

Personal Helicon Nebraska 7/20-8/3/21



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I ran across a photobook entitled *The Least Interesting Place*, by Matt Steinhausen. The place? Nebraska! No surprise, I suppose to many, but totally wrong for me. I grew up in Nebraska, left there in 1960, and although I'd not necessarily want to live back there again, to me it is a most interesting place. Willa Cather said, "Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again." My memories of Nebraska are so strong--maybe that is the way it is for most people about their lives when they were children. I spent the first 13 years of my life in Nebraska. I can still remember the details of the house I lived in, the telephone number, the church I attended, the distance to the nearest towns and city, and on and on.

I left a very rural place. A one-room school where some 25 children were educated by one teacher. A library consisting of 3 shelves, perhaps 8 linear feet. Outside toilets. The nearest town, Cairo, population of 400. Our address: Wood River, double the size–800 people. 25 miles from the third largest city in the state, Grand Island, 25,000. But everything about it--the people, the land, the sky, the water (I'll get to that later) have been huge influences on my life. The people, the events, the land, continue to come to mind every day and influence how I live my live.

I've gone back to visit several times. Each time I say this will be the last time. The last time was 2018. I rented a car in Chicago and drove further west, through Illinois (stopped to see the tombstone of my great-grandparents), on to Milford, 100 miles from where I grew up where I saw the tombstones of my great-grandparents, and on to Wood River, where I read poems from a collection published in 207: *Cornfields, Cottonwoods, Seagulls and Sermons. Growing Up in Nebraska*. I read with trepidation, but was pleasantly surprised and gratified at the reception. I saw a dear cousin, 93-years-old, for the last time. After his death, later that year, I thought for certain I'd never go back.

But I did. Why?

Memories, I suppose, in part. But also as time has gone by, I've come to ponder Nebraska water. Nebraska, especially as one heads west from Omaha, becomes more and more an arid state. I've been told the yearly precipitation drops an inch a year every 25 miles as one heads west—and it doesn't start very high. It was only several years before I was born that the area I lived in went from arid to fertile. And that was because of water—water that had been there for a million years, water from the Ogallala aquifer, only 40 feet below the ground. Irrigation. It changed rural Nebraska from a near Sahara a lot of the time to an Eden (with some hard work). The Ogallala had been discovered in 1901—why it was not tapped before the 1940's I do not know. But tapped it was, and by the time I was born, in every mile-square section there were wells pumping out a thousand gallons of water every minute, all summer long. My father shucked corn by had before the tractor arrived. He talked about crops so sparse that he had to drop an ear of corn at the start of a row, if he went home for lunch, so that when he returned, he would know where to start again—the ears were so few on stalks of corn. Now every acre yielded a hundred bushed of corn.

And those wells bring to my mind a theme of my favorite poet, Seamus Heaney, who wrote more than one poem about wells. His wells, in Ireland, were the kind with buckets and windlasses, powered by muscles, that brought up, who knows, maybe a couple of gallons a minute. To him, they were symbolic of the creative experience. In "Personal Helicon" he says

As a child, they could not keep me from wells And old pumps with buckets and windlasses. I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top. I savoured the rich crash when a bucket Plummeted down at the end of a rope. So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch Fructified like any aquarium. When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call With a clean new music in it. And one Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime, To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

Over the years, writing poetry has become an important part of my life. I suppose every poet thinks about the source of their ideas, their inspiration. I wonder if the water and irrigation wells of Nebraska have not been important Muses for me.

And so, an important reason to go back to Nebraska was to reconnect with the water and those wells.

The irrigation we did (and I did my own share of it by the time I was ten) was labor-intensive. Two-feet-deep ditches were created by a ditcher pulled by tractor, the water from the wells was pumped into those ditches, and that water was siphoned out into the rows with tubes that had to be set by hand, had to be moved to other rows when the water had made its way to the end of the rows that might be a half-mile long. I'd hoped on my trip back to find such irrigation systems again, but now huge sprinklers, connected by pipes that can stretch for a quarter of a mile, circle the fields, spewing out the water in obedience to some computerized program that is connected to a GPS. Much less labor-intensive, probably does a better job. A few farmers still use pipes, six inches in diameters, that run at the start of rows of corn, and distribute water through holes in the pipe. But no more ditch irrigation--I tried to find it, no luck.

But I did connect with water and wells and irrigation. The trip was a time of musing about those wells, the water pumped from them, and what that water did. And how that all in some way relates to creativity and and the writing of poems.

What follows is an essay I wrote, "Personal Helicon"; several poems related to that theme; and photographs. Most of the photographs are related to water, irrigation, wells, and the crops irrigated. A few at the end are of the old home place and of tombstones of ancestors.

Personal Helicon

I've read far too many books about creativity—perhaps—I guess there is a place for them, but too often it's like reading about how to fish rather than going out and fishing. But nonetheless, it is a fascinating topic. I think about creativity especially in regard to photography and poetry. But at this moment, I want to focus on creativity and poetry. Maybe I ought to be writing a poem instead of writing about the creation of a poem.

My mind is drawn to Seamus Heaney and his poem "Personal Helicon". In the poem, Heaney writes about how even as a child he was drawn to wells. He liked to look down the wells, mentions the echoes that return to him when he talked. For him they are symbols of the creative process. He ends his poem with "I rhyme/to see myself, to set the darkness echoing."

The Helicon was a mountain in Greece, the home of the muses. It, and the Hippocrene spring associated withit, have been considered sources of poeticins piration. Hence the title of Heaney's poem, a kind of arspoetica.

I've read the "Personal Helicon" poem many times and have tried to understand what Heaney was saying, recognizing that one should not focus on the intellectual "meaning" of a poem, that one can never comprehend a poem by parsing it out in such a fashion. Yet there is value in it. I am struck by the bucket, and the windlasses needed to pull up the bucket of water. It takes work to get the water out, and the quantity of water that is brought up is small—perhaps a gallon or so a minute. One senses Heaney's water was precious, that it was not wasted. Heaney was able to look down his wells (that seems very important to him), sometimes even see his reflection in the water below. And there were the objects in the water: fungus, moss, slime, even a rat. And then there is the title: referring to a mountain and associated visible spring.

Heaney's wells are different than mine. The wells I think about are those of my childhood, the irrigation wells of Nebraska. Wells that I could not look down. There may have been moss and fungus, rats, but if so, they were not visible to me. These wells produced more than a gallon a minute—a thousand gallons! There



was no work on my part to bring up the water. A pump, energized by a gas-fueled or electricity-fueled engine did the work. The water was also precious—but it was used not to produce works of art or irrigate rare vegetation, but to grow corn and beans, which would be fed to steers and hogs.

There were no mountains in my native Nebraska. The elevation in Hall County is listed as 1946 feet, and the highest point in the county is 2120 feet. No Helicons. And I remember no springs, no Hippocrene. But there was water, and plenty of it—below the surface, in the Ogallala Aquifer, back when I lived there, only 40 feet below the surface. The aqui-

fer was supposedly discovered in 1910, but it was not until the 1940's when it was tapped, and land irrigation started. Quite an underground spring. The Ogallala Aquifer is the Nebraska Helicon and Hippocrene. One does not need to see it, look up to it, watch the spring water oozing from some site. All one has to do is watch the irrigation well spew out its one million gallons of cold clear water every day.

I had to do no work to bring up the water. But there was work connected with the water once it was pumped to the surface, if the water was to be used to make the corn grow. A tractor pulled a ditcher to create the two-feet deep furrows into which the water poured. The ditches ran at the beginning of the rows of corn, and to get the water into the corn, arched plastic tubes, an inch in diameter, were plunged into the water in the ditches, where they filled with water. The exposed end was sealed with the hand, one end remain-

ing in the water, and the other end was placed in the corn row. If one was successful, the tube siphoned the water into the row of corn. The water trickled down the row, taking half a day to reach the end, as much as half a mile from the beginning of the row. (The land was so flat that huge earth movers hauled soil to create a very slight slope to the land—otherwise the water would not have run down the corn row). I walked along the ends of the rows at the end of the day to be sure the water had reached the ends, and if it had, I then moved the siphon tubes to unirrigated rows.



Breakouts sometimes occurred—a leak developed and water ran out of the ditch. If not repaired in time, the water level in the ditch would fall, and the tubes would no longer funnel the water into the corn rows. After the rent in the ditch had been repaired, and the water level in the ditch rose, all the



tubes had to be reset, or water would spill over the ditch. And, if the pumps energized by electricity would stop for even half a second, the water level in the ditches would fall and again the tubes would stop supplying water. Housewives kept an electric light visible in the house. If it momentarily blinked, they raced out to the wells to restart the pumps, which would not on their own restart when the electricity came back on. For me, the work of pulling up the bucket, the work of setting the tubes, is the writing of the

poem; the muse is the bucket and the irrigation pump, the message to be brought, to be translated, is the water. The water may be there, but the engine-powered irrigation pump has to be employed; the water has to be set to do what it is to do: quench the thirst of the drinker, make the corn grow ears to feed the steers.

Heaney's wells produced little water—a gallon or two a minute. My Nebraska well spewed the wa-

ter out, a million and a half gallons a day. And as a poet, I tend to be such a well. I try to nourish a whole section of land, when it might be better to concentrate on making an eighty acre section prosper. In my Nebraska, the water that gushes out is for the mundane purpose of growing the corn to feed the steers and hogs. It is not costly oil, black gold, that when refined flies the jets cross country, provides energy to lighten the buildings where the senators convene. But feeding the steers and hogs means the farmers can pay off their mortgages and take the family to Disney World when there is a lull



in the farm work. I want to be like Ted Kooser, who took the poem he'd written overnight to work the next day and had his secretary read it. If they did not understand the poem, he knew he had more work to do.

Heaney seemed to fixate on the darkness that he saw when looking down the well—the darkness of mystery, of the subconscious, perhaps. It is that darkness that he wanted to "set echoing". That is a darkness I could not peer into, a darkness I can only imagine. Yet I know it's dark down there, in the Ogallala aquifer, where the water has been collecting for a million years. And I can only imagine what fossils and prehistoric relics are immersed in that mighty reservoir!

Personal Helicon

As a child, the well I first recall: out front, at school, a handle that I had to muscle up and down to bring the water from the ground. Clear, clean, and cold.

A cup with every pump, enough to slake the thirst.

Then back into the classroom, all 28 of us, grades 1 to 8; history and grammar if it was afternoon.

And then there was the irrigation well, on the eighty back behind the barn that spewed a million gallons out each day. Water from the Ogallala Aquifer, forty feet below. Not oil, which when refined could fuel the diesel engines on the trains that carried dignitaries all the way from Omaha. Only water. Water that turned a desert place into an Ireland, that grew the corn that fattened steers and hogs and let the farmers keep their houses and their lands, pay the bankers what they owed.

Seamus Heaney's Wells

What if the wells that Seamus couldn't stay away from were dug instead into Nebraska dirt? Wells without the buckets and the pails, with metal lidded tops. He'd not have seen his face, could not have heard the echoes of his voice. How would he have rhymed about the water spewing out, a thousand gallons every minute, every day, all summer long? No chance for anything to fructify; no ferns or scaresome rats, no fungus or dark moss. Yet water from the darkness of the Ogallala aquifer forty feet below. Water waiting for a million years to see the light of day.

Getting the Water Up

You'd think all you have to do is turn the tap a quarter turn and out the water spurts will fill the glass, the tub, will spill out on the floor and drip into the room below unless you turn it off and so you'd think how much we have advanced compared to when to pull the water up you had to drip a bucket on a rope down into the well, until you felt it hit the liquid surface, let it fill then pull it up and save every precious drip but no, it wasn't so.

What Would Have Seamus Rhymed

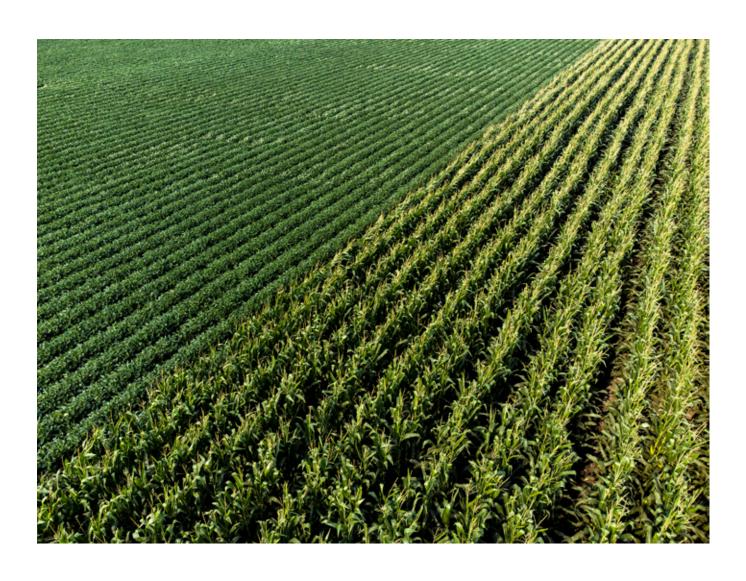
What would have Seamus rhymed had he been born two hours west of Omaha, where wells down only forty feet spew water out, a million gallons every day?







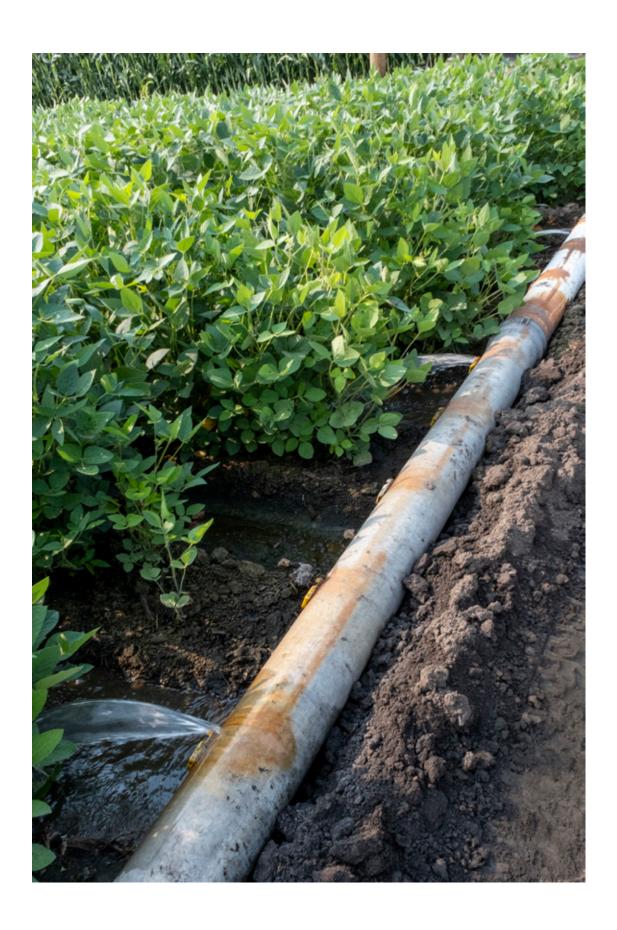






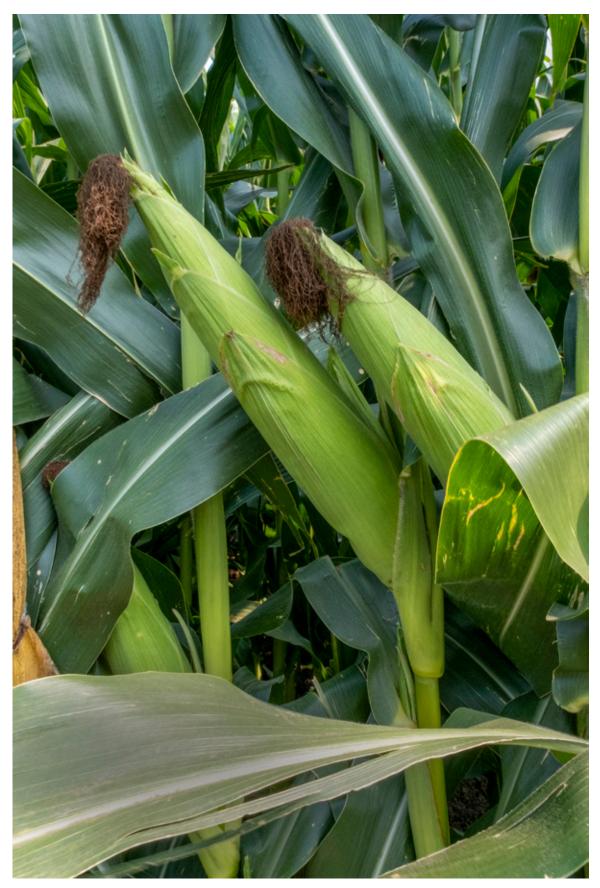








The poem



The poem











The Muses of the Nebraska Helicon

Passive pipes, conduits, that if not energized, will not raise the water, the corn will grow no ears.



Where the corn is stored-the corn the water grows, the water from the Ogallala Aquifer.



The well on Dad's forty acres, inherited from his father. Sad. I remember it next to a cottonwood tree, which is now gone.



1979 or 1980; me, son Joe, and my father.



The old home place. 3 1/2 miles south and 2 miles east of Cairo, NE.



The site where I was hit by Arnold Harder's car when I was 2 1/2 years old. The house is to the left.



I helped shingle this barn when I was 12 or 13. I can't imagine that now. Note the irrigation pump.



The basketball hoop was still up! How much time I spent shooting baskets! But underhand, like Wilt the Stilt shot his free throws.



At the tombstone of my great-grandfather, Joseph Gascho, 1840-1901. East Fairview Mennonite Cemetery, Milford, NE.



At the tombstone of my grandfather, Joe Gascho, 1871-1954, Wood River Mennonite Cemetery, Wood River, NE.



