

THE HOOSIER IDENTITY

By Philip Gulley

I was in the fourth grade, in Mrs. Betty Conley's class, when I first remember hearing the word Hoosier. I'm certain I heard it before then, but that was the first time the word stuck. We learned about the state bird, cardinal, the state tree, *Liriodendron tulipifera*, and the state stone, limestone. In the fifth grade, we moved on to U.S. history, but for one glorious year we dwelled on all things Indiana.

Mrs. Conley was an evangelist for the small town, believing its citizens possessed a degree of nobility lacking in city dwellers. When anything bad happened in our town, she blamed it on people from the city. So for the first twenty-nine years of my life, I avoided Indianapolis like the plague, then was wooed there by its siren song. Unlike the Greek tragedies, my time there ended well. I only moved back to my hometown because I fell in love with a house that had a woodstove in the kitchen, which was, and remains, my idea of high living.

I've lived in Indiana for fifty-five of her two hundred years, have traveled in every one of her ninety-two counties, speaking in libraries and churches, and can report, with a high degree of confidence, that there is no such thing as the Hoosier identity, if by identity we mean a common trait shared by all. Hoosiers are no more all the same than are Californians, Iowans, or Texans. This isn't to say most of us don't aspire to a collective goal, in this case Hoosier hospitality. Just as a cowboy lurks in most Texans, so does the wish to be friendly dwell in most Hoosier hearts. In our 199th year, our legislature voted in a law perceived to be unkind to gays and lesbians and such an outcry was raised by Hoosiers the politicians had to run for cover. We Hoosiers can be contrary, slow to change, and impossible to lead, but once we get it in our minds to welcome someone there's no stopping us.

I've been fired twice in my life, once by a man from Oregon who tossed me overboard to the sharks, and the other time by a Quaker meeting in Indiana whose elders held my hand and wept as they eased me out the door. I returned the next month for a pitch-in dinner and they ushered me to the front of the line and slipped me an extra piece of pie. I'd like to think it was because they were Quakers, but now I believe it was the Indiana in them, that part of us that can't bear to be the cause of someone else's distress, however slim our fault. I once wrote a letter to a man newly arrived to our state, apologizing for its lack of an ocean.

In Indiana, guilt runs a close second to hospitality. We feel guilty about everything. I majored in theology at Marian University in Indianapolis, which was actually a four-year course of study in things I should feel bad about. William Henry Harrison, a governor of the Indiana territory-turned-President, died on his 32nd day in office, throwing the nation into a tizzy about presidential succession. Mrs. Conley told us his last words were, "I wish to apologize for causing you all this trouble." I think she made that up, because no one knows what he said, though it sounds like something a dying Hoosier would do, apologize for something he couldn't help.

Or maybe he could have helped it, had he not violated another maxim dear to Hoosiers, wash your hands. That's the third thing every Hoosier learns. First, be nice; second, be ready to apologize; third, always wash after shaking hands. But William Henry Harrison forgot, caught a cold, which led to pneumonia, which led to his death, which led to John Tyler being sworn in as President. That led to the annexation of Texas and its eventual inclusion as a state, for which we Hoosiers would like to apologize.

I'll be the first to admit that my love affair with Indiana has had its ups and downs. Whenever our legislature meets, I think of leaving Indiana, but I stay put, mostly because of the woodstove in my kitchen and because my hero, Eugene Debs, was a Hoosier, born in Terre Haute on November 5, 1855. It was Eugene Debs who said to the judge after being convicted of violating

the Sedition Act in 1918, “I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.”

The judge was unimpressed and sentenced Debs to ten years in prison, where he ran for President in 1920 and received nearly a million write-in votes. But, and here’s the bright spot, Hoosiers had the good sense to elect Eugene Debs to the Indiana General Assembly in 1884. Any state that would elect Eugene Debs to public office has something noble, something virtuous, in its DNA. That nobility might well be a recessive gene, only popping up every now and then, but I intend to stick around to see if it emerges again.

When I was in the fourth grade, Mrs. Conley, that lover of all things Indiana, recited from memory Eugene Debs’ 1918 speech before the federal court. Even now, I recall that wintry day, his glorious words warming our room and stirring our hearts, thinking that if Indiana never gave the world another gift, at least we had given it Eugene Debs.