

A national example

BY JOEY PUCKETT

It's ironic. For years, I've made comedic fodder out of the distance between the ideas of hoity-toity academics and the critical blind spots in their clinical perspectives. Now, I find myself facing a course assignment to write about Storm Lake, preferably in a way that's eye-opening for readers who live there, having never been to Storm Lake. In fact, my hands-on experience with Iowa is limited to pit stops on the way home to Minneapolis. That said, I'm not coming from nowhere. I've learned a lot about Storm Lake in Dr. Andrew Offenberg's class this semester, and I'll do my best to work with what I know.

First, I'm going to thank you, then I'm going to tell you what I know, what I think, and then ask you to do something.

Storm Lake is incredible. Before I started on this course, I did not know rural towns like Storm Lake existed. In one sense, I'm pointing to your diverse population. But I am also speaking in a figurative way. I didn't have many reasons to spend time

outside of the Twin Cities growing up. Through examination of your town, by studying its history, meeting its people and hearing them repeatedly hammer the belief that Storm Lake is "special," I have grown more fascinated and appreciative of rural America. For that, I thank you. Not every small town could have done it and it speaks well to Storm Lake that I came to these conclusions from a classroom in Ohio.

In our class, we learned chiefly about meatpacking, labor-driven immigration and the sociology of small American towns. This learning took place before the backdrop of learning about Storm Lake, its history, its unique population, its local idiosyncrasies and so on. As such, diversity and meatpacking are the only things I feel qualified to speak to you about.

As far as your town's relationship with Tyson goes, I'm torn. I genuinely appreciate the plant and the things it made possible: a thriving Storm Lake and a better life for thousands of immigrants. I'm a little torn between this sentiment, which most residents share, and the horror of what I learned about the meatpacking industry and your region's water sup-

ply.

Insofar as an environmental catastrophe goes, I want to remind you the destiny of your town's environment is in your hands. I hope you all listen to the direction of scientists who can point Storm Lake towards options which do not leave you dry in the long-term. Just because meatpacking makes Storm Lake possible today does not mean it will do the same tomorrow. Meatpacking is a parasite leeching the water of life from the region. What will you do without water?

As the meat industry goes, John Tyson is worth billions of dollars and I'd wager his executives are worth another set of billions. Tyson just paid a \$221 million fine for price-fixing. Imagine if, instead of spending all their time figuring out how to cheat consumers and exsanguinate their employees, they devoted resources to creating a work environment that didn't historically treat employees with the same reverence as their mutilated products. This is not an ideological bandy. I'm telling you, as somebody who has extensively read the work of scholars who dedicated careers to studying the meatpacking industry, Tyson is not

invested in the environmental future of your town. Tyson is not invested in the health of its employees beyond its effect on its bottom line. It can deny it all they want. When Tyson leadership complains about the cost of improvements, they're trying to make you forget that the costs they cut are really passed on to you. Tyson and its union-adverse sister companies in American meatpacking have let terrible things happen to their employees and host communities in the name of lining their pockets. I can't think of a single exception. Can you?

On to the most positively eye-opening aspect of your town: your people. I am amazed by Storm Lake's continuing success as a home for immigrants, and even more amazed by the humility of those I interviewed about it.

The Storm Lake community does things for immigrants which most places in America do not. You always have. I know this because I read your old newspapers. However, residents I spoke with still won't come to terms with your success. As a fourth-generation Minnesotan, I relate to the Midwestern compulsion to insist that a job that was well done is really

just, "not so bad".

However, as a student, I would argue that these sort of communal compulsions, for better or for worse, are deeply ingrained into small town culture, and that eschewing them can feel uncomfortable. You have to resist Midwestern modesty and, as a town, become more boastful. Storm Lake is a rare example of immigration done well in rural America. Mark Prosser doesn't receive awards for his programs merely for creating them; he receives them because of the results they achieve. Storm Lake has a role to play in the national conversation, and please don't tell me about the New York Times cover. That was four years ago and I assure you the Times readership is not who needs convincing. Ditch your Midwestern compulsions, your kind humility, and start yelling, screaming to the rest of America: We are here, we are real, and what we are doing works. It can work for all of us.

As long as you don't run out of water.

Puckett is a student at the University of Miami in Oxford, Ohio. He is completing a novel titled, "The Automan."