

TEXT FOR DISCUSSION

The Country and the City: Common Ground in the Prairie State?
“Cultural Sustainability and the Pursuit of Community”
Free Press Coffee House, Pittsfield, Illinois
September 18, 2018

Excerpts from *Dispatches from the Muckdog Gazette:*
A Mostly Affectionate Account of a Small Town’s Fight to Survive by Bill Kauffman
(Henry Holt & Company/Macmillan, 2003), Chapter 1

In John Gardner’s novel *The Sunlight Dialogues*, a bearded wild man is arrested for painting “Love” in the middle of Oak Street in the sleepy western New York city of Batavia. He is jailed; he escapes; he is gunned down. The disturber of the peace is revealed to be Taggart Hodge, a local boy gone loco, a wandering son who returned to clue Batavians in to the mysteries of existence.

Poor Tag: he was a century and a half too late...

A blue-collar enclave surrounded by fertile black muck with its rows of onions and potatoes and corn, Batavia was a friendly little city, like one of Vachel Lindsay’s prairie towns, but with more ethnic spice: the English and the Scots and the Germans coexisted uneasily with the Irish, and at century’s dawn came a polyglot influx of Poles and Italians.

But progress came and washed my town away. In the heady morn of the postwar world, Kitty Carlisle’s boytoy, Governor Thomas E. Dewey (the pride of Owosso, Michigan, but resident of New York City or its overspill, as our governors always are), determined to build his own Erie Canal, and the New York State Thruway was born...

Hundreds of miles of farmland were stolen by Albany, for the greater good, of course. This state-of-the-art roadway would link us with New York City, 400 short miles away. Think of the benefits!...

Across Upstate, countless locally owned and owner-operated businesses were bankrupted. Drivers stuck to the Thruway and ate the tasteless chain fare...

Our city fathers rushed headlong into urban renewal, whereby the federal government paid Batavia to knock down its past: the mansions of the founders, sandstone churches, the brick shops, all of it...

Batavia tore out – literally – its five-block heart and filled the cavity with a ghastly mall, a dull gray sprawling oasis in a desert of unused parking spaces. The mall was a colossal failure. Built

in the aptly named Brutalist style, it is used in urban-planning texts as a case study in disaster. But it succeeded in destroying the last vestiges of our home-run economy. J.C. Penney and Wendy's were in; the Dipson Theater and the Dagwood were out. As the Chamber of Commerce might put it in one of those newspeak brochures, Batavia had entered the global economy...

I do not want to paint too relentlessly depressing a picture of the Batavia to which I returned. Hundreds still gather for Friday night high school football, though nonrelatives grow rarer in the stands. Dozens attend the Batavia Concert Band performances on summer Wednesdays in the Blind School Park. A hardy band of volunteers mows the grass in our pioneer cemetery. Yet so many more Batavians are huddled around the living room TV, watching *Friends* instead of earning friends, as localism withers on the vine...

[An influential school administrator in Batavia] was a fanatic on the matter of teaching local history, for as he wrote in his history of the Holland Land Office: "Grandfather's chair may be a very humble piece of furniture, but it is prized beyond all price because it is grandfather's chair."

If Batavia and Upstate New York – and western Kansas and the upper peninsula of Michigan and the Florida panhandle and your home, wherever it is – are to remain distinct entities and not mere wattles on a homogeneous continental blob, then we must remember this...

Like my heroes – old men who refuse to learn the metric system, wizened spinsters who instead of whining about their [expletive deleted] osteoporosis write and self-publish books about the grain merchants and farmwives and country doctors who built their towns – we have it within our power to nurture 1,001 little regional revivals. Like the old paper-rock-scissors game, one handful of dirt trumps an entire globe. Or so I tell myself.

Every Main Street and Oak Street and Elm Street deserves its own record, its own poem, and the lack thereof is not the fault of David Geffen or Rupert Murdoch, however loathsome these men and their playthings may be. Kansas realist Ed Howe understood that "in every town there is material for the great American novel so long expected, but no one appears to write it."

The tools of our regeneration are at our feet, if we'd just take a minute to look down. "Art, although potentially universal in significance, is always more or less local in inception," as Grant Wood wrote...

The colossi of globalism – Disney, the U.N., Time Warner – are impregnable against conventional weapons anyway, so we must preserve our homes, our streets, our Batavias, with acts of recovery, restoration, and resurrection. The seed, the prayer – our only prayer – is love. Which brings us back to John Gardner's Taggart Hodge.

American regionalists face a daunting task. But one thing we must believe. Taggart Hodge was right. Love is the answer. Scrawl it across a highway near you.