



## WHY I CAN'T BE A NATIVE

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*Geoff Brieger*

Often, when I am asked how long I have been in Michigan, I say somewhat diffidently, “Forty-seven years,” then I quickly add, almost ironically, “I’m almost a native!” But will I ever be a native *Michigander*?

The cachet of birthright can of course never apply to me. But here I share a fate not uncommon in my immediate social circles. What are those? Primarily they evolved from my forty-seven years of association with Oakland University. In the beginning, virtually every new faculty member came from outside of Michigan. Some, it is true, obtained their education at Michigan universities, but they were also not born here.

No, to be a native I think you have to be immersed in the local culture, a phenomenon rarely discussed. What exactly is a *Michigander* and what are his/her social contexts?

Since the development of the automobile at the turn of the nineteenth century, this means of transportation has held the paramount role in the consciousness of the region. Not only did it lead to an unprecedented growth of the population of Michigan and employment, but it brought wave after wave of Americans who migrated north for better opportunities, and immigrants from Europe who had faith in the promise inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. They brought with them their own cultures, and while heavily blended with “native” *Michiganders*, they retain their cultural identities to this day.

The automobile also defined the environment, particu-

larly the affection for roads, whose designs were strictly utilitarian, and rarely contributed any charm to the rapidly urbanizing sprawl. It also created the all-too-familiar commercial extensions which lined these roads, and are differentiated into towns, villages, and cities primarily by signs at their entrances.

This is the native environment, and, consciously or unconsciously, it must determine the outlook of the young born here who daily pass such scenes, whether going to school, shopping, or church, for that matter.

The powerful effect of such cultural habituation is reflected clearly in a relatively recent phenomenon, the Woodward Dream Cruise, which combines the best of the auto and shopping phenomena along with a not inconsiderable burst of nostalgia.

Next we must consider the influence of sports. Although most sports teams date back only to the late nineteenth century, they have a firm hold on any true Michigander.

Whether it is the beloved Tigers, the swift Red Wings, the shifty Pistons (currently in the suburbs), or the benighted but renascent Lions, all have their enthusiastic allegiances. Far be it from me to malign any of these diversions. The saying, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do," prescribes the adoption of local enjoyments, whether they be the shows of the Coliseum or of the Palace of Auburn Hills. Still, my lack of an early immersion in the Detroit sports excludes me from claiming native status.

Michigan does not lack in the conventional attributes of culture, of course. It has three or four major universities and a plethora of colleges. There are libraries in just about every town worthy of the name. There are museums, art galleries, and orchestras, even opera, and a modest theatrical scene. However, it cannot be said that these occupy any major space on the cultural horizon of the typical native.

Lest this sound snobbish, let me point out that the sports section of our fading newspapers is considerably bigger than anything devoted to the arts and theater.

So, after forty-seven years, why haven't I adapted? Well, for one thing, there is my accent.

It is unmistakable, although rarely identified correctly. It is not, and never will be, Midwestern. Some years ago, a kind colleague at Oakland University in Linguistics offered to help me remove the last traces of my accent, but I demurred. I declared that I enjoyed diversity in people and accents, and intended to keep mine.

After forty-seven years, I also now realize that it is not possible to erase the early implants of two other cultures—that of my birth-land, Germany, and that of my early, predominantly East-Coast education from Philadelphia and New England. Although at age eleven I left Germany after its utter destruction in WW II, I still remember its pre-war urban aspects—its quaint little towns with crooked streets and old houses, and maybe the mossy remnants of a city wall. Cars really had no place there. Yes, there was commerce of course, but it was on a modest scale, and never dominated the streets. I will not deny, however, that there were and are fanatic soccer fans in Germany.

How do I regard culture in my birth-land? My exposure was limited by my brief eleven years and young age, but I know now that many towns support their own theaters and orchestras from public funds. Additionally, most would argue that there are both cultural advantages and drawbacks which accrue from the continuous habitation of the land for over 2,000 years.

My positive experience of the East Coast includes my appreciation of Philadelphia as a fine living example of a large colonial metropolis, admirably laid out by William Penn. Many of its eighteenth and nineteenth century townhouses are still intact, and in fact the city has enjoyed an urban renewal well in advance of most other cities of comparable size, starting at least fifty years ago. It has excellent public transportation, so a car is actually not needed in the city, although there are plenty. Most importantly, history has left a very visible mark on the city, and Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell are cherished monuments which help give one a sense of place in time.

The East Coast also has fine educational establishments, but I shall not dwell on them, except to mention that I bit the proverbial apple at Harvard. There is no cause and effect here, however. I was indeed expelled to the Midwest, but it was my own doing.

Finally, something about accents: if you have ever been to Brooklyn, or New Jersey, or Boston, you will easily recognize the natives. In Michigan, there is a tendency to obscure origins. A former colleague of mine, from Magnolia, Mississippi, totally discarded his southern dialect. Did he become a native? No. In fact, he moved East.

So, even if I were to enjoy the easy camaraderie of sitting around the barbeque, relishing Tiger victories, or deploring or celebrating the Lions, while tailgating at the Stadium, I would never be a native, and will continue to bump along Michigan's eternally rebuilding roads, in my obligatory car.