

Helping Create Iowa Propaganda Victims

I happened to be at a Cracker Barrel restaurant in Cordele, Georgia last month with my parents, waiting for our name to be called on a busy Saturday night. It was one of those circumstances when you're in close proximity with total strangers who are all doing the same thing you are, and your eyes keep meeting theirs.

I used to feel a little uncomfortable in situations like this, but at some point several years ago I began taking the initiative. This time it was a woman about 40 years old who was standing next to me, so I caught her eye and said, "Hi, where are you from?"

She smiled, mentioned a small town a few miles down the road and then asked me the same question. "Iowa City," I said, "have you heard of it?" She said no, and that's where most of these contrived conversations grind to a halt.

Instead, I asked her what she knows about Iowa. She frowned for a few seconds and then asked hopefully, "Potatoes?" I said, "Let me tell you all you need to know about Iowa in fifty words or fewer." And then I did.

I'm convinced that Iowa has an image problem and a real lack of awareness among regular folks who live in states that don't share our border. Maybe it's my Chamber of Commerce background, but I seldom miss an opportunity to talk up our state to total strangers.

"Iowa probably has the most fertile ground in the world," I told her. "92% of our land is growing something useful. Although half the states in America are larger, Iowa usually leads every year in the production of corn, soybeans, pork and eggs." She was still paying attention, so I went on to say, "Iowa also leads the nation in ethanol production, and in the percentage of our energy generated by wind."

Most of the people I give this spiel to will say “Wow,” or “I didn’t know that” in the appropriate places, bless their hearts. If so encouraged, I’ll forge ahead.

Depending on the listener, I’ll mention the Hawkeyes (that usually gets some response) or that Iowa has the highest proportion of any state’s adult population with at least a high school diploma. We also lead the nation in Rail to Trail conversions and have the largest number of golf courses and automobile race tracks per capita.

So as not to appear obsessed I’ll ask them something about their own state, but they are often starting to edge away from me at that point. Chances are good that most of them don’t know what their state’s talking points are anyway.

In case you’re interested, Iowa also leads the nation in all of the following: Wind turbine and tower manufacturing (and jobs), the percentage of two-parent families in which both parents work, the percentage of electronically filed tax returns, the production of raw biomass, the percentage of citizens 85 years and older, the number of acres enrolled in the continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and overlaying worn out pavements with concrete (white top).

On a less happy note, Iowa has the highest average concentration of Radon in the U.S. There are also more blacks per capita in Iowa’s prisons than in any other state. I hope someone is working on these.

My hope is that the next time any of my hit-and-run propaganda victims are having a conversation and the state of Iowa is mentioned, they will remember something about our brief conversation in a positive way. Even if they say, “I met a very outgoing and knowledgeable guy from Iowa last month who said that Iowa leads the nation in wind-generated potatoes,” it’s better than nothing.

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