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making it home

Part of a periodic series
of essays and ideas
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How does what's on your plate reflect where you live? Check out the new Making It Home tour, the Smithsonian exhibition *Key Ingredients: America by Food*. The tour begins in October 2010 in Keesburg, then travels to five communities through 2011. For details, visit www.MakingWisconsinHome.org.

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community through conversation



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“Home is no longer a tightly defined space in a constricted present.”

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On making it home

One bright June afternoon in the early 1970s, my older brother and I decided to head north, recreating from suburban Chicago through Wisconsin to Upper Michigan. His rattletrap red van, normally in service as his band's primary road vehicle, was imbecilicating. With night coming on, fuses blew one every twenty miles, leaving us without lights. Finally, we decided to pull over for the night and bed down along the Wolf River, on Highway 55 in the Menominee Indian Reservation. I'd never been there before.

We awoke to a warm, golden-green spring morning at rivers edge among the thinnest, old white pines of the Menominee Forest. Obnoxious to the upscale history of the landscape and its people, I still knew this was a different place. That nuance was clear from the character of the forest. Even among the tribal lands of Wisconsin, Menominee country is special. The Menominee are the only native Wisconsin community to have held onto, and still have a reservation within the land they have called home since their story as a people began. For them, the keeping of the forest and the keeping of the community has been a continuing and connected story. In those years it was a troubled home for its people, as the community wrestled with itself, its direction and its place within the dominant culture. On that memorable morning, I was likewise oblivious to that painful historical and social reality. *I continue...*

making it home | cont'd

That night beneath the pines expanded the boundaries of my own home. The waters of the Wolf River connected the North Country with the post-war sprawl of suburban Chicago where I lived. The white pines tied an ancient story to my ephemeral moment. Highway 55 bound a clueless kid to a culture that was foreign to me, but native to the place. Home was no longer a tightly-defined space in a constricted present.

Home is where the heart lies, the place it craves to rest. At home the core of our selves seeks definition and sustenance, security and calm, and its most intimate meaning. Home is the location of our shaping—the local geography that we make and that makes us. For the settled, home provides at least the illusion of permanence, for as long as we do make it. For the nomadic and homeless, home is defined by constant change. For the lost and displaced, home is an aching

But if we are to be honest, home also is where the heart may lie—where we can most easily hide, and hide from, sober truths about our selves, our communities, our landscapes, our past, and our consequences. If home grounds us, it can also provide easy escape. Home, in fact, can serve as our last true refuge, a place where we are free to ignore degradation, injustice and pain.

Home, then, is not so simple a place, despite its connotations of simplicity (*homecoming, down-home, homemade, homespun*,...). It is where the threads connecting us to one another, to the land and to the larger world intersect, where relationships open, close, stagnate, grow, linger, evolve, resolve. It is where we both establish continuity and make change. It is the place we leave to experience the world, and where we return to understand what we have made of ourselves in the meantime.

“Home is where the heart lies, the place it comes to rest.”

For the Menominee and Ho-Chunk, Wisconsin has been home since time immemorial. For the Sauk and Fox and Dakota, it was the home they left behind. For the Ojibwe, Oneida, Potawatomi and Stockbridge-Munsee, it was the home they came to. For the trappers and missionaries, it was a place not to abide, but to harvest furs and souls. For the lumber barons, it was a place to convert those white pine forests into fortunes. Some lumber barons stayed choosing to invest their fortunes and make a home; others moved on. There is a town named Weyerhaeuser in northwest Wisconsin, no Weyerhaeusers live there.

For the newly arrived from Europe, the work of making Wisconsin home fell to farmers who eventually discovered that continuous wheat and speculation in hops were not the basis for a sustained economy or a healthy soil, and that dairy provided one way to draw the nutrient loop tighter. It fell to progressive educators and workers and business owners and political reformers who saw that sound homes had to be embedded within sound communities, which had to be embedded within a responsible civic culture. It fell to early conservationists who worked to nest our human homes within resilient lands—greater communities of soil and water, plants and animals, thriving and self-renewing, supportive of the human communities within.

For John Muir, the famed naturalist and author, Wisconsin was home for only fifteen years. He left Portage and his domineering father for Madison then left the University of Wisconsin for "the University of the Wilderness." On one letter he provided his ultimate home address: "John Muir, Earth-Planet, Universe." Some of Wisconsin's famous sons and daughters have followed Muir's example, passing through their Wisconsin homes on their way to fates borne out elsewhere: Carl Schurz, Georgia O'Keeffe, Olson Weiles, Les Paul, Brett Favre. Many, like Gaylord Nelson, stayed closer to home, making new pathways through the familiar, and in the process changed how we Wisconsinites understand where we come from. Others followed Aldo Leopold's course—people from other places who eventually made their way to the modest flyover, worked, pedestrian, too, mosquitoes, too wintry land of Wisconsin, finding here a home to celebrate, to nurture, and to see into in unexpected ways.

There is no telling how our sense of home may change. Yet there is no sense of home that exists apart from our telling of it. Home, wherever we make it, is where we tell our stories, reclaim our pasts, make our meals, sing our songs, project our images. We've done it since Lascaux, since Gilgamesh, since the Odyssey, since Turtle Island emerged from the waters. Sharing our stories, we connect our homes to all others, over time and across space. As we do, we find ourselves leaving home and coming back again, making our way between the Wolf River and the Univase, and back again.

—Curt Meine

Curt Meine lives in Sauk County, where he is Senior Fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation and Director for Conservation Biology and History with the Center for Humans and Nature.

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The Making It Home

Film Festivals are proudly supported by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism

