

# THE FLYOVER PEOPLE

As Midwesterners, we're often the object of coastal scorn—good thing we like it that way

BY RALPH KEYES

**T**O EMPHASIZE HOW CHIC SHE ISN'T, BRITISH ACTRESS Emma Thompson once "confessed" that she was born in Dayton, Ohio. Around the same time, public-radio commentator Bob Garfield interviewed a few locals at the Dayton airport to confirm his hypothesis that residents of the city where the Bosnian peace accord was negotiated are provincial hicks. Soon after that, the author of a book on shallowness giggled to a radio interviewer that the Midwest was Exhibit A.

My wife and I live in the Midwest, near Dayton. Before moving here we lived in New York, Philadelphia and Shangri-La-ish San Diego. Fond as we were of these places, we've chosen freely and enthusiastically to settle with our two boys in a small Ohio town. We've lived happily in that town for eight years.

When we left urban Pennsylvania for rural Ohio, our oldest son was 10. David missed the Philadelphia suburb where he'd grown up, so we sent him back often to visit friends. Over time, however, he found himself looking forward to returning as much as going. "Dad," he told me after his most recent visit, "life's so tense back East."

I read recently about a State Department lawyer who got so enraged about being charged a late fee at a Beltway video store that he beat the owner over the head with a tape case, then pinned him against a plate-glass window with his Cadillac. This sort of thing doesn't happen too often around Dayton. It wouldn't be polite, and Midwesterners are nothing if not polite. Russell Baker discovered this trait after he wrote a column suggesting that East and West Coast Americans look down on those in the nation's midsection. Baker was surprised by the civil tone of Midwest residents who took exception. "When irritated," Baker wrote, "Middle Westerners don't issue nonnegotiable demands, picket your house or send death threats. Middle Westerners are content to suggest a little fairness might be in order."

Anger dissipates between the coasts. Few roads here are crowded enough to provoke rage. Cross-fire culture offends our sense of propriety. Midwesterners don't engage in the elaborate manners of the South or insta-intimacy of the West. They specialize in little courtesies. They're big on "please," "thank you" and "How you doin'?" They like to chat in lines. This kind of amiability seems banal to some. But it lubricates community life and helps us raise our kids to be people we'd like to know.

In a time of concern about rudeness and hostility, the Midwest is a bastion of civility. Richard Holbrooke said this quality helped him negotiate the Bosnian peace agreement in Dayton. What he found was that bringing red-hot ethnic partisans to a part of the country where all kinds of people live in harmony—including a



they are plain in the best sense: unadorned.

My friends on either coast can't imagine why I'd choose to live in rural Ohio, or how seriously to take me now that I do. Those who prefer a faster, more stylish track disdain the land of baseball caps and sausage gravy. The Midwest's own hyperactives have fled for New York or Los Angeles. That's one reason our quality of life is so high. Having been forsaken by those who crave excitement, we can enjoy our relaxed pace in peace.

What protects this area is its dreary weather and tedious topography. It isn't just that upper Midwestern blizzards keep out the riffraff, as they say in Minnesota, but that winter's grayness in the lower Midwest drives out sun worshipers. SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) could be our greatest ally. A friend in Boulder, Colo., which has exploded with sun 'n' fun seekers, notes wistfully that Ohio's lackluster climate creates a force field around my own little town of 4,000. Our farm ponds can't compare with La Jolla's Cove. We have no Rocky Mountain highs, no Grand Canyon lows. Nothing to match Philadelphia's Independence Hall. Just cornfields, silos, prairies and the occasional hill. Dull.

This very dullness holds our population down. Trend seekers stay away in droves. We did have a scare a few years ago when NEWSWEEK proclaimed that THE HEARTLAND IS HOT. (Hardly anyone uses the term "heartland" out here; it puts on airs.) Thankfully, that thought seems to have passed. More recently another newsweekly featured a town just south of us in its cover story on the growing popularity of small communities. Luckily, its tone was condescending.

It isn't that Midwesterners don't realize that coastal residents look down on the "flyover people" beneath them as they jet between New York and L.A. In fact, we're glad they do. Jet-set condescension sustains our quality of life. Were more coastals to settle among us, they might bring their frantic, tense, angry ways with them. Their disdain is our salvation.

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