Dear Participants,

The theme of our 2020 Renewing Illinois Summit is One Illinois: Noble Aspiration or Impossible Dream?

Illinois, as we all know, is a large, dynamic, and diverse state with a rich and complicated history. Regional tensions and fissures have been a common theme during our two centuries of statehood.

Some experts have identified six distinct regions in Illinois—Chicago, suburban Cook County, the collar counties, Northern Illinois, Central Illinois, and Southern Illinois—while others have depicted three—Chicago, the collar counties, and the rest of the state. Other analysts see the division in Illinois as a simple and stark split between urban and rural.

Our hope is that this summit helps us forge a creative and positive agenda for One Illinois. As we attempt to do so, we should consider fundamental issues and hard questions:

- What specifically can be done to forge a common identity and a sense of shared destiny in Illinois?
- Is it necessary or misguided to think of One Illinois?
- Are the different regions in Illinois treated fairly in the allocation of financial resources and political power?
- Can the urban-rural division be bridged?
- Do the people of the various regions of Illinois inevitably view such issues as guns, education, economic development, criminal justice reform, and transportation differently?
- Are Illinois' regional tensions related to, or distinct from, the challenges facing other large states such as New York, Florida, Ohio, or Minnesota?

We hope that this book provides you with a solid foundation to consider these and other questions. We invited the top leadership of the Illinois General Assembly to offer their perspectives on One Illinois. Roger Biles, one of Illinois’ leading historians, provides crucial historical context to understand the regional tensions in Illinois. Two wonderful travel essays provide fascinating glimpses of the Prairie State.

We hope this reading is enjoyable and instructive and helps all of us find tangible ways to Renew Illinois.

Sincerely,

John T. Shaw
Michael J. Madigan
Speaker of the Illinois House of Representatives

The House Democratic Caucus I Lead

I applaud all participants in the Renewing Illinois Summit at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and for the important selection for thematic focus, questioning the practicality (or lack thereof) of a vision of inclusiveness for our great state of Illinois—a vision of “noble aspiration” or “impossible dream.”

Democratic equality demands that everyone whose basic interests are affected by policies should be included in the process of making them. Yet individuals and groups often (correctly) observe that decision-making processes are too frequently dominated by only some of the interests and some of the perspectives in society.

What are the ideals and advantages of inclusion? What are the disadvantages of hegemonic marginalization of others?

As a participant in this Summit you need only to look to the namesake of this Institute for some guidance and inspiration on the assembling of puzzle pieces that will help you to understand your mission. The Essential Paul Simon is a book that brings together a vast array of the senator’s writings. The work of Professor John Jackson shows Simon looking at problems from many angles.

For instance, in 1976, Senator Simon wrote a short essay on compromise as an essential tool to progress. He cited an amendment dealing with mining on federal lands and the need to win support from colleagues.

“For many people the word “compromise” has a bad ring to it. And if compromise means abandon-
colleagues. He cited an amendment dealing with mining on federal lands and the need to win support from colleagues.

For instance, in 1976, Senator Simon wrote a short essay on compromise as an essential tool to progress. He cited an amendment dealing with mining on federal lands and the need to win support from colleagues.

“I had been inflexible and unwilling to compromise my amendment would have been defeated and the Shawnee National Forest would have been without this important protection. I got a little less than I hoped for. But a small victory was won for the public,” Senator Simon explained.

Illinois continues to face many similar challenges and problems. Too often too much attention is paid to geographic differences or the perceived differences between rural and urban areas. We share common goals. I think we all want a state with good schools, a safe environment and reliable, quality health care. Striving to achieve common goals can help diminish or dull divergent interests.

Achieving the goals can be a difficult journey. In a democracy just like in our personal lives, we also frequently encounter arguments or positions which contain elements both of truth and fiction. These admixtures of fact are particularly daunting, as they encompass the lion’s share of those assertions of complexity we cannot immediately dismiss or accept. These occupy the majority of disputes, not only politics, but in discourse on morality and ethics, too.

But today, one of the elements of our modern political Illinoisan society of which I am most proud, is our growing sensitivity not only to identify voices heretofore marginalized, but also to dedicate ourselves to giving voice to these groups—both within and without our political arena: the voices of women; the voices of the immigrant; the voices of our less fortunate; the voices of those afflicted by sexual violence; the voices of children who are abused and afraid.

The work of the Illinois House of Representatives can be greatly assisted by your efforts and the other assets offered by the Paul Simon Institute. In recent years, the Institute has commissioned as a series of public opinion polls. The polls offer a clear impression of the mood of our citizens on a wide range of important, often controversial issues. The diversity of Illinois can make the work challenging.

The House Democratic Caucus I lead believes in this challenge and embraces it.

Within my own organization, regarding my staff working within the Office of the Speaker who assist all Democratic members of the House Democratic Caucus, I have reinvigorated my leadership to ensure a culture which practices inclusiveness and tolerance. I must also acknowledge my staff has had the benefit of the fresh perspectives that come from the various intern programs offered by the Paul Simon Institute.

Further, the House Democratic Caucus I lead will forever assert the values of compassion, empathy, acceptance, tolerance, and affection for diversity. To be sure, there are plenty who disagree. And they work tirelessly fill our modern political rhetoric, both nationally and at the state level, with angry vitriol and protectionist accusations. While making a place for divergent views is an important element in an Illinois seeks to be a better place to live, work and raise our families we must resist the darker reality of a nation far from willing to embrace equal opportunity, equal consideration, and equal respect for women, for those of the LGBTQ community, for those with disabilities, for those who are impoverished, for those only newly arrived upon our shores—desperate to escape the crime, poverty, oppression, and violence of their former lands.

The House Democratic Caucus I lead is not nearly so doe eyed. We appreciate we are not there yet. We anticipate there is much work left to do. And we congratulate all who embrace the courage necessary to join us in this struggle.

Like the words of Senator Simon that I mentioned earlier the House Democratic Caucus I lead understands well that politics is the art of compromise. We understand, also, and maybe only too well, the unfortunate limitations of our resources, time, and energy. But the House Democratic Caucus I lead, will not abandon nor equivocate regarding our efforts to protect the diversity of viewpoints from all across this wonderful prairie state of ours that we call home.

The House Democratic Caucus I lead, is about promoting change, promoting voice, promoting agency, and promoting opportunity—not for the few, not only for the wealthy, and not only for those who appear as we appear, but for all Illinoisans, from wherever they might come, and proceeding from whatever viewpoints they might hold dear.

These attitudes and approaches seem like the right ones to bring us closer to achieving One Illinois. I look forward to results of the Institute’s Renewing Illinois Summit with the belief it will contribute to making this state a better place.

With kindest personal regards, I remain,
Sincerely yours,

MICHAEL J. MADIGAN
Speaker of the House
Dear Friends,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this short essay for the Renewing Illinois Summit for Illinois college and university students. I appreciate the invitation and the commitment to public service which the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute and the students at the summit have made.

Senator Paul Simon and I did not agree on every issue. But the one thing that all of us who knew him can agree on is that Paul Simon was a man of integrity. He was known for his honesty and the sincerity of his beliefs, and the high-minded way in which he went about making the case for his ideas.

It is notable that Paul Simon did not become a public figure through politics, but instead as a journalist crusading against corruption. His first exposure to the inner workings of the U.S. Senate came not as an elected official, but as a witness before the Kefauver Commission investigating the kind of corruption he exposed in his newspapers in the 1950s.

The memory of Paul Simon as a relentless foe of corruption in government is what comes to mind when considering the theme, One Illinois: Noble Aspiration or Impossible Dream? There are many political issues which divide us. But one thing that we should all be able to agree upon is the principle that government should serve all its citizens fairly and ethically. Just as Paul Simon fought against corruption in government decades ago, we too should be able to come together as One Illinois to demand a higher standard from our public leaders and elected officials.

Illinois has seen the high cost of government corruption in recent decades. We have seen it at the federal, state and local levels, and we have seen that it knows no party labels and no geographic boundaries. Every Illinoisan has paid a price for this corruption; whether it is a financial price through inefficient use of taxpayer money, a personal price through an inability to get the quality of services we expect from our government, or a psychological price from the loss of trust in our leaders that occurs every time we hear about a new indictment or a new investigation.

At a time when our state and our nation are facing a public health emergency on a scale unheard of in recent memory, that question of trust in our leaders is especially critical. On an issue on which we need to cast aside some of our divisions and work together as One Illinois, it is harmful to have that mistrust of government officials and public institutions always lurking in the background.

I agree that we face a great number of challenges in finding a common identity and a sense of shared destiny in our large and diverse state. To some extent that is proper: a state as large and diverse as ours should have a diverse set of opinions and beliefs. After all, a healthy society cannot survive without some dissent and disagreement.

But I also believe that there are issues and beliefs that can bring us together, and one of these is the belief, which Paul Simon held and fought for his entire adult life, that government should be free from corruption and that everyday Illinoisans should be able to trust their elected officials and their public institutions.

Good people on different sides of different issues will continue to argue enthusiastically for their positions. That is the nature of a free society and a constitutional republic. The belief that our public officials can work together to create positive change is what drives us to debate these issues so passionately. We believe the energy we put into these debates is worth it because we also believe that it will drive our policymakers to come to a resolution that best serves the public. What makes us One Illinois, and what makes this concept such a Noble Aspiration as opposed to an Impossible Dream, is our shared faith in our institutions and our leaders.

Public corruption undermines that shared faith, and once shaken it is hard to restore. To heal our many divisions in Illinois, we need to start somewhere, and I believe this is a good starting point. Standing up courageously, as Paul Simon did, and cleaning up our government by fighting corruption is a cause all Illinoisans can get behind. We can restore our rattled faith in our government and our institutions and repair the distrust and discord that characterize so much of our society today. If we can come together on this one important issue and produce results, then perhaps the other issues that divide us will not seem so challenging.

Through pursuit of this goal we can confidently assert that the idea of One Illinois is not an Impossible Dream, but is a Noble Aspiration.

Sincerely,

JIM DURKIN
House Republican Leader
Remember, Illinois has played a key role in producing two of the greatest unifiers in history. Our differences should be celebrated in coming together, not used to divide us. But while we are one state, we are not one, singular identity. We are an amazing diversity of individual cultures and communities, joined by the boundaries of this great state called Illinois. The reality is that, like it or not, we are one state. There is only reality.

As for the question, I’ll answer it by stating my belief that there is no noble aspiration or impossible dream. If only life and politics could be more like sports.

Thankfully, stereotypes aren’t reality. If only life and politics could be more like sports.

Southern Illinois folk would never set foot in Chicago. University of Illinois fans would never deign to acknowledge SIU. And surely Chicagoans have better things to do like liberally spend everyone else’s hard earned tax dollars than support Southern Illinois. None of this would seem probable if one believed stereotypes. Because if you believed stereotypes...

SIU – SIU”, propelling the underdog Southern Illinois Salukis to an upset win over twenty-first ranked Georgia in the NCAA basketball tournament. The pro-SIU crowd was so loud announcers repeatedly noted that the unranked Salukis had essentially been handed a home tournament game in Chicago. Make no mistake, there were plenty of Southern Illinois faithful at the United Center. But it also was filled with University of Illinois fans, who had stuck around after their earlier game, along with basketball fans from across the city and region to watch SIU play. And surely Chicagoans have better things to do like liberally spend everyone else’s hard earned tax dollars than support Southern Illinois. Thankfully, stereotypes aren’t reality.

Fast forward to 2020 and the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute is initiating a conversation about who we are as Illinoisans. I’ve been asked to weigh in on this year’s Renewing Illinois Summit theme: One Illinois: Noble Aspiration or Impossible Dream?

There is perhaps no place better to have a discussion about unifying Illinois than Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, a school that for generations has lured students in part because it is as far away as you can be and still get in-state tuition. A place where random roommates from places like Rolling Meadows and Oblong have the opportunity to learn that they might have more in common than one would think and then grow as individuals by having the chance to discuss their differences. As for the question, I’ll answer it by stating my belief that there is no noble aspiration or impossible dream. There is only reality.

The reality is that, like it or not, we are one state. But while we are one state, we are not one, singular identity. We are an amazing diversity of individual cultures and communities, joined by the boundaries of this great state called Illinois. Our differences should be celebrated in coming together, not used to divide us.

Similarly, the purpose of this summit is to bring different people together to spur conversations about shared solutions. Not everyone will have the same opinions. There will and should be disagreement. But you’re not going to kick anyone out. You’re going to work through disagreements until you reach the point that a majority of you agree on a path forward.

In democracy you will find that the hero of public discourse is the person with ideas. Solutions are inherently hard. But complaining isn’t a plan, and blame isn’t a solution.

The reality is that internal conflict, and moving past it, has always been part of our history. In our frontier days, what is now Old Shawneetown was a bustling economic powerhouse along the Ohio River. Legend has it the community’s financial leaders declined to invest in a northern development known as Chicago because they considered it too far away from Southern Illinois to ever be successful. And there’s no shortage of media coverage over the years playing up differences between Chicago and the rest of the state, or sometimes the rest of the state and itself.

In 1994, a Crain’s Chicago Business reporter set out to explore how different regions of the state felt about the governor’s race, which featured Dawn Clark Netsch, a Democrat from Chicago, and Jim Edgar, a Republican from Charleston.

“They’re both from the North, I believe. That won’t help us too much,” said one Southern Illinois businessman. And that leads us back to the danger of stereotypes, which stretches far beyond perceived regional differences in Illinois. Too often we see communities and people typecast for analytical expediency. Elections years are the worst.

Women, minorities, rural residents, urban residents and others are all lumped into oversimplified blocs for the sake of headlines and argument. But again, reality is far more complex.

Kevin Williams, the Chicago Tribune’s music and visual arts editor, recently took to Twitter after seeing And President Ronald Reagan, who famously told Russia’s leader to “tear down this wall” and thereby spurred the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the re-unification of Germany. Let me share my perspective on this. I’m president of the Illinois Senate and as such the leader of the Illinois Senate Democrats. We have 40 Democratic members in the 59-seat Senate. If I tried to force one identity on my 39 colleagues, it would be an exercise in futility. Illinois Senate Democrats are men and women. We are Caucasian, African American, Latino and Asian. We’ve worked as engineers, social workers, lawyers, teachers, reporters, police officers, and a Super Bowl linebacker. Like everyone else, we have different opinions on guns, abortion, and taxes. We’re prone to glorious disagreements. But we also have shared values, such as recognizing, protecting and advancing the rights of working men and women and the role of public education in solving problems and improving the quality of life in all communities.

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Kevin Williams, the Chicago Tribune’s music and visual arts editor, recently took to Twitter after seeing
more than his fill about the “black vote” in recent primaries.

“As a black boomer, let me help. Not everything is about race for a great many black folks. We aren’t a monolith, but instead a collection of individual voters with individual wants and needs, just like any other voter. Political analysis will go a long way when it gets this,” Williams tweeted.

The suggestion I would make to you, and one that I hope you will put into practice at this summit, is to be an individual whose intellectual beliefs allow you to roam from one group to another based on knowledge and expertise.

Be smart enough to learn from others.

Base your beliefs on facts and defend them with intelligence and information, as opposed to fear and emotion.

Be open to having your beliefs challenged and your viewpoint expanded.

Because, in the end, there’s only us, the people of Illinois, and we will get through our challenges like we always have, together.

DON HARMON
Illinois Senate President
“Why are we connected with these yahoos, any-way?” asked Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mike Royko in 1981. “Chicagoans have little in common with the small town bumpkins and simple-minded rustics who make up most of the rest of Illinois.”

Royko’s mean-spirited depiction of Illinoisans who lived outside of the Windy City created a furor throughout the state. Editorial writers of newspapers from Galena to Cairo lashed back at the provincial views expressed by the Sun-Times writer, and angry lawmakers defended their aggrieved constituents in fiery speeches on the floor of the General Assembly.

The controversy, which soon subsided, reflected a long-standing history of regional antagonism in the state present since territorial days and persisting into the twenty-first century.

An early north-south division developed into an uneasy urban-rural split based upon Chicago’s phenomenal growth in the nineteenth century; rampant suburbanization created a sprawling metropolitan region in Cook County and the surrounding area that dwarfed lesser urban places in the rest of the state. The remarkable population increase in Chicago and surrounding suburbs, coupled with modest increases or even losses elsewhere in the state, altered the political balance of power in Springfield.

Residents of Rockford, Peoria, East St. Louis, and other stagnant communities grumbled about the decline of representation they suffered in the state legislature. As well, Chicago’s economic successes often contrasted with the halting progress in less prosperous parts of Illinois. Issues have changed over the decades, but the regional tensions traceable back to the original era of European settlement have stubbornly remained as serious barriers to state unity. A full understanding of the regional fissures begins with historical context.

One year after Illinois became a state in 1818, most of its people resided south of the new capital city of Vandalia. The vast majority of newcomers had arrived from the Upland South (Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia). Few settlers ventured into northern Illinois, the last area of the state in which significant numbers of Indians roamed and still constituted a threat to the advancing white population.
The nascent settlement that became Chicago amounted to nothing more at that time than a jumble of cabins, trading posts, and stables. With the forcible removal of the last Indian tribes and improved transportation came a dramatic increase in the numbers of immigrants in the 1830s. Regional differences in settlement patterns endured. Southerners journeyed to Illinois along the Ohio River and the National Road, a wide thoroughfare suitable for wagon traffic that originated in Cumberland, Maryland and ended in Vandalia.

After the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, immigrants followed the Great Lakes to Illinois from New York, Pennsylvania, and the New England states. The Erie Canal also linked the Atlantic seaboard to Chicago, which became the distribution center for manufactured goods to a vastly expanding midwestern frontier. Before the Civil War, the pattern of a commercial Chicago and an agricultural downstate was crystalizing.

Population growth in the state’s northern section exploded in the 1830s and 1840s, triggering a series of cultural conflicts. People in the southern reaches of Illinois warily eyed the new arrivals, who boasted of their enviable affluence and superior education. The Yankees believed in hard work, thrift, order, and progress; they took pride in being aggressive businessmen. Sober and industrious, they labored long hours and advocated higher taxes to improve the commonwealth. They viewed the denizens of southern Illinois as lazy and decadent, attributing the primitive frontier conditions throughout much of the state to the indolence of the inhabitants. “One thing is certain,” wrote a northern settler in 1850, “where New England emigrants do not venture, improvements, social, agricultural, mechanical or scientific, rarely flourish.”

Imbued with a sense of altruism and eager to perfect themselves and others, many of these northerners embraced a variety of reform causes ranging from abolitionism to temperance. Accustomed to living at a slower pace, seemingly less determined to succeed financially, and indifferent—if not openly hostile—to formal education, most southerners possessed values typical of their Scotch-Irish or Anglo-Celtic roots. They viewed Yankees as greedy, grasping peddlers who could not be trusted. Being “Yankeed,” southerners said, meant to be swindled by a fast-talking salesman from the big city.

Often distrustful of institutions, southerners felt overwhelmed by the number and influence of schools, government agencies, and voluntary associations established in Illinois by transplanted northerners. Perhaps worst of all, the moralistic Yankees perpetrated a kind of cultural imperialism whereby they sought to remake other people in their own image—an image that southerners suspected to be more illusory than real. High-minded Yankee rhetoric masked base motives, sons of the South believed, as moral crusades often conveniently allowed reformers to advance their own economic interests.

Along with the influx of Yankees came waves of migrants from foreign countries. In the early years of immigration, many foreigners congregated in the settled tracts of southern Illinois such as in St. Clair, Madison, and Edwards Counties across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, but increasingly they established residences in the northern part of the state—especially in the Chicago region where unprecedented industrial growth created jobs and economic opportunity. As multitudes of Poles, Slavs, Scandinavians, Italians, Greeks, and Jews arrived in the great ethnic cauldron on Lake Michigan, many downstaters recoiled at the heterogeneity they encountered during their infrequent trips to the Windy City. Bombarded by a variety of languages, sights, and smells in the city’s polyglot neighborhoods, visitors from elsewhere in Illinois saw Chicago as not only alien but threatening. The cultural divide widened throughout the nineteenth century as increasing numbers of the foreign-born were drawn to the metropolitan magnet at the southern tip of Lake Michigan.

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The combustible issue of race added to the tension. History, geography, and demography combined to create an ambiguous legacy for slavery in Illinois. The 1818 constitution forbade human bondage but stopped short of emancipation where the practice already existed. State law prohibited whites from bringing slaves into Illinois for the purpose of manumission. The early settlement of the state by so many southerners reinforced support for slavery, a condition altered somewhat but not eradicated by the increasing Yankee immigration. In the years before the Civil War, a robust abolition movement developed in Illinois, the Underground Railroad thrived, and the fledging anti-slavery Republican party grew rapidly.

At the same time, however, pockets of pro-slavery sentiment remained throughout the state and especially in the southernmost area. In the 1860 presidential election, Abraham Lincoln won just 50.7 percent of the popular vote statewide (approximately 70 percent of ballots in the northern counties and only 20 percent in southern counties). Lincoln’s narrow electoral margin attested to the deep divisions among the state’s residents on the slavery question.

During the Civil War, the Confederate cause attracted many followers in Southern Illinois. In the first months of the conflict, concerns about the loyalty of Illinoisans sympathetic to slavery and secession abounded in Springfield. Pro-slavery forces in Williamson County met in Marion and discussed the formation of a new state that would secede from the United States. The northern red counties (plus a few from the south) were won by Abraham Lincoln. The southern blue counties were won by Stephen Douglas.

The rapid growth of Chicago in the post-Civil War decades amplified the fear and mistrust between the metropolis’ residents and the inhabitants of the rest of the state. The Windy City’s growing reputation as a wicked, worldly refuge for vice, criminality, irreligiosity, and political extremism further alienated downtown defenders of pietism and tradition. Industrialization brought spectacular economic growth and development to the state, but it came unevenly as agriculture increasing lost sway to manufacturing. The chasm widened further as many offspring of rural and small-town Illinois repudiated their humdrum lives on the prairie and left for the bright lights and economic allure of the big city. Disgruntled farmers and village merchants, increasingly isolated as their numbers dwindled, became keenly aware of their declining status in modernizing America. The growth in Illinois of such groups as the Granges, Farmers’ Alliances, and Populist Party, all of which also served an important function as social outlets, underscored the perceived need among farmers for enhanced political representation to protect their endangered financial interests.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, as the population disparities between urban and rural areas continued to widen, the pull of tradition remained strong in central and southern Illinois. The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a hardy revival in rural areas, no more so than in “Bloody Williamson” County where Governor Len Small dispatched the National Guard to reclaim control of local government from the Invisible Empire; twenty men died in full-pitched battles by the time that National Guardsmen withdrew. Offsetting the Chicago electorate’s opposition to prohibition, voters outside of
Cook County provided sufficient majorities to ratify the Eighteenth Amendment. Downstaters scored a notable victory in 1920 by voting overwhelmingly to defeat a revised state constitution that would have redistricted malapportioned legislative districts and granted Chicago several home rule provisions. The rejection of the new constitution safeguarded, at least temporarily, the political power of downstate counties by preserving their disproportionate majorities in the General Assembly.

World War II accelerated many of the trends ongoing in the state for generations. Owing to the effect of the draft and the movement of many men and women away from rural Illinois to work in urban factories, the farm population fell from 978,907 to 759,429 from 1940 to 1945. Fewer farmers faced the need to increase yields to feed Americans and their wartime allies. Workers engaged in agricultural pursuits saw their income triple during the war, but they balked at inflation, the scarcity of consumer goods, rationing, and the shortage of labor that forced them to work much longer hours to maintain production levels. Meanwhile, many farmers resented the benefits won by industrial workers. Thanks to the insatiable demand for war material, men and women readily found manufacturing jobs with generous wages routinely augmented by overtime pay. Factory workers received higher wages, it seemed to rural folk, because labor unions took advantage of the scarcity of consumer goods, rationing, and the shortage of labor that forced them to work much longer hours to maintain production levels.

The decades after the Second World War ushered in spectacular economic growth and an age of mass consumerism, especially in the Chicago metropolitan region.

The conversion of the economy from military hardware to consumer goods went smoothly as industrial output in Illinois ballooned after the war. Approximately three-fourths of the gains in the state’s manufacturing occurred in metropolitan Chicago. At the same time, the postwar advent of the automobile triggered massive suburban growth and transformed the Illinois landscape. Throughout the “collar counties” encircling Chicago–DuPage, Lake, McHenry, Kane, Will, and the unincorporated sections of Cook–bulldozers carved out living spaces for hordes of suburbanites in the postwar decades. As the Chicago metropolitan area metastasized across northeastern Illinois, industry deserted the inner city for greener pastures in adjoining municipalities, other states, and overseas.

Chicago’s share of manufacturing employment in the region fell from 71 percent in 1947 to 54 percent in 1961; less than half of the industrial jobs remained in Chicago in 1965. Soon most commuters were working outside of the city and, according to studies by civil engineers and urban geographers, Chicagoans were driving daily to nearby communities for employment as well. The appearance of massive shopping malls with acres of free parking in outlying areas allowed suburbanites to make their purchases close to home and avoid fatiguing traffic and expensive parking garages in the Loop.

As in previous decades, population grew unevenly in Illinois after World War II. Chicago lost residents, its suburbs recorded huge increases, and the remaining areas of the state experienced moderate growth. The state’s population generally shifted northward from 1950 to 1980, with the metropolitan region around Chicago adding the most people. The populace also became more diverse. The number of whites in Illinois decreased by an estimated 700,000 to 900,000 during the 1970s, while the number of African Americans and Latinos increased by approximately 400,000.

As before, Chicago remained the primary destination in the state for nonwhite immigrants. During the 1960s, the city’s African American population increased by 300,000, and more blacks lived in Cook County than in any other county in the nation. The Mexican presence in Chicago, stimulated by the bracero program in World War II that recruited several thousand temporary workers, increased steadily and remained the largest group of Spanish-speaking immigrants, followed by Puerto Ricans and other groups from Central America and the Caribbean. By the end of the twentieth century, people of color in Chicago were joining the suburban exodus; for the most part, blacks moved into southern suburbs such as Dolton, Robbins, and Harvey, while Latinos moved westward into such places as Cicero, Aurora, and Elgin. Long the most heterogeneous portion of Illinois, the Chicago metropolitan region was becoming even more so in contrast to downstate counties.

As Illinois approached the millennium, two key demographic developments altered the character of the state. First, beginning in the years immediately following the Second World War and lasting in the last decades of the century, the vast suburban region encompassing Chicago surged in population, wealth, and political influence. The percentage of the state’s people residing in the collar counties rose steadily from 1980 to 2010. (See Table 1). No longer merely an important but secondary force existing in the shadow of the metropolis, the conglomeration of suburbs surrounding Chicago became instead the dominant geopolitical region in the state. Second, the emigration of whites and the simultaneous influx of people from other nations changed the racial mix of the state. Between 1970 and 2000, more than a million whites left Illinois while hundreds of thou-

| Table 1 — Population Growth in Collar Counties, 1940-2010 |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| County      | 1940      | 1960      | 1970      | 2000      | 2010      |
| Cook        | 5,258,653 | 5,105,067 | 5,378,741 | 5,194,675 |
| DuPage      | 658,833   | 781,666   | 904,151   | 916,924   |
| Lake        | 440,372   | 516,418   | 644,356   | 793,462   |
| Will        | 324,460   | 357,313   | 502,266   | 677,560   |
| Kane        | 278,403   | 317,471   | 404,119   | 515,269   |
| McHenry     | 147,897   | 183,241   | 260,077   | 308,760   |
| TOTAL       | 7,103,624 | 7,261,176 | 8,094,720 | 8,316,650 |
| Illinois    | 11,425,516| 11,430,502| 12,419,289| 12,836,032|

Source: All population data are taken from U.S. census reports.
sands of immigrants from Latin America and Asia replaced them. During the 1990s, for example, the Latino population of the state grew from 904,446 to 1,530,262 (a 69 percent increase), and the Asian population grew from 282,569 to 423,603 (a 50 percent increase).

Suburban sprawl, never a phenomenon caused solely by white flight, affected downstate communities as well as Chicago. According to the Illinois House of Representatives’ Smart Growth Task Force, the pace of metropolitan growth in some central and southern Illinois cities nearly equaled the more heralded rates in the northeastern region of the state. Cookie-cutter residential developments, strip malls, office buildings, parking lots, and chain stores became commonplace in the outlying areas of Springfield, Peoria, Bloomington-Normal, and Champaign-Urbana, and along the Route 13 corridor stretching from Carbondale to Marion. New suburban developments—with curvilinear streets, cul-de-sacs, and homes with attached multi-car garages—replaced corn and soybean fields as they crept outward from existing municipalities. Local businessmen and enthusiastic boosters endorsed growth as a sign of progress and touted their hometowns’ enhanced cosmopolitanism.

The notorious conditions of the inner-city poor in Chicago notwithstanding, Southern Illinois communities contained the highest percentages of indigents. In 1990 Alexander County reported that 263 of every 1,000 residents received public aid, while Pulaski County counted 225 residents per 1,000 on welfare; Cook County listed 212. Desperate to attract revenue-producing businesses, downstate communities vied for industries that they would have shunned decades earlier. Small towns competed to attract prisons, for example, more of which were built during the 1990s than at any time in history. Towns even battled to have landfills and garbage incinerators located in their backyards.

Economic uncertainty beset Illinois agriculture too. The disappearance of farmland, ongoing in modest fashion for generations, accelerated in the last three decades of the twentieth century because of paving, flooding, strip mining, and other forms of development. Between 1981 and 1996, the state lost nearly 600,000 arable acres—about 4.4 acres every hour for fifteen years.

Political inequality has become glaring. Chicago Democrats controlled about 50 percent of the Illinois electorate in mid-twentieth century, with suburban and downstate voters commanding the other half. By 2010, voters in the six collar counties outnumbered their counterparts in the remaining ninety-six counties by a two-to-one margin. Downstaters have long rued their powerlessness in the state capital, lamenting the damage to democratic decision-making when majority interests drowned out the voices of an embattled minority.

The entrenched divisions between a flourishing north and a less affluent south and between urban and rural environments, worrisome in their potential implications for the future, can best be understood as the natural outcome of abiding historical forces in Illinois. Yet even with a solid grasp of the past’s determinative impact on the present, the search remains for effective policies to address the formidable barriers to achieving One Illinois.
We can only imagine what the unbroken prairie of Illinois looked like in the early 1800s. Green and golden grasses taller than a human went on for miles. Not a tree in sight. Beautiful and awesome. And terrifying, too.

Anyone diving blindly into that prairie would be quickly engulfed by it. In the middle of it, they wouldn’t be able to see more than a few feet in any direction and, annoyed by the heat and buzzing flies, they could easily become disoriented. If they lost the way, they found trouble.

So, anyone attempting such a journey was wise to stay on the trail, if there was one, and keep an eye of the distant highland.

Elkhart Hill isn’t the tallest point in the state. Not even close. But it rises 170 feet above the flat prairie, making it one of the most prominent natural features in central Illinois, and it acted as an important landmark in those days, a sort of beacon for those trying to navigate across the vast sea of grass.

Native American trails led to Elkhart Hill. It was a landmark on the route that connected the fertile Mississippi River valley and the hunting grounds at Peoria Lake. That route later would become known as the Edwards Trace. The hill was alternately home to the Kickapoo and a powerful cattle baron, a governor and homesteaders. Lincoln slept there. Wagon roads and stagecoach routes came this way. Then rails and paved roads, the Chicago & Alton Railroad and Route 66.

From the top of the hill today, you can almost make out the buildings in downtown Springfield, twenty miles southwest. Somewhere over there is the zinc dome of the Illinois State Capitol, which is fitting, because in many ways the state developed around this promontory.

Elkhart Hill was formed about 10,000 years ago by the great sculptor of landscapes, the glacier. As that mass of ice scraped across what would be Illinois, it leveled most of what lay in its path, but it also created ridges and hills as it froze and thawed, advanced and retreated. Elkhart Hill is one of those creations, as are the ridges that ring Lake Michigan and the till plains and terminal moraines in central Illinois.

As the climate warmed, the glacial melt waters came in torrents, carving valleys and setting the course of the rivers that now flow through and around the state. The areas untouched by the glaciers – notably, the southern tip now defined by the Shawnee National Forest, and the region around Galena in the far northwest – were molded like it had been dusted in snow.

Indeed, some of the roads we travel today – Illinois Route 1 and U.S. 150 – were etched first by the herd.

The humans who tracked those animals into Illinois were chert-chippers and stone-tool makers, most likely descendants of the people who crossed the land bridge from Asia. They settled first in small clusters under rock outcroppings, and then, once they adopted agricultural practices, in larger groups out in the open. They developed trading networks, made pottery, and perfected watercraft. They built mounds. And they migrated across the land, sometimes but not always in the hunt for meat.

The trails they left are faint, and the evidence of their existence is fragmentary – weapon points, flakes of chert, and telltale tools found here and there. But from the location of its archaeological discovery to the location of its geological origin, a stone tool can leave a trail distinct enough to suggest migratory routes of the people who used that tool.

In the early 2000s, archaeologists discovered a cache of stone points near the American Bottom across from St. Louis. The distinctive stone used to make those points, almost 12,000 years ago, could have come only from one quarry, in what is now northwest Indiana. It is curious and perhaps not at all coincidental that if you drew a line from the archaeological dig to that quarry, it would match the route of the Kaskaskia-Detroit Trail, which was in use as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Indigenous people, French fur traders and American settlers used the same route.

One culture gives way to another, and while the faces change, the routes sometimes do not.

In eastern Kankakee County, a subsistence farmer who goes by the name Basu was plowing one of his fields a few years ago when he hit a rock. It was oddly shaped and smooth. He didn’t think much of it, but then his plow struck another. Before long, he had a pile of prehistoric stone tools, the heads of axes and hoes. A heavy rain followed the plowing, and it exposed an array of smaller stones, arrowheads and scraping tools. The field looked like it had been dusted in snow.

The artifacts are hundreds of years old, and their sheer number suggests that his field might have been the site of a village or a workshop used by people prior to European contact and the introduction of metal tools and weapons.

Basu’s field is bordered by an abandoned spur of the Chicago & Eastern Illinois Railroad, which was built around 1900 atop a known Potawatomi trail. That trail served the Potawatomi prior to 1830, and local historians suspect the trail was also used by the Underground Railroad.

Examples of this sort of repurposed route exist all over Illinois.
The base layer of Illinois Route 3 is prehistoric. Parts of that route, along the bluffs above the American Bottom, have been in use continuously since the mound-building era. The French improved the road, and American settlers traveled it between Cahokia and Kaskaskia, the state’s first capital.

Interstate 70, between St. Louis and Vincennes, runs parallel to U.S. 40, its predecessor, and they both shadow the old National Road, which was the nation’s first federally funded highway, the vision of Thomas Jefferson. The National Road, which reached Vandalia in the late 1830s, funneled thousands of settlers into Illinois from the East.

When the lead mines opened near Galena, hundreds of prospectors, miners and speculators streamed up to the northwest corner of the state. It was the nation’s first mineral rush. At the time, all roads in Illinois seemed to angle off toward Galena. When the Illinois Central Railroad was first laid out, it ran north from Cairo to Galena. The Chicago Branch of the Illinois Central was an afterthought. All of these roads carried immigrants from Kentucky and Tennessee, Virginia and the Carolinas to Galena.

People came to Illinois for many reasons. They came to mine lead, to process salt, and to dig coal. They came to turn sod. They came to work, and they came for freedom. And all of those reasons come down to one thing. As long as hope lies at the end of the road, people will load the wagon and head that way.

Another prominent corridor runs east-west on the north side of the Illinois River between LaSalle and Joliet. Through the years, this corridor has held the Great Sauk Trail, a stagecoach road, the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad and paved roads, including U.S. Route 6 and Interstate 80. It also contains the route that had the most profound impact on the settlement and development of the state – the Illinois & Michigan Canal.

The canal was first envisioned in 1673 by French explorer Louis Jolliet. He was introduced to the Chicago Portage by Native Americans, who had been using the portage between the Des Plaines and Chicago rivers for hundreds of years. The portage connected the Illinois River and Lake Michigan, the two bodies of water that lend their names to the I&M Canal.

The canal, which was built between 1837 and 1848, created a continuous water route between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. The commercial promise of that canal opened the floodgates to immigration into Illinois and birthed the city of Chicago. Laborers, speculators, merchants and manufacturers, people from the East Coast and from all over the world poured into the city, whose population rose from about 100 in 1830 to about 4,500 in 1840. In ten more years, with the canal finally open, Chicago had more than 30,000 residents and it was the world’s largest grain port.

The canal was ninety-seven miles long, and besides its terminal cities, Chicago to LaSalle, it gave rise to a dozen other towns along its length – Ottawa, Seneca, Morris, Marseilles, Joliet, and Lockport among them. When the canal reached a place called Athens, workers struck a thick bed of hard limestone. It stalled construction. And a town grew in place. The town was known as Athens, later to be renamed Lemont.

The I&M Canal exists today as a series of long pools and dry ditches that run alongside a larger and more proficient system of canals and channels, locks and dams, floodwalls and levees, all of which comprises the Illinois Waterway, an integral link in the nation’s inland waterway system.

As Lemont grew and the laborers – primarily Irish Catholics – settled in, they used the limestone to build a church at the bluff. St. James at Sag Bridge is constructed with Athens Marble. It wasn’t easy, because the stone had to be hauled up to the building site. The laborers worked on the church on their one day off, lugging rock up the bluff by mule and wagon, by hand. Their reward from the parish was to be assigned burial plots in the church cemetery. The more rock you hauled up the hill, the closer your limestone tombstone was to the church.

These Irish immigrants came to Illinois for a better life and, they prayed, for a better place in heaven.

Unlike other routes, whose impact is weighed by who – hunters, war parties, explorers, settlers – traveled them, the I&M’s significance has less to do with who and how many it conveyed. The canal’s significance is in the idea of the canal itself. The I&M brought people to work on it, not to travel in boats, and it held the promise of commerce and the hopes of industry, the faith of merchants. And Chicago, for more than 100 years, beckoned people from all over the world.

The rich ethnic neighborhoods comprise a quilt-pattern of diversity that is Chicago. There are large Polish, Irish, Latino and Black neighborhoods. There’s China Town, Little Italy, Greek Town, and great pockets of German, Eastern European and Asian cultures still flourishing in the city. These people came to Chicago by many different routes – by lake steamer, by wagon, by train and by air – but if it’s not for the idea of that canal, they may never have come.

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The I&M was the last great project of the canal-building era in America, but it wasn’t the last...
canal built in Illinois. The Hennepin Canal, which was planned about the same time as the I&M, was meant to extend the state’s canal system straight west to the Mississippi River. It took off from the Illinois River at the mouth of Bureau Creek and the town of Hennepin and led to the Mississippi at the mouth of the Rock River. Construction was delayed for many reasons — an economic recession, the Civil War — and by the time it was complete, it was already obsolete. The Hennepin moved freight locally until about 1950, and it functions today as a narrow 100-mile state park and recreational area.

Like the Hennepin, not all routes preserve their original function, and some aren’t even visible on the landscape today. Gone, for the most part, is the Edwards Trace, the Goshen Road, the Kellogg Trail between Peoria and Galena. Gone, too, are so many railroads, whose passing can be glimpsed in abandoned rail beds, long low ridges lined with trees cutting across the countryside. Each of these was significant in its day, and each still commands at least a footnote in our collective story.

Some routes were only passageways into and through Illinois. The Cherokee Trail of Tears, the Potawatomi Trail of Death, Black Hawk’s Trail, the many routes of the Underground Railroad, the corridors for the Great Southern Migration. There are real roads, rails and waterways associated with these migrations — the Illinois Central, Illinois Route 146, U.S. 51, Route 66, U.S. 36, the Illinois River — but in terms of shaping the State of Illinois, the lasting legacy of these routes lies in our conscience, not on our landscape.

Near present-day Rock Island, the Sauk Indians lived in a vast village called Saukenuk. It was the starting point of the Great Sauk Trail, which ran eastward, skirted the southern reach of Lake Michigan, and headed into the territories and toward the other Great Lakes beyond. Like many tribes, the Sauk lived in sync with the seasons. They planted their hilltop fields in the spring, left on the summer hunt and to gather material for crafts and village life. They returned in the fall for harvest, and left again for the winter hunt. They shared the fields and the pastures. The land, like their culture, was held in common.

As Illinoisans today, we hold much the same in common — our landforms, our rivers, our time together, our past. All of it is a part of our collective story, a story we are still writing.

We and our ancestors may have traveled different roads to get here, but here we are. We all saw something in Illinois that drew us here and kept us here. We saw something rising up from the prairie, that vast sea of grass, beckoning us, calling us home.
The plan was to travel to the southern tip of Illinois and report back. The plan was also to take our sweet time getting there, because actually the plan was not so much to see the bottom of Illinois as to travel as much of Illinois as possible in a week, zigzagging across the state on our way south from Chicago, sticking to back roads and small towns, avoiding interstates and chain hotels, hitting random roadside attractions. A road trip. A highly subjective State of the State. Our final stop: a tiny unincorporated community called America. The destination was arbitrary, of course, picked for its name and convenient location at the far extremity of the state, but maybe it would acquire meaning down the road—after all, Lucy (the photographer) and I (the writer) were embarking on a journey deep into the American heartland in search of all the things that make a Midwestern road trip great: pretty river towns, quaint main streets, mom-and-pop restaurants, wide-open vistas, and all manner of unexpected curiosities and finds.

At first, I thought I might not be qualified for this. I have only lived in Chicago a few years, am not even American, and am actually Parisian to the point that I didn’t have a driver’s license until a week before this assignment. Who was I to write about Illinois? I didn’t even know there was a forest downstate, and hills, and people who made wine on them. But then a quick survey of my born-and-raised Chicago friends revealed that they hadn’t known about the forest, either, or the archaeological site on the Mississippi, or the many-million-year-old sandstone formations shaped like camels. When shown a picture of those formations (Garden of the Gods in the Shawnee National Forest), they all said, “Wow! That’s Illinois?”

Simply wanting to make sure I had the demonym right, that an Illinoisan was indeed called an Illinoisan, I asked one of those friends, a lifelong Illinoisan, for confirmation. He thought about it a second. “I guess so,” he said. I had to turn to the web for certainty. Maybe I was qualified for this trip after all.
Day 1: Chicago to Sheffield
125 miles

Lucy’s Honda Fit refuses to start on the Monday morning of our scheduled departure. She seems unfazed and makes a decisive move on the spot: renting a Jeep Renegade for the week. All I knew about Lucy before this point was that she is a photographer and shares a birthday with my husband. I now add “good in a crisis” to my list.

A couple of hours southwest of Chicago, driving through Troy Grove (avoiding major highways—you can set your GPS to do that)—mostly means that you’ll drive along the main street of every small town on the way, we come across Chubby’s, a family restaurant that claims to serve the world’s largest ham sandwich. Largest in weight? Height? Girth? Amount of ham enclosed? It will remain a mystery. Closed Mondays. There’s a part of me, the French part, the one I’ll be trying to suppress on this trip, that is glad about the “Closed” sign. After all, they claim it is the largest, not the best.

We stop in Princeton for lunch at Spoons, a “fresh, friendly, foodie-approved” restaurant and bar, where pretty much everything is spoon-themed, from the art on the walls to the salt-and-pepper holder made of bent spoons. I order the soup of the day (Greek egg-lemon) and the “chef’s favorite” (a Moroccan stew). Such a random combination of international cuisines in northern Illinois gives pause but turns out to be excellent.

Reading about the history of the place on the menu, I learn that Spoons is purported to be haunted by the ghosts of all the men who used to drink and play pool here back in the day. Even though the pool tables are long gone, it isn’t unusual, apparent-ly, to hear the sound of balls being racked up now and again. I tell Lucy about it, and about the number of ghost stories I came across while doing research for our trip. Many Midwestern states have guides to haunted locales—Haunted Missouri, Ghostly Tales of Iowa, Wisconsin’s Most Haunted—but I doubt they take their ghosts as seriously as Illinois does. There’s a real obsession with haunting here. I read about haunted schools, haunted mansions, haunted hotels where it isn’t rare to hear laughter and water splashing and to see quickly evaporating footprints at the edge of empty-for-decades swimming pools. Lucy turns a shade paler. Shocked that I’ve brought up haunting unprompted, she tells me about her own ghost, which turns the lights on at night in her Logan Square apartment.

We stop in Sheffield (population 926) for the night. We’re staying at the Chestnut Street Inn, a bed and breakfast whose lobby I pause to study: Moroccan rugs, a black-and-white picture of Celine Dion, some full-color pictures of Celine Dion, a Star Trek still, and, next to that, a framed letter signed by Julia Child thanking its recipient, a Ms. Rosenkot-ter, for sharing her method for hard-boiling eggs.

In my room, a thick binder awaits, presenting the innkeepers (Jeff and Monika Sudakov, husband and wife), their house, every object in it. Leafing through the binder, I find out that Monika’s nickname is Mini Julia, because of her love for Julia Child (“juliachild” is the B&B’s Wi-Fi password). I find out that I can pick from a catalog of over 1,200 movies in both VHS and DVD formats. I find out, going over the list, that Jeff and Monika’s taste in film is quite eclectic (ranging from The Deer Hunter to Mrs. Doubtfire, two movies I happen to love in very different ways).

I find out a framed Céline Dion autograph comes with a story, one involving a fortuitous encounter at a pro golf tournament. I find out that Jeff studied musical theater, performed on cruises for a time, was a let dancer for 14 years in Southern California. I find out a million other things, but listing them would turn this into an article about Jeff and Monika. There probably is material for a whole book, in fact, though Jeff thinks it’s sort of defy the rules of character coherence I live by as a fiction writer. That is, they wouldn’t be believable if put in a novel. They did too much. Luckily, they are real people. As such, they don’t have to make a choice between being hard core Céline Dion fans and having read all of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

At dinner, I ask to borrow a copy of Monika’s thesis to read that night. She’s a little surprised at the request but obliges. I keep it by my side as Jeff serves us dinner on the sun porch. The meal is stellar: pota-to-leek soup, a filet mignon cooked to perfection, a crème brûlée Monika is apparently (and justifiably) famous for. Did I mention that the Chestnut Street Inn has been recognized by BedandBreakfast.com as one of the top 10 bed and breakfasts in the world for food? Of course it has.

I ask our innkeepers about their travels. Monika would like to go back to Morocco one day, sure, but there are other places she’d like to see first. And traveling abroad gets hard sometimes because “Céline gets in the way,” as she puts it. Monika tries to see Céline Dion in Las Vegas at least every couple of years. Later, back in my room, I start reading Monika’s thesis. I’m not surprised that it is good. At this point, I can’t imagine Monika doing anything badly.

Once I turn all the lights off for the night, I remember what silence is. The last time I heard a similar degree of it was years ago, at my grandparents’ home in rural France. A silence so deep you know you’re going to start having auditory hallucinations sooner or later. A silence that reminds you of the difference between quiet and peaceful, of how a city silence can be the opposite of peaceful, actually, merely a wait for the drunken argument to come, the siren in the distance. I fall asleep immediately, but I wake up at exactly 4 a.m., thinking about Lucy’s ghost.
Day 2: Sheffield to Pittsfield
194 miles

Tuesday is mostly spent driving past silos and churches and roadside cemeteries on Illinois Route 40. At first, we slow down as we pass the cemeteries, and sometimes Lucy stops to take pictures. We think the preponderance of cemeteries is unusual, but after a couple of days on the road, it will become clear that the roadside is just where people are buried in Illinois.

As the crow flies, we’re only about a hundred miles from Chicago, but I couldn’t feel any farther from home. All that vacant space, the farms, the painted barns. Every time I see a barn, I think of Don DeLillo’s _White Noise_ and its “most photographed barn in America.” That’s what happens when you’re a bookworm who doesn’t travel much: Your brain finds fictional references to the actual places you’re seeing. Because I love movies as well, David Lynch’s _The Straight Story_ comes to mind. The endless cornfields, the creeks, the cute little bridges. Every small town a weird oasis. Every car that passes you, an event.

As the designated navigator on this trip, I’m painfully aware of all the towns we don’t get to drive through, towns whose names are full of promise. We will not drive through Time, Magnet, Etna, Paradise, Alhambra, or Eldorado. We’ll see Funkhouser, though, and Marblehead, and Equality. I have to come to terms with the fact that one can’t see them all.

Though our plan is to avoid cities, we still end up briefly in Springfield for a bite to eat and a look at the capitol. It seems important to stop there somehow, even just for an hour, to see if we can gather important information about the state Springfield is supposed to represent. Every person we meet there, though, is confused by our project. “There’s not much to see around here,” I’m told. “Have you considered doing the same road-trip thing, but, like, in another state?”

Sixty-eight miles west, in Pittsfield, we check into the William Watson Hotel, and I take about 40 brochures to peruse in my room. I knew that “Land of Lincoln” is the state slogan, but I hadn’t grasped just how serious the whole thing is. Back in Princeton, I grabbed a brochure about the Ronald Reagan Trail, but that only listed three major stops, while the Abraham Lincoln National Heritage Area spans 42 counties and offers quite a few more activities, from Civil War reenactments to a visit to the very hotel we’re staying at. Lincoln, it seems, used to try cases across the street in the Pike County Courthouse and would come hang out in the lobby to wait for a verdict, pacing the same hardwood floors I’ve just walked on. Actually, I don’t know why I’m imagining him pacing nervously—I figure he was a rather confident type of man.

The brochure for the hotel itself contains lots of information about the area, though it lists more places of worship than restaurants. We arrived in Pittsfield so late (past 8 p.m.) that there’s only one dining option left, the Dome on Madison, and we end up the only customers there. The first thing we notice (the first thing any sighted person notices, I assume) upon entering the restaurant is the group of life-size mannequins in shiny apparel. We’re told by our waitress, Andrea, that the owner of the place likes to dress them differently according to the season. “Some people don’t like them,” she confesses, and we pretend to be surprised. Andrea’s reaction on learning of our road trip couldn’t be more different from the Springfield shrug we got earlier. “You’re living my dream!” she says, and is full of recommendations about where to go and what to see. She tells us that there is a line out the door for the restaurant during hunting season, that everyone hunts around here. “Everyone,” she insists. She also tells Lucy what to take pictures of.
Day 3: Pittsfield to Charleston
355 miles

In the morning, I go on the historical house tour everyone in Pittsfield has told me about. It compris-es 15 sites that boast a connection to Abraham Lin-coln. Free Press, the coffee shop where I was served a perfect café au lait earlier, isn’t part of the tour, but the building that once housed the eponymous Pike County Free Press, is. Its editor, John Nicolay, would become Lincoln’s private secretary during his presidency.

Other than that, the tour ends up being mostly about what Lincoln ate (or didn’t!). At the site of the now-gone Penny Heck’s Bakery: “Lincoln drank cider and ate gingerbread here.” At the Shastid House: “John Greene Shastid and his family entertained Lincoln on his numerous visits to Pittsfield, including one time when Lincoln ate all the pigeons.” In front of the Scanland House: “Mrs. Scanland and her family entertained Lincoln on his numerous visits to Pittsfield, including one time when Lincoln ate all the pigeons.” In front of the Scanland House: “Mrs. Scanland and her family entertained Lincoln on his numerous visits to Pittsfield, including one time when Lincoln ate all the pigeons.”

While finding out about Lincoln’s taste for pigeon and Mrs. Scanland’s shitty powers of foresight, I do not forget to talk to the actual living and breathing citizens of Pittsfield. Donnie owns an antiques shop on Madison Street. As I make the decision to buy from him a collection of 65 marbles in a glass jar, I ask what brought him to antiquing. “I had a bad deal 20 years ago,” he explains, “hurt my back real bad. Couldn’t fish, couldn’t hunt anymore. So I took up coin collecting.” I kind of want to hug Donnie. I don’t usually want to hug people (again: French), but the way he sums up his life for me I find deeply moving. You get the impression that the jump from hunting to coin collecting was not a smooth one. The marbles are on my desk back in Chicago as I write this, and I just realized that my favorite of the bunch, a green one with white specks, the one that may have persuaded me to buy the whole jar, is in fact an old M&M. All 64 of the other, real marbles are still beautiful, though, and I don’t regret my pur-chase for a second.

Zoe, a movie theater that looks as if it’s been closed for decades (a faded sign in the window ad-ver-tises the cost of a ticket as 65 cents). The gorgeous façade is unlike any I’ve seen before: cream, orange, and red tiles arranged to create a slightly psychedelic effect—“late streamline moderne,” I’ll later read it’s called. I’ll also learn that the theater has been closed for as long as I’ve been alive (it shut down in 1987) and used to offer a “cry room.” I’ve never heard of a cry room before. The definition proves disappointing, and altogether more practical than what I had in mind. It’s a soundproof enclosure where you can take your crying baby and still con-tinue watching (or at least hearing) the show you paid to see. I thought it was a place adults could go to hide their tears.

If you visit Quincy, a gorgeous river town north of St. Louis, stop by the visitor center, not only because it is located in the Villa Kathrine (built for a wealthy eccentric named George Metz, who after a trip to Morocco decided he really wanted a Moorish-style palace along the Mississippi), but also because you might be lucky enough to chat with Holly Cain, who works there and will tell you everything there is to know about the area. There’s the architecture, of course, including rows of impressive Victorian hous-es (I can’t recommend a walk up Maine Street high-ly enough), but Holly informs us that if we have a lot of money, there’s the possibility to stay at the near-by Hoffman Mansion, where Justin Bieber is said to have spent one night and left a pair of underwear. When I ask her to point us to an attraction more es (I can’t recommend a walk up Maine Street high-ly enough), but Holly informs us that if we have a lot of money, there’s the possibility to stay at the near-by Hoffman Mansion, where Justin Bieber is said to have spent one night and left a pair of underwear.

That night in Charleston, reached after a long drive east across the state’s wide midriff, a young lady at our inn tells us she’s been blessed, while a young man, whose identity shall remain secret, confesses that “there’s nothing much to do around here except take acid and look at the bed.” I have no acid on me, but just looking at the bed and its surroundings at the McGrady Inn, the B&B where we’re spending the night, is pure joy. The place, a repurposed church, is all dark wood and stained glass. A new silence to get used to.

At Maid-Rite, I, for the first time ever, dip a french fry in a chocolate milkshake. I finally under-stand what the fuss is about. Lucy takes a portrait of three teenagers sitting in the booth behind ours, and when she asks for their email addresses so she can send them the photo, one of them tells her, “I never did too good in school, so I never really need-ed one.” He doesn’t have Facebook, either, “or any of that.” He’s the first millennial I’ve met without a social media account, I think, then realize he’s far too young to be a millennial, that he’s the genera-tion after, the one for which there’s still no agreed-upon name. For a minute, I see the future. And yet that future looks a lot like what I imagine to be America’s past: teens in ironed T-shirts and baseball caps, happy to shoot the breeze over milk shakes in an old-timey diner.
Day 4: Charleston to Grafton

160 miles

We zag west again, back toward the river. Lucy and I remain intensely focused on the theme of our journey. As we drive through Mattoon, just out of Charleston, we listen to a podcast about an incident from the 1940s in which the townspeople claimed to have been terrorized by an unseen anesthetist they called the Mad Gasser of Mattoon. It was a case study in mass hysteria and sensationalist journalism (the Mad Gasser affair, not the podcast). The rest of the time, we listen to Sufjan Stevens’s album, Illinois or to talk shows on local radio stations that ask such pressing questions as “Can an undercover CIA agent still serve God?” (The answer: maybe.)

In Effingham, we pull over to take a picture of America’s largest cross, at the junction of Interstates 57 and 70. Standing beneath the cross, looking at all the cars zipping by, I feel sad for interstate travelers. There’s nothing to see from an interstate, except, I suppose, the occasional cross.

In Livingston, I take about 30 photos of the Pink Elephant Antique Mall. Complete with a life-size pink fiberglass elephant and an ice-cream-cone-shaped ice cream stand, it’s exactly the kind of place a French person travels through America for.

Our destination for the night, the Ruebel Hotel, is, according to its website, “the most famous haunted site” in Grafton. I don’t know who ranks haunted places, or what the methodology is, but this haunting seems to center on guests’ encounters with the ghost of a little girl named Abigail. Some have even managed to capture her “orb” (whatever that is) on camera. “There’s a challenge for you,” I tell Lucy.

Karen insists the ghosts never do anything too awful, but when she recounts a few stories (knives thrown to the ground, faucets left running, floods in the floors below), I think that it sounds pretty bad. Karen proceeds to tell us about ghost saliva: “It shines, it sparkles, and then you step on it and it dissipates immediately.” I take that to be a good thing.

Karen for a dinner recommendation, but our host assures us that everything will be closed. It’s already 6:20 p.m. on a Thursday, the hotel is empty. No one is here to greet us. No note. Just a pair of dead roses on the table.

Karen proceeds to tell us about the hotel. Her tone suggests she might be tired of telling the story. “We read it was haunted,” I say. “Yes,” Karen says. “But they’re friendly ghosts.”

Karen proceeds to tell us that Karen Khamee at the Ruebel Hotel in Grafton.

Visibly eager to change the subject, Lucy asks Karen for a dinner recommendation, but our host insists that everything will be closed. It’s already past 7, she points out. There’s no explanation as to why the restaurant attached to the Ruebel, which according to the website is supposed to be open on Thursday nights, isn’t. I mention that we were considering going to Alton, a bigger town nearby, but Karen says there won’t be anything open there, either. She seems not to want us to leave but offers nothing to make us want to stay.

I think we’ll take our chances,” I say. “Alton is only 15 minutes away.”

“IT’s not 15 minutes,” Karen corrects me. “It’s 22 minutes.”

Lucy and I pretend to deliberate for a few seconds, and then Lucy says, “Well, we’ll give it a shot anyway.” “OK,” Karen says with an air of resignation. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then, maybe.”

And yet Mikey proves to be inexhaustible on the topic of Alton, seems to know everything about it, from how to spot bald eagles to where to get the best coffee, suggesting an affection for the town that goes beyond housing prices. His friendliness is almost enough to make us forget that we have to go back to Grafton for the night. We decide we need to steel ourselves with a couple of beers before bed, and so we stop by the bar next to the hotel. In an appropriately macabre spirit, it’s called the Bloody Bucket.

Lucy and I agree that the atmosphere in the Bloody Bucket is too friendly to be trusted. Surely, the laughing customers playing darts are ghosts as well, intent on trapping us in their undead world.

After a beer and while standing outside smoking a cigarette, I gather the courage to ask another smoking customer if he’s a ghost. He assures me he isn’t (we agree that my pinching his arm would be proof of that) and mentions that he used to work at the Ruebel, did so for 11 years, under the previous ownership. “No ghosts there,” he says. “Just an old building. If you open a window here, a door will slam up there, that’s it.”

After another round or two, I’m convinced the patrons of the Bloody Bucket are living human beings, and I feel ready (and drunk enough) to return to the Ruebel. Still, back in my room, I cover the mirror with a bath towel, just in case. For some reason, I feel more ready to deal with Abigail’s actual ghost than its reflection.
Day 5: Grafton to Alto Pass
151 miles

I wake up with deep red scratches on both my hands. They were made in my sleep, by either Abigail or myself. Who cares? I’m alive. I text Lucy, who replies instantly: alive as well.

I take a stroll behind the hotel to gaze at the Mississippi or, more precisely, at the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers. It’s still early, there’s pink in the sky, seagulls are cruising above drifting sheets of ice. Now I marvel at not only the silence but the curious noises breaking it: dry little cracking and popping sounds emanating from the ice, like those my jaw makes when I’m grinding my teeth. Mikey told me yesterday that on this part of the river at this time of year, all you have to do to see a bald eagle is look up or look down, and he’s right on both counts. One eagle in the sky, another perched on the ice. Its landing caused the seagulls to fly away. Earlier on the trip, I saw deer, a red fox, a bald eagle is look up or look down, and he’s replies instantly: alive as well.

By the time we reach Alto Pass, which stands at the edge of the Shawnee National Forest, the terrain is deeply hilly. We drive up and down slowly, in case deer want to cross the road stupidly, which they tend to want to do, but slowly is how you want to drive through this landscape anyway. It gives you a chance to feel swallowed by the woods.

Alto Pass also happens to sit astride the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail, a 50-mile swath of hilly country dotted with vineyards and wineries. One of them, the Von Jakob Winery & Brewery, also happens to be our B&B for the night. Lucy and I buy a bottle of one of their reds and take it to my room. The wine is dry and drinkable. (Though French, I know nothing about wine, so that description will have to do.)

I notice there’s a whirlpool in my room, so I do what I’ve only ever seen done in movies: drink wine in a Jacuzzi.

Day 6: Alto Pass to Timber Ridge Outpost
84 miles

The next day is the part of our trip where I discover Jimmy Buffett. Lucy plays me his greatest hits on the drive to Makanda, and as I hear him rationalize daytime drinking by concluding “It’s only half past 12 / But I don’t care / It’s 5 o’clock somewhere,” I can’t help noting that if it’s 12:30 where Jimmy Buffet is, it simply can’t be 5 o’clock anywhere, as time zones don’t work in half hours. (I later learn that in Afghanistan, North Korea, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, and several other countries, they actually do, but I doubt that Jimmy Buffet was thinking of those places when he wrote his song.)

In Makanda, a tiny hippie town in the woods, we visit Dave Dardis, a.k.a. the Rainmaker. Dave is a sculptor, and his studio, right on the town’s main drag, is open to the public seven days a week. I’d known what John had meant, I would’ve asked, people really not know what Castro looked like?). If I’d known what John had meant, I would’ve asked, “Why is this square meter of the art studio a shrine to Senator Paul Simon?” I guess I could write the Rainmaker an email and ask, but that seems like cheating. It will be for the next traveler to find out.

Later, after a stop at the Red Onion in Equality for perfect steak kebabs (the restaurant completely lives up to its motto: “Yes! It’s worth the drive!”), we head deeper into the Shawnee National Forest’s 289,000 acres of protected wilderness. We pass thousands of pines and oaks. Of the latter, the forest is home to many kinds—post, blackjack, northern red, scarlet, and white—though the differences between them are more salient in autumn, I’m told. I mostly see just oaks.

Elizabeth Canfarelli, the co-owner of Timber Ridge Outpost & Cabins—a collection of buildings deep in the woods that’s surrounded by a few
sparely furnished (and fully heated) treehouses she rents out to tourists such as us—tells us about all the hiking trails around. The areas known as Cave-in-Rock (which features exactly that) and Garden of the Gods are the most popular, but Rim Rock Trail seems to be the locals’ favorite. Her general store, the Garden of the Gods Outpost, is about the only business in a 20-mile radius. It sells soup and chili, souvenirs, and books about the history of the region, including one on the topic of yet another thing I’d never heard of: the Reverse Underground Railroad. “It’s exactly what it sounds like,” a young employee of the store tells us. Seems this part of Illinois was a way station for free Northern blacks being forcibly returned to slavery in the South. “Today, this is about the best place to live, but it does have a dark, dark history.” She pauses. “Very dark,” she adds, in case she hasn’t been clear. I make a note to read up on the subject later.

It rains all afternoon and night, and in a way, I’m glad for it. I would’ve loved to hike, sure, but sipping coffee, then wine, in a beautiful treehouse, looking at the rain pound on the leaves, my copy of Saul Bel­low’s *Seize the Day* open in front of me, well, that’s pretty damn nice, too.

**Day 7: Timber Ridge Outpost to America**

**73 miles**

Today is the day we see America. It’s also our last day on the road. Lucy and I have to resume our Chicago lives tomorrow, and so, after reaching our destination, we will point our Jeep toward the nearest I-57 on-ramp. The interstate is a great way to travel and see precisely nothing, but that’s what we’ll have to do. Seven days and a thousand miles to get to America, five hours and 365 miles to get home.

But before speeding north, we must first meander just a little farther south, almost as far as you can go before Illinois spits you out into Missouri. As we drive along the most deserted road we’ve been on all week, I ponder the possible reasons America, Illinois, is called that. As far as I know, Amerigo Vespucci didn’t map it. Had he, though, it would’ve taken him about six minutes. As far as I can tell, there’s almost nothing here, mostly silos and fields, and the Ohio River just beyond, to the east.

No one is out. It’s still early on a Sunday, and maybe everyone’s still sleeping, as they should be. Lucy and I get out, and she takes a picture of the sign for the town, which is basically just 15 or so houses and farms strung along a dead-end road. In the spirit of hopefulness, I decide to believe that this is the opposite of a good metaphor for the country America was named after.
TO RENEW ILLINOIS, READ ABOUT ILLINOIS

The Paul Simon Public Policy Institute asked more than twenty-six prominent Illinoisans to respond to the question: If you were teaching an “Illinois 101” course to highly motivated undergraduates, what five books you would assign them to read? They can be histories, biographies, novels, or essays. In sum, they would provide a wide-ranging and nuanced understanding of Illinois.

The Institute passes on these recommendations to those looking for a good read and a better understanding of Illinois.

CHRISTOPHER BELT, ILLINOIS STATE SENATOR, 57TH DISTRICT
A. Lincoln by Ronald C. White Jr., 2009.

ROGER BILES, PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF HISTORY, ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY,
AUTHOR OF ILLINOIS: A HISTORY OF THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE
Twenty Years at Hull-House by Jane Addams, 1910.
The Social Order of a Frontier Community by Don Harrison Doyle, 1983.

TERRI BRYANT, ILLINOIS STATE REPRESENTATIVE, 115TH DISTRICT
Down Don’t Bother Me: A Novel by Jason Miller, 2015.
Sins of the South: Big Secrets in a Small Town by Maureen Hughes, 2012.
When Lincoln Came to Egypt by George Smith, 2016.

FRANK CICERO, JR., ATTORNEY, KIRKLAND AND ELLIS, AUTHOR OF CREATING THE LAND OF LINCOLN: THE HISTORY AND CONSTITUTIONS OF ILLINOIS, 1778-1870

RICHARD DURBIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM ILLINOIS
City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America by Donald Miller, 1996.
Bloody Williamson by Paul Angle, 1969.

JIM EDGAR, FORMER ILLINOIS GOVERNOR
Horner of Illinois by Thomas Littlewood, 1969.
Clout: Mayor Daley and His City by Len O’Connor, 1975.
Bloody Williamson by Paul Angle, 1969.
Illinois History: A Reader by Mark Hubbard, 2018.

LaTOYA GREENWOOD, ILLINOIS STATE REPRESENTATIVE, 114TH DISTRICT
There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America by Alex Kotlowitz, 1991.
A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry, 1959.

PATRICK HANLEY, ASSOCIATE, MCKINSEY & COMPANY
Midwest Futures by Phil Christman, 2020.
City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America by Donald Miller, 1996.
The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros, 1984.

ERIKA HAROLD, ATTORNEY, MEYER CAPEL, REPUBLICAN NOMINEE FOR ILLINOIS ATTORNEY GENERAL
There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America by Alex Kotlowitz, 1991.
The Jungle by Upton Sinclair, 1906.
DAVID JOENS, DIRECTOR, ILLINOIS STATE ARCHIVES

The Devil in the White City by Erik Larson, 2003.

Additional Reading

Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and War Years by Carl Sandburg, 1939.

CHUCK LEVESQUE, PRESIDENT, DEPAUL USA

Chicago: A Novel by Brian Doyle, 2016.
Rootabaga Stories by Carl Sandburg, 1922.
City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America by Donald Miller, 1996.

JIM NOWLAN, POLITICAL COLUMNIST, FORMER ILLINOIS STATE REPRESENTATIVE


GLENN POSHARD, FORMER ILLINOIS CONGRESSMAN, FORMER PRESIDENT OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years by Carl Sandburg, 1939.
Cornsuckers by Carl Sandburg, 1918.
Spoon River Anthology by Edgar Lee Masters, 1915.

BERNARD SCHOENBURG, POLITICAL REPORTER AND COLUMNIST, STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Governor Richard Ogilvie: In the Interest of the State by Taylor Pensoneau, 1997.

Additional Reading


RAY LAHOOD, FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, FORMER ILLINOIS CONGRESSMAN

The Education of a Senator by Everett McKinley Dirksen, 1998.

MIKE LAWRENCE, FORMER DIRECTOR, PAUL SIMON PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Governor Richard Ogilvie: In the Interest of the State by Taylor Pensoneau, 1997.
Bloody Williamson by Paul Angle, 1969.
The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America by Ethan Michaeli, 2016.

Additional Reading

GREG SHAW, POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR, ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Division Street: America by Studs Terkel, 1967.
There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America by Alex Kotlowitz, 1991.

JOHN SHAW, DIRECTOR, PAUL SIMON PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE


Additional Reading

Played in Peoria by Jerry Klein Sr., 1980.

SHEILA SIMON, LAW PROFESSOR, SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY,
FORMER ILLINOIS LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years by Carl Sandburg, 1939.
Song of My Life by Harry Mark Petrakis, 2014.
Bloody Williamson by Paul Angle, 1969.
Anything written by Gwendolyn Brooks.

SAMUEL WHEELER, FORMER ILLINOIS STATE HISTORIAN

City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America by Donald Miller, 1996.

Additional Reading

Freedom’s Champion: Elijah Lovejoy by Paul Simon, 1994

PAULA WOLFF, POLICY ADVISOR, ILLINOIS JUSTICE PROJECT

The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation by Natalie Moore, 2016.

EMANUEL “CHRIS” WELCH, ILLINOIS STATE REPRESENTATIVE, 7TH DISTRICT
