



# The *Kindness* of Strangers

Photos and text by Missy Ricksecker

**I** met Sparky Weilnau, whose popcorn farm sits just outside the village of Milan, early on a Friday morning in late June. We drove out to his land, drinking coffee and stopping to see the crops and outbuildings up close. Huge storm clouds loomed on the horizon over an exquisite gold field of wheat, threatening severe weather. “This reminds me of that painting,” Sparky remarked.





### SPARKY AND PHIL WEILNAU

As a township trustee, Sparky was one of the lead members of the Ohio Chautauqua host committee in Milan, along with his many other volunteer gigs. Out on the farm, we ran into his son Phil, who was busy in the barn. I barely recognized Phil, a highly regarded folk musician who performs often at venues in nearby Norwalk. He had been decidedly more spiffed up when performing under the Chautauqua tent several nights before!

I knew exactly the painting. John Rogers Cox’s “Gray and Gold, 1942” is one of my favorites in the Cleveland Museum of Art’s permanent collection. Sparky explained the painting from a farmer’s perspective, saying that the oncoming storm could mean financial ruin for a farmer. And did I ever notice that there were no electric wires in the painting? This dates the work to the early days of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. I added that Cox painted it just as the US was entering World War II. After pausing to consider the layers of meaning imbued in Cox’s work—and in this moment—we began to talk about war, local history, and the precarious nature of family farming in today’s economy.

### RADICAL HOSPITALITY

On the road with Ohio Chautauqua last June, I made a point of getting to know a few people on each stop during my month of wandering. In Clifton, I chatted with Arby Conn, who was soon to retire as pastor of the tiny village’s Presbyterian church. We got to talking about matters of faith and the divine. I asked him what these things meant for him. “Radical hospitality,” was his response. The idea and practice of welcoming all people, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs, into your life, and going out of your way to seek out those who are not welcomed.

Hospitality is an age-old concern. Travelers in the ancient world relied on the hospitality of strangers in a far-flung world without hotels. A major theme in Homer’s *Odyssey*, hospitality was an elaborate sacred duty, which involved



### ROBERT WHEELER

Robert Wheeler, the great-great-grand nephew of Thomas Alva Edison, encouraged me to come out and see his family farm. Homer Page Farm was passed down through the generations via Edison's sister Marion, who married Page in the Edison family home in 1851. The farmhouse walls are decorated with family photos, including images of Edison and his wife, and posters promoting the rock band Pere Ubu. Robert and his wife Linda fondly refer to their farm as "the last resort," as it is home to about a dozen rescued farm animals. As the president of the Edison Birthplace Association, Robert helped lead a successful effort to have a statue of Edison erected at the US Capitol. Oh yeah, and those Pere Ubu posters? Robert has played with the band—better known in Europe than in Erie County—since 1994.

welcoming people into the home, offering them a place at the table for a meal, and sharing stories. The relationship between guest and host was given great prominence in the moral and ethical code of the Hellenic world.

I was moved by the hospitality the Chautauqua troupe received from its hosts, and from a few strangers along the way. In each place we visited, we were invited into people's homes and lives. We were fed and treated as honored guests. As we shared our stories, Arby's idea of "radical hospitality" and the sacredness of the Homeric ideal of the guest-host relationship became a reality.

In the village of Milan, our last tour stop, I got to know a few gardeners and farmers. As I took pictures of their fields and gardens, they told me their stories. ❤️





### NICK AND KELLEY GEORGIAFANDIS

Chautauqua host Dan Frederick introduced me to Nick Georgiandis at the Milan Coffee Station, where it seems everyone in town stops to get a cup of joe in the morning. Nick and his wife Kelley are music teachers who have taught generations of adoring students, including Phil Weinhau. Nick retired in 2015 after 36 years as a teacher and band director at Edison High School. Kelley still teaches piano from their home. The two manage a small farm and sell their produce in a little shed in front of their house. Payment is on the honor system. Kelley and Nick teach classes in gardening—and what to do with all that produce when it comes into season.

