

## Landscapes

Kathy Miller

Growing up in Weston, I used to dread Sunday afternoons after the football games were over when my parents would suggest an afternoon drive through the country. We lived in the country, so I wasn't sure why we had to drive around back roads marveling at the scenery. What I did not know then was that years later I would find myself on journeys meandering rural roads with that same longing my parents had. What defines the legacy of Platte County, what shapes and defines our history, are the familiar landscapes that we return to not just year after year, but decade after decade.

My drives often begin at Weston Bend State Park. If I go to the overlook with its panoramic view of the Missouri River bottoms, I know that Lewis and Clark saw what I am seeing, the mingling tones and textures of nature, the winding river. Perhaps one of the trees in the dense canopy was the same tree they saw or even touched. Perhaps they glimpsed a white tail emerging from the woods as I hope to do. Or, perhaps they returned to watch the green trees softening, later to erupt into flames, and then to walk with the leaves crunching underfoot. Our lives might be fleeting or transitory, but this landscape is not. It remains.

The Missouri River is a backdrop to Weston and to the farm my family owned for more than a hundred years. My grandfather, Roy Johnson, loved Port William, the name of our farm which was adjacent to the river. My childhood was filled with watching him knit hoop nets to drop into the river or fixing the lines on his ever expanding collection of rod and reels. It was nothing for him to haul out a 70 pound blue cat. He was swift in gutting and beheading the fish which had whiskers like the channel cat he also caught. These fish put up a good fight, one of the reasons he loved to fish for them. If Grandpa did not sell the fish, we would gather for a fish fry. The men would batter the catfish and drop it into lard sizzling in huge black cast iron kettles. Today, my nephew Matt, fishes for the same fish my grandfather caught, or for a crappie, or any fish that might take his line. The ritual of fishing, the love of this landscape is in his blood; it is a heritage, a legacy.

Another land legacy from our farm is picking up pecans. We are lucky to have a pecan grove right out in the middle of my Uncle Ted's soybean field. Every fall for as long as I can remember, after the first frost, we take buckets and fill with pecans. This custom, more than any other, helps me know that the holiday season is on its way. The pecans will be shelled then used to bake pies and breads and cookies. Grandpa always told me to watch for woolly worms; if their coat was heavy, that meant we would have a hard winter. My mother is 82, and she still picks up pecans every year. She might be a little slower getting up, but this offering from the land is not something she will give up. Yet another gift I have received from this landscape is Eagle watching. I didn't have to see an eagle in a zoo; I have watched one on the land of my grandfather. Today my husband and I plant a garden on this land. Yes, we have a garden on our property, but digging in the soil that belonged to my grandpa and now to my Uncle, helps me feel

life's rhythms, to feel connected to something greater than myself. The old smoke house is falling in, but the soil is black and rich and alive.

Twilight is a time of magic in the country. Recently, I had visitors from the city, and we lingered outside on our deck well into the night. They kept looking up. I was confused. My friends shared that in the city, they do not see stars. Our sky is big and open and lit up, and although I do not know names of constellations, I can still count stars sprinkled across the sky. The stillness and stars evoke memories of lying flat on my back looking up into the sky and feeling like I was falling into it. Even the Weston sky is part of the landscape.

Watching tobacco being planted behind my house takes me back to my years as a teen setting tobacco for local farmers. It was actually fun work, and besides, we got to get a suntan. Donald Spratt gave me my first job, but I have worked in fields for Schaback, Siler, Hill, and Roberts. No matter who now owns or farms this land, the landscape endures; the open pastures or promise of harvest keeps generation after generation returning to the land. I was reminded of this recently when Michelle Siu from Toronto published a photo essay, "Twilight on Bradley Farm" in the *Washington Post*. In her beautiful piece, she describes the Bradley's love of a farm that has been in their family since 1883. She describes Mrs. Bradley's love of nature. Mr. Bradley knows what so many before him knew; that we are mere caretakers of this land and the legacy we have been given. Even after we are gone, this lovely landscape will be here for others to write and tell stories about.

Driving down the back roads, tires humming on blacktop or crunching gravel, I can imagine other landscape scenes. These landscapes reflect the way we have lived. I learned to swim by plunging into frigid pond water at Bud Goodlet's. I waded into weeds to recover a lost softball or perhaps to catch a grasshopper. But the slashing weeds are the point. I have trudged calf deep through snow just to make a trail and watched my frosty breath lead the way. I have heard a chorus of coyotes and a swarm of honey bees. I have watched a football game and become so distracted by the beauty of the hills framing the field, that I wasn't sure of the score. I have hunted morels, and if I didn't, I know who will have some and who will share. The legacy of Platte County and Weston is the landscape: the hills, the river, the bottoms, the farms, the very land we walk on that will endure long after we are gone. This land is what shapes us and often writes our story for us. So, I will continue my rustic country drives through the landscapes that define me and remember that legacy my parents gave me. I thank them.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-sight/wp/2014/10/20/the-last-farmer-or-from-the-missouri-photo-workshop-twilight-on-bradley-farm/>