

Peoria is Next to Normal

by John Farrow

Peoria, Illinois. The middle of Middle America. The most average place in the country, named an All-American City three times, where the income of every family is the national average and every woman has 1.86 children.

Just thinking "Peoria" reminds me of Tricky Dicky sitting in the Oval Office wondering aloud (playing the devil's advocate, of course) if one of his Watergate-era schemes would play there. And I'm also wondering why this plane, bound for Peoria with an intermediate stop in beautiful downtown Moline, is full. Only a few people on board look anything like runners heading for the RRCA national convention, and some are actually Shriners, no doubt off for a big weekend in the Midwest.

Somewhere over Kansas while munching on 323% of my minimum daily requirement of fat and salt, I notice that the person sitting next to me is studying a book of horse skeletons. She turns out to be a chiropractor going to Moline for a seminar on how to manipulate farm animals. Equine manipulation? It sounds a little sinister. I wonder if Midwestern HMOs cover it.

Wouldn't you know. The plane all but empties in Moline. Either this is one mother of a chiropractic seminar, or the Shriners own Moline this weekend.

Once at the airport in Peoria, there seem to be an awful lot of Ward and June Cleavers waiting in the terminal. It makes sense, though. All the way to the hotel we pass nothing but pleasant, well-maintained houses, each with a freshly-cut lawn and flowers lining the walk. Not too big or expensive. Just average.

At the hotel, I notice that we have just missed the Glenn Miller Orchestra and that this month has been proclaimed Accordion Awareness Month. Now, I can understand that here in Lawrence Welk's backyard the

accordion is likely to be a popular instrument, but the entire month of June? Back in Texas we only let them out once a year at Oktoberfest.

Peoria is justly proud of its sons and daughters who have gone on to make good. People like Richard Pryor and Betty Friedan. And next door to the RRCA convention at Big Al's, the feminine mystique is on full display in the person of Miss Nude USA. Do Ward and June know about this?

As always, this year's convention was enlivened with stories of Bart Yasso's travels. Last year it was rhinos on the trail in India; this year it is mule-racing in Colorado with Vernon, his faithful racing mule. Said Bart of having to encourage Vernon to actually finish the race: "If your partner is a mule, don't be surprised if he occasionally acts like one." Of course, there is nothing like watching slides of two asses running down a mountain. Then there was his trip to Whakapapa, a ski area in New Zealand, the name of which can give the uninitiated pause (in Maori, pronounce the 'wha' as 'fuh').

This week was also the annual Steamboat Festival in town, so what better time to take a ride on a paddle-wheel steamboat. However, we had to share the river with some serious Formula One muscle boats throwing up fifty-foot rooster tails as they churned out practice laps in preparation for the week-end races. Plus, we had to make room on the deck for one of the local clubs as they did a series of chants which someone first suggested was for good luck on the river, but after a while seemed like "We need more beer."

Unfortunately, the Ugly Feet Contest from Colorado Springs was missing, or had perhaps gone underground. No doubt the results from last year sent chills through the hearts of the Executive Committee with fear of liability suits should anyone ever see such a spectacle again. Of course, the misshapen appendages lounging around the pool weren't no spring chickens, either.

The week concluded with the Steamboat Classic, its 4-mile course reputed to be the fastest in the world. Both men's and women's

world records were set here in 1995, and many of the fastest middle-distance runners were in town to take a shot at the \$25,000 prize offered to anyone setting a new record. The streets of Peoria were alive with runners in the days leading up to the race, but seeing the likes of Joseph Kimani, Khalid Khannouchi and Colleen DeReuck out for a jog at 5 minutes per mile put the term “fun run” in a new perspective. There would be no new record this year, however, as a heavy blanket of humidity covered the area all week.

The start of the race was in front of Kelly’s Seed and Hardware Store, a throw-back to the simpler times of the 1950s. Inside, the pace is slow and nothing is wasted, not even words. Witness this exchange between customer and clerk:

Lived here all your life?

Not yet.

Is Peoria average? Perhaps. But normal? No, that’s the next town down the road: Normal, Illinois, the location of the Illinois State Penitentiary.

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