



Down Home Missouri: When Girls Were Scary and Basketball Was King

Joel M. Vance

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When I was thirteen, we moved to Dalton, Missouri, a flyspeck on the road map, so my father could supervise the 960-acre farm he and his two partners had bought several years before. It was a return to his roots. Our new home in Dalton was infinitely more primitive than our South Side Chicago apartment and even more primitive than my aunt and uncle's hill-country house on the other side of the county. It was a hotel, one that hadn't entertained guests for decades. It was a nightmare the likes of which my father never had. Not only did the hotel lack an indoor toilet and potable water, it also had no bathing facility.

In this warmly witty account, Joel Vance re-creates what it was like for a city kid to have his life changed almost entirely when he is transplanted from his Chicago birthplace to his father's home country in rural Missouri—where basketball was the major social event and a night out might be a trip to the burger joint in town.

While Vance writes about his relatives and their roots in Missouri and Wisconsin, his focus is on his growing-up years in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The anguish of adolescence is detailed, but lightened with Vance's special skill for humor. Dating, French kissing, drinking, hog castration, and vocational agriculture are just a few of the experiences that Vance recalls. His comical encounters with the local citizenry, his social misadventures, and his fumbling exploits on the high school basketball and baseball teams are interwoven with reflections on weightier matters, such as the mismanagement of the Missouri River and its wetlands by the Corps of Engineers. He shares his emotions, his dreams, and the realities of his high school days, capturing the essence of the experiences of many who lived in the Midwest at midcentury.

Although Vance's writing is funny—sometimes laugh-out-loud funny—there are poignant moments, too, when the realities of life and death are immediate and personal. Any reader from a small-town background will identify with Vance's memories, and most city readers will understand Vance's confusion in coping with the move from Chicago to rural Missouri. Taking the reader back to a time when life was simpler and days seemed longer, this lively recollection of coming of age in a small Missouri town will provide hours of enjoyment.

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