

This Place We Call Home

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“. . . a land flowing with milk and honey.” – Deuteronomy 26:9b

When Dorothy closed her eyes, tapped the heels of her ruby slipper together, and began repeating “There’s no place like home,” I knew exactly how she felt.

As an eight-year-old child, I, too, had been taken suddenly and unexpectedly from everything I knew and loved as home in Ohio and deposited among virtual strangers in a small town in southern Indiana. I was an orphan, and these were my other relations, and it was for my own good.

And indeed, it was, as time would tell, but that cold truth didn’t lessen the sense of loss and the lingering memories of the life I had left behind.

So, when I was called here to Faith, I felt I had unfinished business with my home state. What is this place? Is it the place of my childhood and my memories? Or is it something more, now that I’m grown up, for better and for worse?

The Christian faith, for me, has been a lifelong process of discovery, and if I’m to take the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation seriously – that God entered this world as a human being – it seems to me that my knowledge of God and my knowledge of God’s world are closely related. In divinity school, I would learn that the ferociously religious John Calvin said something very similar at the dawn of the Reformation.

So, nine years ago, I set off to learn more about Ohio, this place we call home. But how to go about it? Ohio’s a big place. We cover almost 45,000 square miles of an almost perfect rectangle of land 220 miles wide and 220 miles long. From Ashtabula to Cincinnati is 301 miles and spreading out on both sides of that diagonal are 938 incorporated municipalities, ranging from the tiny village of Rendville – population 38, located about halfway between Zanesville and Athens – to the state capital, Columbus, with its 880,000 people. How do you get to know all of that?

The answer came in early August of 2010, when Don and Marilyn Wilson gave me the beautiful picture book, *County Courthouses of Ohio*, by Susan Thrane and Tom and Bill Patterson. Here’s what I wrote in my diary for August 8, 2010: “Every chance I get before I go to bed, I sit down with the book on Ohio courthouses Don and Marilyn Wilson gave me. It’s been lots of fun to read.”

It’s been even more fun to use as a guidebook to the state of Ohio, county by county, courthouse by courthouse. It took me nine years – Ed Jacquet and I visited the Marion County courthouse this past June – but I made it to all eighty-eight of Ohio’s county courthouses. And

because you always asked about these trips, before or after I'd made them, you all were always tucked under my arm.

A few of you – Jill Dugovics, Ken Vogt, and Ed Jacquet – went with me physically on some of my visits. And since the project in which you took such interest is now finished, I thought I should tell you a little of what I did with your money that provided me with the time to explore.

The first thing I'd like to tell you is that if you want to see your government at work, don't turn on your screen or pick up the paper. Instead, visit your local county courthouse, where you'll meet ordinary Americans trying to make life livable for all of us. To hear the media tell it, democracy is badly broken, and perhaps it is in Washington.

But if you talk to, say, Kathy Fortney, the retired Clerk of Courts of Medina County, as I did on the courthouse balcony overlooking the town square on August 26, 2010, you'll learn that most elected officials are honest, hardworking people who view their jobs as a call to service for their neighbors and their communities. Kathy began working as a file clerk for Medina County when she was eighteen years old, and she retired as Clerk of Courts after a lifetime of public service.

Of course, she'd seen some shenanigans during that time – money changing hands that shouldn't have, back-slapping and back-stabbing that both went on behind closed doors, that sort of thing – but Kathy and her staff sought to do the best they could to help the people of Medina County live together peacefully and prosperously even when that meant scheduling their trials in the Court of Common Pleas.

And I saw that dedication to the common good repeated time after time, courthouse after courthouse. And at the heart of those courthouse buildings were the courtrooms, some of them stunningly beautiful, where our best approximations of justice were sought after, deliberated, and decided.

It is no accident that courthouses and churches bear a striking similarity in their architecture, décor, and solemnity, because courthouses were built as temples to justice. The Roman goddess Justitia, blindfolded and holding a balance in one hand and a sword in the other, adorns the dome of many of our courthouses. In fact, when I would drive into an unfamiliar town looking for the courthouse, I'd scan the skyline first looking for Lady Justice.

The buildings themselves are dinosaurs, which is to say, they are a vanishing breed of something magnificent. We don't build this way anymore, and when these priceless examples of civic monumental architecture are gone, a precious representation of our history, identity, and national and local pride will have died with them.

I just missed visiting the Seneca County courthouse building of 1884, pictured on p. 104 of Thrane's book. It was demolished in 2012 just weeks before I visited its replacement on September 10th of that year. The grass on the site of the old courthouse was still a brighter green than the older grass surrounding it. The new courthouse, like all modern courthouse buildings, is an office block without character, personality, charm, soul, or pride. It functions, it is cost-effective, and it could be built by machines rather than craftspeople and artisans, and to that extent it reflects the world that you and I live in, rather than the vanished world of our great-grandparents.

The magnificent Beaux-Arts courthouses of Cuyahoga and Hamilton counties, the ornate Italianate courthouses of Geauga and Ross counties, or the massive Richardsonian Romanesque

courthouses of Trumbull and Wood counties – we will never see their like again. Even if today's county residents were willing to foot the bill for such artisanal architecture, and even if we could locate enough mahogany, marble, and brass to decorate their interiors, it would be virtually impossible, now, to find enough skilled artists, woodworkers, and glaziers to do the finishing work that makes these buildings awe-inspiring. Janet Lipstreu, friend of Rose McIntyre and Chris Wilkinson, and sometime member of our movie group, was in charge of the restoration of the stained glass of the Auglaize County courthouse, which I visited on August 20, 2014. Here's what I wrote about that visit in my notebook:

"People in other courthouses have asked me if I've seen the Auglaize County Courthouse, and now I know why. It's a fantastically restored building, done in 2010-2012, and not reflected in any of the photos in Thrane.

"The interior is unique – Romanesque of the most beautiful stone (marble), glass, ceramic, metal, and wood – everything impresses. Janet Lipstreu, who has joined our movie group occasionally, was in charge of the glass restoration, and it is spectacular."

Churches, of course, were the original patrons of stained glass, which was designed primarily not to teach illiterate peasants the stories of the Bible, but rather to create world of colored light and beauty otherwise unavailable – and in many cases inconceivable – to people whose lives were generally drab and ordinary. Entering one of Ohio's county courthouses is often like entering a classically constructed cathedral: your sense of scale is enlarged, your perception of proportion shifts, and your awareness of what is possible is challenged. I often found myself saying, with Jacob, "How awesome is this place!" – just as the designers and builders of those edifices intended.

Despite chronic poverty in some of our counties, despite drug-ravaged communities and court dockets in others, and despite corruption and malfeasance in a few, Ohio, I've discovered in my travels, is indeed a land flowing with milk and honey. That image is a metaphor for prosperity, abundance, and the security that comes from freedom from want. For most of us who live in this fertile square of God's good earth, that security has been our norm, the occasional deviation from it notwithstanding.

Ohio is not broken. It is gerrymandered, reliably red, and not as progressive as it once was, especially when it comes to public education. We have our problems, to be sure, but my visits to every county, and my conversations with the people in them, have convinced me that we are vastly more than our problems. Most of us want what is best for all of us, and that gives me great hope and comfort. I'm here this morning to deliver to you that good news, after nine years of fieldwork.

There's so much more I could tell you about this place we call home, but I need to close so that we can have our regularly scheduled August meeting and our annual picnic. Let me leave you with one more story about one more courthouse.

Fayette County is on the way to Cincinnati. It sits below I-71 between Xenia and Chillicothe. The county seat is the oddly named City of Washington Court House.

On Oct. 16, 1894, William "Jasper" Dolby, an African American, pled guilty to the charge of criminal assault against a white woman, Mrs. Mary C. Boyd. Dolby was being held in the Fayette County jail, located in the courthouse, in the custody of Sheriff James F. Cook. Dolby had been sentenced to twenty years in the state penitentiary, and was awaiting transport to that facility.

But as word of the incident spread through the town, with increasingly salacious and gruesome embellishments added to each retelling, white citizens decided to take the law into their own hands. They gathered as a lynch mob on the courthouse lawn and demanded that Sheriff Cook hand over his prisoner to them. Sheriff Cook refused and ordered the crowd to disperse. When the crowd grew larger and more restive, Sheriff Cook telegraphed Governor William McKinley in Columbus for assistance. Governor McKinley ordered the mobilization of a company of the state militia, the precursor of today's National Guard, to Washington Court House, to protect the prisoner and break up the mob.

The presence of the militia aggravated the ugly mood of the crowd, who threatened to storm the courthouse. Colonel Alonzo B. Coit pleaded with the crowd to desist, to no avail, and as the crowd began to batter the southeast doors of the courthouse, he ordered his men to fire their weapons through the massive wooden doors. Five people were killed and eighteen others were injured, all white, and Jasper Dolby's life was saved. Col. Coit was indicted for manslaughter and acquitted at trial. After the trial, Gov. McKinley said, "The law was upheld, as it should have been . . . in this case at fearful cost. . . . Lynching cannot be tolerated in Ohio."

The bullet holes remain in the doors of the Fayette County courthouse, and you can put your fingers in them, as I did, when I visited that sacred ground on August 25, 2015.

When we hear so much today of the poor and deteriorating state of race relations in our country, when people are forced to wear buttons reminding us that Black Lives Matter, and when an interracial couple's home explodes with a swastika and racial slurs spray-painted nearby, it's easy to forget that this is not our new normal. Decency, honor, respect, and fairness are still treasured and maintained by most Ohioans, and the bullet holes in a courthouse door testify to that normal.

The media do not depict real Ohio. To find the real place we call home, look around you in these pews, join your neighbors in the stands as your child or their child, your grandchild or their grandchild plays in the marching band, or take a fieldtrip to Fayette County and feel the bullet holes in their courthouse door. God created our home good, and much of that goodness, I'm pleased to report, remains. Thanks be to God.