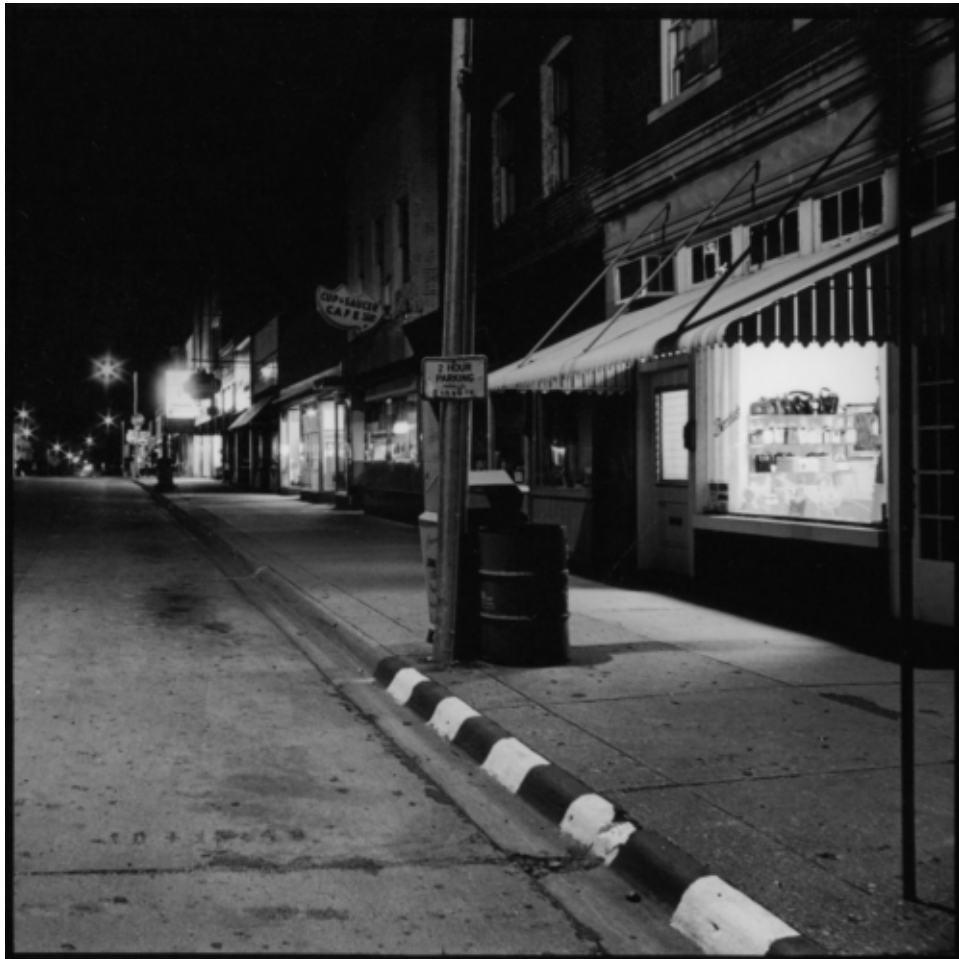




The place I came from

Ron Hammond



Cover photograph "Main Street in Eureka Illinois at Midnight"

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"I know. You think I'm making this all up. But I'm not. It's true. Most of it. And no, it's not heaven on earth. It's boring as hell in its own way, and I wouldn't want to live there a week. So why do I tell you, anyway? It's just this: that there are places we all come from -- deep-rooty-common places -- that make us who we are. And we disdain them or treat them lightly at the risk of self-contempt. There is a sense in which we need to go home again -- and can go home again. Not to recover home, no. But to sanctify memory."

Robert Fulghum

"All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten"

Villiard Books, 1988, page 28, used with permission

Robert Fulghum wrote this after visiting *"the place he came from"* — San Saba, Texas.

In 2002 I attempted to create a portfolio of photographs from *"the place I came from"* — the heart of the Corn Belt, specifically Eureka Illinois and its surrounding area. With 100 or so 5x7 work prints I struggled with finding a theme — a thread of continuity through them. A very perceptive colleague told me *"You don't have a project here. You have three projects. In one you love this place, in the second you are an observer, in the third you hate this place."* Those labels are a bit extreme but plenty descriptive enough to help me find the thread I sought.

Twenty odd of the "observer" group became, with poems by my friend Judith Skillman, a small self-published book *"Forgotten But Not Gone."* that was a hit in *"the place I came from,"*

My wife and I left central Illinois after college only returning to visit my parents in Woodford County or Barbara's family in neighboring Tazewell County until their deaths.

This portfolio, mostly from the "hate this place," group is my contribution. Most of the photographs are from Eureka and its surrounding area but a couple from its neighbor to the southwest, Washington, Illinois in Tazewell County — the place that my wife came from. It is another mostly rural farming town and her sister lived on a farm just south of town.

Woodford County is about a quarter the size of King County and with its 2020 population of about 39,000 about 1.8% of that of King County. Eureka is by far the largest town in its county with a 2020 population of 5,000 perhaps 2000 when I lived there.

Tazewell county is only a bit larger and more populace. Most of King County's area is water, forests, mountains. Most of Woodford and Tazewell counties' area is corn fields.

There are some very steep hills on the west end of Woodford county — adjacent to the Illinois River. Almost all the rest of these counties is **flat**. My wife's sister had a swimming pool in her back yard. From the ladder to the slide on one end of it — high enough to see over the corn stalks — I could see the water tower and courthouse dome in Eureka seven miles away. Prairie View Park is on a "hill" perhaps 30 feet above the corn fields just north of Washington. At night you can see the lights of eight communities — Washington and Cooper Station in Tazewell County, Germantown, Metamora, Secor Junction, Eureka, Deer Creek, and Goodfield in Woodford County.

The winters are long and bitter cold, the summers are scorching hot. There is a brief period in the spring and another in the fall with splendid weather. Tornados are many spring's business and drenching rain and thunderstorms swing through in the late summer.

From here, central Illinois seems like a different world and a different incarnation. From there, a four hour plane ride and two plus hour drive from Chicago, Washington state seems like a different world and a different incarnation.

*"Well, I reckon that will come in handy
when he wants to wire up a barn."*

Response to my father from the father of a high school
classmate after my dad told him that I was finishing
a master's degree in electrical engineering.

My growing up there, a clueless town kid with little contact of
the outside world, was sort of *"Dandelion Wine"* idyllic. (Ray
Bradbury's book on growing up in a small town in rural Illinois.)

In many ways it was idyllic but with grown-up eyes it was also
relentlessly insular, conservative, racist, and fundamentalist. I
saw little of this as a kid, insulated by my progressive, literate,
inclusive parents — a high school teacher and the town librarian
— two of the least judgmental people I've ever known.

The photographs in this portfolio are from the *"hate this place"*
group but again "hate" is a bit extreme. However, looking at
them made me realize that I really didn't like the weather pr
culture, nor most of the people.

As Fulghum said: I *"wouldn't want to live there a week."*



The Photographs

1. Courthouse Square, Eureka Illinois on a Sizzling Summer Day
2. Attorney and Client, Main Street at the Court House, Eureka Illinois
3. Main Street, Deer Creek Illinois
4. Summer Afternoon, Secor Illinois
5. Pig Roast, Family Farm, near Washington Illinois
6. Pie and Cake Judging, Eureka Pumpkin Festival
7. At a Farm Auction Somewhere near Eureka, Illinois
8. Homecoming Celebration, Eureka High School
9. Eureka's Finest
10. Fred's Truck, Ace Hardware and Lumber, Eureka Illinois
11. Prairie Skyscraper and Barn, Cruger Junction Illinois
12. South Main Street and Reagan Drive, Eureka Illinois

Courthouse Square Eureka Illinois on a Sizzling Summer Day

Almost certainly on a Saturday — the day that farm families came into town. Men to the Farm Bureau, the bank, the hardware or lumber store or the court house square. Women to one of the two grocery stores or the two drug stores, the dry goods store, the locker plant (rental freezer drawers before home freezers were common)

The white, short-sleeved shirt on the left is a field marking for a "townie". The two others, long-sleeves, heavy tan on hands and face are farmers. They seem to be paying close attention to the guy on the left. Perhaps he's a farm bureau agent, banker, local politician.



Attorney and Client

Main Street at the Court House, Eureka Illinois

It was a blistering hot summer day. Court was in session and the document box on top of the car leads me to believe that they were discussing an upcoming case. Client doesn't look particularly happy about it and attorney is a caricature of a small town lawyer.



Main Street Deer Creek Illinois

Deer Creek is at the southwest corner of Woodford County, perhaps two miles west of Goodfield which is five miles south of Eureka. The consolidated school district also includes Congerville, perhaps five miles east of Goodfield. This friendly kid stopped to talk with me — it went something like this:

Kid: Why are you taking pictures in little ol' Deer Creek?

Me: I want to show how it has changed and have pictures to show when it changes again.

Kid: Nothin' ever changes around here.

Me: Yes they do. When I was your age these buildings all had stores in them. They had a harvest festival and carnival in this street every all.

Kid: Not any more.

Me: Did you build your bike. It's pretty clever.

Kid: Yep, three junk bicycle frames and the seat off of a junk garden tractor. Getting the brakes to work was really hard.

Me: Are you going into Eureka to high school?

Kid: Yep, one more year. Go over to Goodfield to get the school bus.

Me: What comes after high school for you.

Kid: Dunno Maybe work for the fence company. (maker of woven wire fence materials in Goodfield.)



Summer Afternoon Secor Illinois

Secor is seven or so miles northeast of Eureka — mostly east. These many small central state towns are seven miles apart because the original railroads were mandated to have a passing siding at most every seven miles. If there was a passing siding a village grew up next to it.

Most of the villages followed a pattern promoted by the railroad — “Railroad Ave” along the tracks, “Main Street” crossing it, etc. Since there was a siding it was a good place for a grain elevator (“Prairie Skyscraper”) Since there was an elevator the farmers needed a farm supply store. With a store or two they had to have a church and a one-room school...

Secor still had a primary grade school but the older kids went into nearby Roanoke for school.

The kid on the bike didn’t stop to talk to me but the three dogs, distracted in the photograph by the bird flying by, paused to say hello and see if I would scratch their ears (yes). When they noticed that the kid had gone on they raced after him.



Pig Roast

Family Farm, near Washington Illinois

A pig roast is the Midwest's answer to a barbeque. A whole pig is roasted in a fire pit, usually overnight. The following afternoon is the event.

In addition to roast pork there is corn fresh in from the field. Most of the corn is "field corn" for biofuel, animal feed, or hybrid seed corn. But there is usually a row or two of "sweet corn" for human feed on the edge of the field.

You wouldn't catch these men dead cooking in a kitchen but the pig roast, like the barbeque, is a man's venue. Potato salad and pie (prepared by the women folk of course) and lots of beer complete the menu. The man on the right is my wife's nephew.

The corn field adjoined the back yard so the corn was likely on the stalk five minutes ago.



Pie and Cake Judging Eureka Pumpkin Festival

These two couldn't look more like Midwest farmers if they wore badges.

Most communities had a harvest festival of one kind or other every September with a carnival, a parade, and all the trimmings.

Eureka's was the Pumpkin Festival. Libby's canning factory there canned pumpkin for several weeks in late August. At that time corn was planted in rows far enough apart that pumpkin plants would grow between them — benefitted by the shade of the taller corn.

Pumpkins were ripe and ready to pick about the time the corn was all in.

Of course with all those pumpkins, pumpkin pie was a big item and I'm guessing that this lady had a pie in the contest.

The entire town smelled like cooking pumpkin for weeks and main street was lined with farm tractors pulling a wagon (sometimes two wagons) full of pumpkins. I had no appetite for pumpkin, (pie or otherwise) for years after moving away from Eureka.



At a Farm Auction

Somewhere near Eureka, Illinois

There is an auction barn near Goodfileld, a few miles south of Eureka. Items at the auction barn come from all kinds of sources including estates and the sales are well organized and professional.

This was at the farm itself. These customers are leaning on a home-size freezer and everything from farm implements down to furniture and table ware was there.

These people look to me like vultures wheeling around over a potential meal — pick up a bargain, see what the family left behind when they died or moved into town. I don't like them very much.



Homecoming Celebration Eureka High School

I assure you that I was *not* there for the homecoming parade and celebration. It happened to be when I was there anyway.

I had wandered over to the high school to watch the parade and take some photographs. It ended at the high school where the participants were heading for an event at the school.

The Chicago Cubs and the St. Louis Cardinals are traditional foes among the local baseball fans and opinions about them are held with religious zeal. (I declined to participate since I didn't give a damn about baseball.)

I couldn't resist myself and made a derogatory statement about "the cubs".



Eureka's Finest

At the time I was living there Eureka had two police officers — a day cop and a night cop. Whether or not there really was a night cop is an open question. Nobody I knew ever saw him. The day cop was regarded as a joke.

By the time of this photograph there were two day cops. This one was directing traffic around the block to avoid a fender-bender at the main intersection.

Fortunately the crime rate was very low and small towns don't attract the best quality of criminals anyway.

The State Bank of Eureka went modern and opened a drive-through kiosk pretty much across the street from where this officer is standing. There were two tellers, one to serve the drive through and the second for the inside counter.

I am not making this up. My dad sent me the clipping from the weekly Woodford County Journal.

The drive through teller looked out the window as a pickup truck parked at the curb beyond the drive through. Two men got out and pulled ski masks down on their faces. The teller found this a bit threatening so triggered the silent alarm to fetch the police — headquarters a block away, across from the court house. As the two men walked up to the bank they heard the police siren wind up, made a hurried retreat to the truck and drove away with a block or so lead on the police. *But the cops lost them.* No problem, *one of the tellers* recognized the truck and knew the owner. The police drove over and staked out the owner's house. A few minutes later the truck pulled in. They claimed it had been a prank and they panicked when they heard the siren. Could be.



Fred's Truck

Ace Hardware and Lumber, Eureka Illinois

My parent's neighbor restored vintage trucks — in this case an 1947 Ford pickup. Knowing I'm a photographer he asked if I would photograph it for a vintage truck calendar. I proposed that we pose it in a lumber yard, tail-gate down with a few 2x4s in the bed as if it was a working truck.

I went to the lumber yard to get permission to use their old-fashioned lumber rack on a Sunday when they weren't open and there would be no modern vehicles around.

I Explained the gig I wanted to do with their rack and an old truck as if it were a working truck. The guy behind the counter probably wasn't born when I lived there.

*Sure. Help yourself. The alley alongside the rack isn't locked . That must be Fred Williams Ford — **he lives across the street from your dad.** Send us is copy.*

Now keep in mind that I hadn't been more than an occasional visitor in that town for at least 40 years. I had been in that hardware store perhaps twice in 40 years, likely with my dad but I don't look a lot like him.

Fred's copy was in color (and without Fred) but I wanted a black and white and with him in the picture. His color version did appear in the calendar.



Prairie Skyscraper and Barn Cruger Junction Illinois

Cruger Junction is roughly seven miles west of Eureka — another passing siding interval with the obligatory grain elevator. The elevator in Eureka burned down in a spectacular fire in the 70s. This one was clearly rebuilt not that long ago, likely when soy beans became a viable cash crop.

I never understood the “junction” part of the name. It likely made sense at some time.

You are pretty much looking at the village — a few houses, the towering elevator, the vintage barn. It formerly had a gas station and a couple of stores.

Political viewpoints are rock solid and long lasting. “**Vote No**” probably referred to a long forgotten school or library levy, widely opposed by those living outside of the towns.



South Main Street and Reagan Drive Eureka Illinois

Ronald Reagan is Eureka's favorite son. He went to college there (Eureka College that my father referred to as "backwater U"). Actually in Reagan's time there it was a small but respectable liberal arts (well, liberal in the Disciples of Christ view) college.

My wife's eldest aunt was there at the same time and sang in a choral group with him. She said he was a dumbbell even then.

The tall monument marks the grave of my wife's great grandfather. He was a Scottish immigrant that became a wealthy farmer who held a lot of progressive ideas about schools and libraries but by family legend was a "hidebound old poop,"

Reagan Drive, formerly Cemetery Road, goes by the south boundary of the Eureka College campus, past the monument there at the site of one of the Lincoln/Douglas debates, and dead ends at a corn field.

