Observations From 20 Years of Iowa Life

Thoughts from a university professor on the Iowa hamlets that will shape the contours of the GOP contest

IOWA CITY -- On January 3, Iowans will trudge through snow, sleet, sludge, ice, gale-force blizzards -- whatever it takes -- to join their neighbors that evening in 1,784 living rooms, community halls, recreation centers, and public-school gymnasiums in a kind of bygone-era town-hall meeting at which they'll eat and debate, and then vote for presidential candidates along party lines. Chat 'n' Chews, they are called.

These Iowa Caucuses create a seismic shift in the presidential nominating contests. Obama catapulted to the top of the Democrats' dance card when he captured 38 percent of Iowa voters in 2008, and then swept to victory at the Democratic Convention eight months later. Without such a strong initial showing in Iowa, Obama might not have been able to steamroll through subsequent state primaries to win the presidency.

Since Obama is the presumed Democratic candidate in 2012, this year it's the Republican candidates who have trained their attentions on the state these brisk, late-autumn days. They're falling over each other in front of grain elevators and cornfields, over biscuits and gravy in breakfast cafes, and at potluck dinners (casseroles are the thing to bring), glad-handing and
backslapping as many Iowa voters they can. Great photo ops, you know. Hoisting a baby in the
air is good politics. So's gulping down a brat (short for bratwurst).

Considering the state's enormous political significance, I thought this would be a good time to
explain to the geographically challenged a little about Iowa, including where Iowa is, and
perhaps more importantly, in both a real and metaphysical way, what Iowa is.

For almost 20 years I've lived in Iowa, where as a professor at the University of Iowa I've taught
thousands of university students. I've written a couple of books on rural Iowa, traveling to all 99
counties, and have spent much of my time when not teaching, visiting with and interviewing
Iowans from across the state. I haven't taken up hunting or fishing, the main hobbies of rural
Iowans, but I'm a fan of University of Iowa Hawkeye football, so I'm a good third of the way to
becoming an adopted Iowan. I even have a dog, born and bred in Iowa (more on that later).

Iowa is not flat as a pancake, despite what most people think. Northeast of Cedar Rapids is
actually pretty hilly. It's an agricultural (corns and soybeans), landlocked state. While Iowa's
landmass is a little larger than England's, its population is only three million, about 17 times
smaller. The state's name derives from the Ioway Indians, one of several tribes that used to call
the region home. Of Iowa's 99 counties, 88 are classified as rural. Iowa's capital and largest city
is Des Moines (pop: 203,000), whose primary business is insurance. The state is 91 percent
white.*

On the state's eastern edge lies the Mississippi River, dotted with towns with splendid names
like Keokuk, Toolesboro, Fruitland, Muscatine, Montpelier, Buffalo, Sabula, Davenport,
Dubuque, and Guttenberg. Each once was a booming city on the swollen banks of the river that
long ago opened the middle of America to expansion, civilization, abundance, and prosperity.
Not much travels along the muddy and polluted Mississippi these days except rusty-bucket
barges of grain and an occasional kayaker circumnavigating garbage, beer cans, and assorted
debris. The majestic river that once defined the United States has been rendered commercially
irrelevant these days.

Mark Twain once lived in Southeast Iowa, in Keokuk, working at his brother's printing press. He
also was employed nearby as a reporter for theMuscatine Journal. When Twain lived in Keokuk
150 years ago, the Gateway City was a sought-after destination; some seriously said Keokuk
would someday rival Chicago as a metropolis of culture and commerce. Thirty-eight hotels
crowned the intersection of the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers. The coming of the railroads
changed all that, and today, Keokuk, is a depressed, crime-infested slum town. Almost every
other Mississippi river town is the same; they're some of the skuzziest cities I've ever been to,
and that's saying something.
On Iowa's western frontier lies the Missouri River, which girds a huge, sparsely populated agricultural region anchored by Sioux City (pop: 83,000) in the state's far northwest and Council Bluffs (pop: 62,230), across from the Nebraska hub of Omaha. Eskimo Pies, the original I-Scream Bar, was invented by a Danish immigrant in Onawa, a tiny town not far from the Missouri, and today you can visit an Eskimo Pie display at the Monona County Historical Museum there.

In between these two great, defining rivers, Iowa is a place of bizarre contrasts. The state is split politically: to the east of Des Moines, Iowa is solidly Democratic; to the west, it's rabidly Republican. Iowa's two U.S. Senators are emblematic of this schizophrenia: Fundamentalist Republican Charles Grassley and Ultra-liberal Democrat Tom Harkin. Grassley is 78; Harkin 72; both have held seats in either the U.S. Senate or House since 1975.

Insular Iowa is also home to the most conservative, and, some say, wackiest congressman in America, Republican Rep. Steve King, who represents the vast western third of the state. Some of King's doozies: calling Senator Joe McCarthy a "hero for America"; comparing illegal immigrants to stray cats that wind up on people's porches; and praying that Supreme Court "Justice Stevens and Justice Ginsberg fall madly in love with each other and elope to Cuba." Keith Olbermann named King not only the worst congressman in the U.S., but the Worst Person in the World six times.

Considering the above, not just a few Iowa heads turned when a District Court in Des Moines in 2007 declared same-sex marriages legal. Iowa, at the time, was the second state in the U.S. to allow gays to marry each other, a decision the state Supreme Court unanimously upheld two years later. In retaliation, Iowa conservatives in 2010 mounted a successful campaign to oust three of the justices who ruled on behalf of same-sex marriage. Marriage between two same-sex people is legal in Iowa for now, but may not be for long. So far, Democrats have blocked a statewide referendum on the issue (Dems hold sway in the Iowa Senate 26-24), but if Republicans take control of the Senate, gay marriage could -- and likely would -- be repealed.*

Whether a schizophrenic, economically-depressed, and some say, culturally-challenged state like Iowa should host the first grassroots referendum to determine who will be the next president isn't at issue. It's been this way since 1972, and there are no signs that it's going to change. In a perfect world, no way would Iowa ever be considered representative of America, or even a small part of it. Iowa's not representative of much. There are few minorities, no sizable cities, and the state's about to lose one of its five seats in the U.S. House because its population is shifting; any growth is negligible. Still, thanks to a host of nonsensical political precedents, whoever wins the Iowa Caucuses in January will very likely have a 50 percent chance of being elected president 11 months later. Go figure.
Maybe Ambrose Bierce described it right when he called the U.S. president "the greased pig in the field game of American politics." For better or worse, Iowa's the place where that greased pig gets generally gets grabbed first.

* * *

Rural America has always been homogenous, as white as the milk the millions of Holstein cows here produce. Many towns are so insular that farmers from another county are strangers. Historically, at least since 1900, whether because it was too hard to get to, too uninviting, or promised too little, few newcomers chose to knock on America's Heartland door.

Iowa anchors the Upper American Heartland, the rural interior that produces much of the world's corn, pigs, cattle, and soybeans. The corn grows so fast in Iowa -- from seedlings to 7-foot-high stalks in 12 weeks -- that it crackles nonstop throughout the summer months. The sound is like popcorn popping slow-motion in a microwave. That pop-pop-popping can be heard especially in the early morning hours, as dew and fog cover the acres of gently swaying cornstalks that surround farming villages the way the sea encircles an island. Rows upon rows stretch further than most urban minds can fathom, as dew and fog cover the acres of gently swaying cornstalks that surround farming villages the way the sea encircles an island. Rows upon rows stretch further than most urban minds can fathom, leathery husks and silky tassels bending in unison to the shimmying breeze. From one angle the corn resembles a hodgepodge of gnarly green stalks, but from another, each plant appears positioned with precision next to another, next to another, an exacting maze, for thousands upon thousands of acres.

For any corn connoisseurs out there, don't think of poaching an ear from a field, boiling it *al dente*, then slathering on it hot butter. Almost all the corn Iowa farmers grow is feed corn, not sweet corn. It's meant for pigs, not humans, and tastes that way. Almost all of it gets stored in an elevator (elevators in rural America raise and lower grain, not people.)

Each isolated Iowa homestead is marked off by a stand of trees (usually maples, cottonwoods, sometimes basswoods), as much windbreak as shade grove from the blazing sun. Just about everyone wears a hat; farmer's tan is a condition every Iowan knows -- a blanched forehead above a leather-cured face. Ailing windmills stand unsure next to sturdy no-nonsense homes and dilapidated peeling-red barns, often with freshly tilled beds of Black-eyed Susans or gladiolas in front.

In this land, deep within America, on Friday nights it's not unusual to take a date to a Tractor Pull or to a Combine Demolition Derby ("First they were thrashin', now they're CRASHIN'!"). There are few billboards along the washboard-bumpy, blacktop roads that slice through the countryside, only hand-drawn signs advertising sweet corn, cattle, lemonade, or boar semen. Driving through these throwback towns, a stranger might receive a slight nod from a farmer on the side of the road, or a two-finger driver's greeting from knobby fingers atop a pick-up's steering wheel. Strangers are rare in these parts. Why would they be here? What would bring
someone with no business or family to such a remote pocket of America, where car alarms are as unheard of as home burglar alarms? Locals don’t bother to put on their turn signals because everyone knows where everyone else is going. Some rural counties in Iowa don’t have a single traffic light.

In the large towns (population more than 2,500), towering grain elevators are what you first see from a distance. In mid-sized towns, it’s church steeples, their bell towers once a call to farmers toiling in the fields. Just about every town, no matter what size, has a water tower with the town name scrawled or stenciled on the tank’s side. Each summer, the 4H and Future Farmers of America sponsor contests where teenagers vie for birthing and raising the best pig, lamb, goat, roster or hen. Housewives compete for best pie (always with a no-fail pie crust). A float pulled by a farmer’s pickup showcases smiling and often-hardy girls waving, to be crowned County Fair Queen, Dairy Queen, and Pork Queen. Kids compete in a Mom-calling contest; the loudest wins.

Iowa is these gently rolling plains, full of farms and barns and also millions of pigs and turkeys (twenty times as many people). But there are too-many-to-count empty storefronts (and not coincidentally scores of flourishing Wal-Marts). The region has suffered terribly, particularly since the 1980’s when the ravaged farm economy started spinning out of control into free-fall.

After winning the Iowa Caucuses three years ago, then-candidate Barack Obama didn’t mince words about the lingering impact of the Farm Crisis.

Speaking at a San Francisco fundraiser, Obama said, "Like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing’s replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate and they have not. So it’s not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.”

Obama got scalded for his comments. Those are tough sentiments to share with those caught in the middle. I imagine many in the rural Midwest must have said a variation of this -- "Whaddaya expect from a Harvard-educated, black city slicker who wouldn’t know a John Deere tractor from an International Harvester combine?" And what better audience before which to piss on rural America than one filled with wealthy Bay Area Democrats, few of whom could pick out Iowa from Nebraska? If the audience wasn’t primarily vegan, gluten-intolerant foodies, what came out of Obama’s mouth was some of the most succulent red meat he could have tossed their way.

Coastal elites love to dump on Iowa the same way Manhattanites trash New Jersey. Iowa is the place East and West Coasters call "Fly-over Country.” It didn’t rate even a speck in Saul
Steinberg's classic 1976 New Yorker cover. Obama's comments went over without a second thought, until they wafted back to the Heartland. What Average Joe in Iowa wants to admit he clings to anything -- except hunting, fishing, and the Hawkeyes? Guns, religion, xenophobia? Them's fightin' words.

Obama might have been wrong for telling the truth, which seldom happens in politics, but the future president was 100-percent accurate when he let slip his comments on the absolute and utter desperation in America's hollowed-out middle, in particular in the state where I live.

There's the idealized version of rural America, then there's the heartbreaking real version, the one Obama was talking about.

Take One: The fairytale rendering is pastoral and bucolic; sandy-haired children romping through fecund, shoulder-high corn with Lassie at their side. It's Field of Dreams meets Carousel with The Waltons thrown in for good measure. The ruddy, wooden Bridges of Madison County (where John Wayne was born) may be in the background as the camera pans wide.

Take Two: The nightmare reality is tens of thousands of laid-off rural factory workers, farmers who have lost their land to banks and agribusiness, legions of unemployed who have come to the realization that it makes no sense to look for work, since work pretty much no longer exists for them.

An illusionary, short-term salve has been the proliferation of casinos in the state. In the last two decades, Iowa has established 18 of these bell-clanging jackpot landmines and more could open as the economy continues to go south and overseas. (But, of course, this is happening far and wide in the United States. Detroit has three downtown casinos for those who want something to do while in the Motor City.)

Maytag, the iconic American company that makes washer and dryers, is a good example of Iowa economics. Maytag's flagship operation had been based in Newton, Iowa, for more than a century (the company was founded by Fred Maytag in 1893). After Whirlpool bought Maytag in 2006, workers girded for the worst, which came a year later, when Maytag closed the two million square-foot plant, leaving 2,000 workers unemployed. In protest, workers left their boots hanging on the cyclone fence surrounding the plant. At its peak, Maytag employed 4,000 workers in Newton, a town of 16,000. The Newton plant was union; consolidation of Maytag and Whirlpool was shifted to nonunion facilities, as well as overseas.

In part, rural Iowa's economic malaise has been made all the more in-your-face by the thousands of undocumented immigrants arriving every month, trolling for work that pays indecent wages in some of the most dangerous jobs imaginable, mostly on under-regulated, non-union kill-floors of the rural slaughterhouses. The migrant workers (almost all young,
single, Central American men) end up living in deplorable makeshift shantytowns that have cropped up over the last decade amid the splendor of green and golden fields.

Four states -- California, Texas, New York, and Florida -- get two-thirds of the nation's immigrants. But for many immigrants, these states serve only as ports of entry; once inside the U.S., these newcomers converge in rural America in waves of secondary migration. And some immigrants head directly inland, altogether bypassing American coastal cities. In Iowa, they almost all come for slaughterhouse jobs, where entry-level positions are plentiful and workers don't need to know a word of English. The only requirements are a strong stomach and a strong back, and a willingness to accept that the work and the pay don't match. It's no wonder Iowa locals spurn such jobs as knockers, stickers, bleeders, tail rippers, flankers, gutters, sawers, or plate boners, all of whom work on what amounts to a disassembly line. Turnover at these grueling jobs is higher than 100 percent a year; health benefits at most plants don't kick in for several months; but the first months in a slaughterhouse are the most dangerous, when accidents are most likely to occur.

How'd so many slaughterhouses get from the cities to the country? For more than a century, slaughterhouses were located in brawling cities like Chicago, Fort Worth, and Omaha. Chicago rose to prominence, in part, because of its famed cattle-processing industry. The city's Union Stock Yards opened in 1865 and eventually grew to 475 acres of slaughterhouses. Today, only one slaughterhouse remains in Chicago, a tiny boutique lamb and veal processor. All the rest have closed shop or moved to rural America.

In a fundamental shift in how meat was processed, industry leaders decades ago realized it made more sense to bring meatpacking plants to the corn-fed livestock than to truck livestock to far-off slaughterhouses in expensive cities with strong unions and government regulators poking their noses into the meatpackers' business. Mobile refrigeration allowed processed meat to be trucked without spoilage. At the same time, the industry became highly mechanized. Innovations such as air- and electric-powered knives made expensive, skilled butchers superfluous. Mega plants in rural outposts became the norm. Hourly wages for union meat-production workers in 1980 peaked at $19 per hour (1980 dollars), not including benefits. Today, starting pay is often barely minimum wage at rural slaughterhouses. Because packinghouses are located in such isolated pockets of America, employers don't have to pay wages competitive with jobs in more urban venues. It's take it or leave it, and most locals would rather leave it. For undocumented workers, though, these jobs are a bonanza.

About the only possible bright spot in the rural Iowa economy is wind energy. It's a huge on-the-come bet that may actually pay off. Iowa is the second largest producer of wind energy in the U.S. (Texas is the first). Twenty percent of all electricity in the state is generated by wind. Drive down Interstate 80 for any stretch in Iowa, and you'll pass wide-loads announcing what's in front and behind: 150-foot-long, 12-ton blades for wind turbines. You'll also pass "wind farms,"
surreal grassy outposts with row after row of huge white turbines, their blades spinning. It’s the windmill updated, but this time for the masses.

But relatively few rural Iowans are employed in the business of wind energy. The bulk of jobs here are low-income ones most Iowans don’t want. Many have simply packed up and left the state (which helps keep the unemployment rate statewide low). Those who stay in rural Iowa are often the elderly waiting to die, those too timid (or lacking in educated) to peer around the bend for better opportunities, an assortment of waste-toids and meth addicts with pale skin and rotted teeth, or those who quixotically believe, like Little Orphan Annie, that "The sun'll come out tomorrow."

It’s no surprise then, really, that the most popular place for suicide in America isn’t New York or Los Angeles, but the rural Middle, where guns, unemployment, alcoholism and machismo reign. Suicides in Iowa’s rural counties are 13.55 per 100,000 residents; New York’s suicide rate is 5.4 residents per 100,000. Hunting accidents are common, perhaps spurred by the elixir of alcohol, which seems to be the drink of choice whenever a man suits up in camo or orange overalls. Mental-health clinics have all but been shuttered in Flyover Country; in a budget crunch, they’re the first to go. Other, more nuanced reasons for the high rate of suicide: Farmers and ranchers by occupational nature rely on themselves to solve problems; the stigma of depression prevents those affected most from seeking help -- if help existed. Some residents turn to church leaders (as Obama said), but few are genuinely qualified to offer that kind of counsel.

* * *

I live in Iowa City, a university town 60 miles west of the Mississippi, along Highway 80 (known as The Interstate to younger Iowans, just The Highway to older Iowans). Eighty is America’s Main Street, bisecting Iowa, connecting the hallowed-out middle of Corpus Americana to the faraway coasts. Granted, I’m a transplant here, and when I lit out almost two decades ago for this territory, I didn’t quite know what to expect. The first day I arrived from San Francisco, wandering about Iowa City during spring break, billed as a bustling Big Ten University town, I kept wondering, "Where is everyone?" I thought a neutron bomb had gone off; there were buildings but few, if any, people.

Today, I still not quite sure what I’d gotten myself into. I’ve lived in many places, lots of them foreign countries, but none has been more foreign to me than Iowa.

They speak English in Iowa. You understand the words fine. (Broadcasters, in fact, covet the Iowa "accent," since it could come from anywhere, devoid of regional inflections.) But if you listen closely, though, it’s a wholly different manner of speaking from what folks on either coast are accustomed to.
Indoor parking lots are ramps, soda is pop, lollipops are suckers, grocery bags are sacks, weeds are volunteers, miniature golf is putt-putt, supper is never to be confused with dinner, cellars and basements are totally different places, and boys under the age of 16 are commonly referred to as "Bud." Almost every Iowa house has a mudroom, so you don’t track mud or pig shit into the kitchen or living room, even though the aroma of pig shit is absolutely venerated in Iowa: It’s known to one and all here as "the smell of money."

Friday fish fries at the American Legion hall; grocery and clothing shopping at Wal-Mart; Christmas crèches with live donkeys, sheep and a neighborhood infant playing Baby Jesus; shotgun-toting* hunters stalking turkeys in the fall (better not go for a walk in the countryside in October or November). Not many cars in these parts of America. They’re vehicles, pronounced ve-HICK-uls -- 4X4’s, pick-ups, snowmobiles). Rural houses are modest, some might say drab. Everyone strives to be middle-class; and if you have some money, by God you’d never want to make anyone feel bad by showing it off. If you go to Florida for a cruise, you keep it to yourself. The biggest secret often is -- if you still own farmland -- exactly how many acres. Ostentatious is driving around town in a new Ford F-150 pickup.

The reason everyone seems related in small-town Iowa is because, if you go back far enough, many are, either by marriage or birth. In Iowa, names like Yoder, Snitker, Schroeder, and Slabach are as common as Garcia, Lee, Romero, Johnson, and Chen are in big cities.

Rules peculiar to rural Iowa that I’ve learned are hard and fast, seldom broken: Backdoors are how you always go into someone's house. Bar fights might not be weekly occurrences, but neither are they infrequent activities. Collecting is big -- whether it's postcards, lamps, figurines, tractors, or engines. NASCAR is a spectator sport that folks can't get enough of. Old-timers answer their phones not with "hello," but with last names, a throwback to party-lines. Everyone's phone number in town starts with the same three-digit prefix.

Hats are essential. Men over 50 don't leave home without a penknife in their pocket. Old Spice is the aftershave of choice. Everyone knows someone who has had an unfortunate and costly accident with a deer (always fatal for the deer, sometimes for the human). Farming is a dangerous occupation; if farmers don't die from a mishap (getting a hand in an auger, clearing a stuck combine), they live with missing digits or limbs.

Comfort food reigns supreme. Meatloaf and pork chops are king. Casseroles (canned tuna or Tatertots) and Jell-O molds (cottage cheese with canned pears or pineapple) are what to bring to wedding receptions and funerals. Everyone loves Red Waldorf cake. Deer (killed with a rifle is good, with bow-and-arrow better) and handpicked morels are delicacies families cherish.

Religion is the glue that binds everyone, whether they're Catholic, Lutheran, or Presbyterian. You can't drive too far without seeing a sign for JESUS or ABORTION IS LEGALIZED
MURDER. I'm forever amazed by how often I hear neighbors, co-workers, shoppers, and total strangers talk about religion. In the Hy-Vee grocery store, at neighborhood stop-and-chats, at the local public school, "See you at church!" is the common rejoinder. It's as though the local house of worship were some neighborhood social club -- which, of course, it is. A professor I know at the University of Iowa chides her students for sitting in the back of a lecture hall, saying, "This isn't church, you know."

When my family and I first moved to Iowa, our first Easter morning the second-largest newspaper in the state (the Cedar Rapids Gazette) broke all the rules I was trying to teach my young journalism students in its coverage of an event that was neither breaking nor corroborated by two independent sources. An archived edition of the paper shows it with a verse from Matthew 28:5-6 above-the-fold on Page One, along with an illustration of three crosses. The front-page verse -- which in its entirety read, "And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said." -- took up two columns and was played against a story about the murders of six people in the Iowa town of Norwalk.*

After years and years of in-your-face religion, I decided to give what has become an annual lecture, in which I urge my students not to bid strangers "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter," "Have you gotten all your Christmas shopping done?" or "Are you going to the Easter egg hunt?" Such well-wishes are not appropriate for everyone, I tell my charges gently. A cheery "Happy holidays!" will suffice. Small potatoes, I know, but did everyone have to proclaim their Christianity so loud and clear?

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea. One gutsy, red-in-the-face student told me in no uncertain terms that for the rest of her life, she would continue offering Merry Christmas and Happy Easter tidings to strangers, no matter what I, or anyone else, said, because, "That's just who I am and I'm not about to change. Ever!" Score one for sticking it to the ethnic interloper.

Such do-good obligation flourishes even when the words invoked don't have much to do with religion. After the University of Iowa played arch-rival Iowa State in football, one of my students got arrested for public intoxication. While walking back to her dormitory one Saturday afternoon, she paused to rest on the steps of the Old State Capitol Building, only to fall asleep until a police officer awakened her. All arrests in Iowa City are published in the local newspaper, and I asked her what had had happened. "When my parents find out, they're going to be furious. I'll get called home for a Come-To-Jesus talk."

On the surface, this Come to Jesus moment had nothing to do with religion. Instead, it described a meeting in which your butt was about to be kicked for some serious, errant behavior, and if you didn't repent your evil ways, then there'd be hell to pay. Come to Jesus was a nonsectarian, equal-opportunity expression that could just as easily involve Jews, Muslims, or Hindus (if you
could find any in Iowa) as it involved Christians. But it was vintage Iowa, invoking the name of Jesus as though everyone believed in the good Lord's son and his providence.

Of the students I teach, relatively few will stay in Iowa after they graduate. The net flow of Iowans is out, not in. Iowa's greatest export isn't corn, soybeans, or pigs; it's young adults. Many born in rural Iowa grow up educated due to the state's still-strong foundation of land-grant universities (although, that too is eroding) and abiding familial interest in education (on a per-capita basis, Iowa has more high school graduates than 49 other states). But once they're through college, they leave. Iowa is the number-two state in the nation in losing college-educated youth (only North Dakota loses more).

An interesting sidelight to the outflow problem is the rapid influx of Chinese students at the University of Iowa. The university vigorously recruits Chinese undergraduates, and has even set up an office in Beijing with the express purpose of attracting Chinese to study in Iowa (no other recruiting office exists anywhere else). Almost all come from well-heeled families, who pay full tuition for their children to attend college. Few speak passable English, almost all congregate in majors that require little English (math, biology and actuarial science), and many drive around town in brand-new sports cars. It's a strange sight to see in Flyover County -- dozens of Chinese students moving together en masse, the girls chattering away in Mandarin, always holding each others' hands. These wealthy, ill-prepared bonus babies are seen as the future of the University. If Iowa has fewer and fewer young people each year to fill the University's cavernous lecture halls, and the state is still a tough sell to coastal American kids, then it's China that's the next frontier as state support for higher education dwindles.

Today, half of Iowa's 952 incorporated towns have populations of fewer than 500 residents, and two-thirds of the state's towns have less than 1,000. Iowa is home to the highest per-capita percentage of people older than 85; the second highest of residents older than 75, and the third highest of people older than 65. The largest and most elegant house in many rural towns is the local funeral parlor. The graduating classes of most rural high schools are so small that an Iowa tradition calls for silk-screened T-shirts with the names of all classmates on the back. Most, if not all of these teenagers, have worked for a couple of weeks in the summer as detasselers, when they remove the pollen-producing tassel on the top of each corn plant, letting it drop to the ground, so that two varieties of corn will cross-breed and make a hybrid. The job has become an absolute rite of passage for rural Iowa kids.

And while it's changing fast, rural Iowa is still a place where homes sell for $40,000 (some a lot less), serious crime is tee-peeing a high-school senior's front yard, and traffic is getting caught behind a tractor on Main Street. If rural Iowans ever drive on the highway (not much reason to do so, really), they welcome other vehicles accelerating on the entrance ramp, smiling, often motioning with their hand to move on over, as though gently patting the butt of a newborn.
The only smog comes from a late-autumn bonfire. Crime isn’t way rampant in these rural towns, but it’s edging upwards, particularly in towns adjacent to slaughterhouses. On summer nights, you can still keep your keys in the ignition and run into the local Casey’s for an Icey or to get a cherry-dipped cone at the DQ one town over. Rural Iowa is still the kind of place where parents drop off their kids at the municipal pool to swim all day long.

Iowa is a throwback to yesteryear and, at the same time, a cautionary tale of what lies around the corner.

Which brings up my dog. And here's why: My dog is a kind of crucible of Iowa.

What does Hannah, a 13-year-old Labrador, have to do with an analysis of the American electoral system and how screwy it is that a place like Iowa gets to choose -- before anyone else -- the person who may become the next leader of the free world?

For our son's eighth birthday, we wanted to get him a dog. Every boy needs a dog, my wife and I agreed, and off we went to an Iowa breeding farm to pick out an eight-week-old puppy that, when we knelt to pet her, wouldn't stop licking us. We chose a yellow Lab because they like kids, have pleasant dispositions, and I was particularly fond of her caramel-color coat. Labs don't generally bite people, although they do like to chew on shoes, hats, and sofa legs. Hannah was Marley before Marley.

Our son, of course, got tired of Hannah after a couple of months, and to whom did the daily obligation of walking the dog fall?

That's right. To me.

And here's the point: I can't tell you how often over the years I'd be walking Hannah in our neighborhood and someone in a pickup would pull over and shout some variation of the following:

"Bet she hunts well."

"Do much hunting with the bitch?"

"Where you hunt her?"

To me, it summed up Iowa. You'd never get a dog because you might just want to walk with the dog or to throw a ball for her to fetch. No, that's not a reason to own a dog in Iowa. You get a dog to track and bag animals that you want to stuff, mount, or eat.

That's the place that may very well determine the next U.S. president.