from both sides now trotted out onto that temporary battleground to act as surrogates for the two closely related and mutually respectful (mostly) communities that were using the game to play out a rivalry that existed because… well, because rivalries have to exist. The players on both teams played lustily and well, as they should have, and all was as it should be.

And on this particular night, our team won the game. Not that it mattered.

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