



Bob Gibson and Stan Musial,
Spring Training 1961, Tampa Bay

NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

SEASON XXXVI



Angry no more.

FROM THE BULLPEN

2020 Campaign

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Brethren,

This issue of *From the Bullpen* will begin with a hearty congratulations to Brother Sunny, who last Monday night became a second-time grandfather when AJ's wife, Maddi, gave birth to a beautiful bundle of joy by the name of Jude Albert Blongewicz, delivered a month early by C-section and tipping the scales at 5 lbs. 3 oz. The fabled Blongewicz name lives on for at least another generation of misspellings and mispronunciations. Enjoy your time with your new grandson, Gramps!



CORNFIELDS AND CATTLE

Thursday morning last I woke up ridiculously excited because I had blocked off the entire day for another drive around the state to visit courthouses. HQ¹ thinks I need to have my head examined because she cannot fathom how anyone could get so fired up about just driving around in their car and looking at boring old cornfields and grazing cattle. Of course, my response to this² was "Jane, you ignorant slut." Because what could be better than a full workday without television, email, phone calls or obligations of any kind? I think I'm finally starting to understand my enigmatic³ brother-in-law, who every so often just packs himself into his posh motorized outhouse and takes off for parts unknown for days and even weeks at a time. Why? Because he can.

Anyway, after making the bed, getting breakfast for HQ--including a latte from Scooters--putting the dishes away and otherwise greasing the skids for my day trip, I filled up my thermos with some freshly-brewed pumpkin spice coffee before taking care of my morning ritual,⁴ and then piled into the car for a great day of adventure.

FULL NELSON

With nobody but myself to answer to, I decided that I would begin the day's drive with a revisit to Nelson, county seat of Nuckolls County, because when I visited there back in June on my way to Red Cloud, I was prevented by an apathetic courthouse worker from entering the building due to the COVID-19 lockdown. With my trusty roadmap in hand to help me decide my route, I decided to take I-80 from Omaha to the Milford exit, and then head south and west on Highway 6 through the villages of Friend, Exeter and Fairmont, small towns in middle Nebraska that we only usually hear about during high school football, basketball, volleyball and wrestling tournament times, but which were also known to me because some of my fraternity brothers grew up in that area and led us on some memorable party bus misadventures in said jurisdictions.

At Highway 81 I headed south to and through Geneva (see above), and then headed west on Highway 74 through Shickley and then south on Highway 14 until I reached Nelson, population 450, and home to the underrated Oxbow Motel, which that day was a veritable beehive of activity. The nearby Nuckolls County District Courthouse was as beautiful as I remembered it, and this time its doors were unlocked and I was able to enter and begin my self-guided tour. Once up on the third floor--where the district courtrooms are almost always located in courthouses like this one--I found that the district courtroom was dark and locked, but to my good fortune a nice clerk lady asked me if she could help. I told her that I was a "courtroom buff" and would love to take a look at the interior of the courtroom, which she promptly unlocked and allowed me to do.

¹ My nickname for Michele, short for "Headquarters," as in "Orders from Headquarters."

² In my head. From "The Office," with Michael quoting Dan Ackroyd counterpointing Jane Curtin on "SNL."

³ To put it politely. Other descriptors might be *neurotic*, *eccentric*, *quirky*, *idiosyncratic*, *odd*, *peculiar*, or my personal favorite, "*on the brink of madness*."

⁴ You're thinking TMI, I know, but you're wrong. I took the garbage cans out to the curb, in fairness, a weekly ritual.

I have used the self descriptor of “courthouse buff” when visiting other courthouses and being approached by other courthouse workers, and it occurred to me that the nice lady clerk probably thought “Dork” when I said I was a courthouse “buff.” Either that or she added “OON” to the end of it when describing me to her coworkers after I left.

I will spare you the perhaps snoozeworthy minute details of the rest of my junket, save to say I visited these courthouses in these towns in the following sequence:

- Franklin County (county seat Franklin, population *exactly* 1,000);
- Harlan County (Alma);
- Furnas County (Beaver City⁵);
- Gosper County (Elwood); and my favorite of the six visited that day,
- Phelps County (in Holdrege, Nebraska). A picture of the Phelps County courthouse is shown below, another of those beautiful Beaux-arts structures built to anchor the town courthouse square.



⁵ Population 641. Not to be confused with *Beaver Crossing*, which is up near York, near the interstate, and the home of fraternity brother Jeff “PeeWee” Schultz, a legendary figure; as well as the situs of the Ernst Family Detasseling Project from back in about 1967 or 1968, which may bear retelling in a future issue.

With my visit to the Phelps County courthouse, I have now been inside a total of 76 of our state's 93 courthouses, including 27 of them in 2020 alone. I think that there is a reasonably good chance that I will have hit all or nearly all of them by this time next year, depending on how effectively the COVID vaccine is distributed and how well it works, because once I can get back to visiting ballparks again, my emphasis will quickly change.

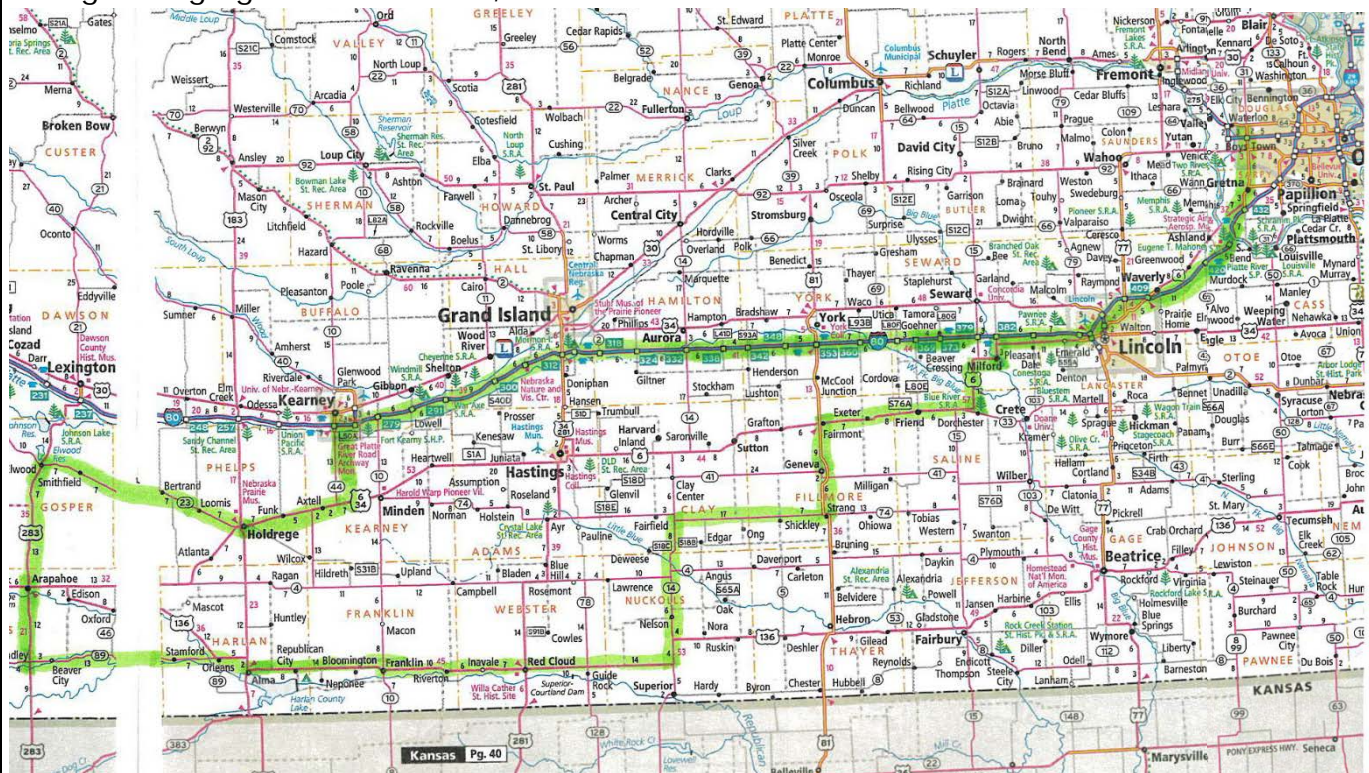
And speaking of ballparks, after my visit to the courthouse in Holdrege, I drove over to the Phelps County Fairgrounds to catch a look at the ballpark where the Holdrege White Sox played baseball in the late 1950s when they were part of the Short Season Class D Nebraska State League.⁶ The ballpark is now called Jack Waller Ballpark, and it is the home of the Holdrege Legion baseball team. The grandstand at some point burned down and had to be replaced, but the field itself is reportedly the same field that the Holdrege White Sox played on for a few years. Pretty hard to believe that this little town (population about 6,000) was once the home of a professional baseball team.



After visiting the baseball field, I headed back home to Omaha. Lots of cattle, cornfields and center pivot irrigation systems along the route.

⁶ Together with the McCook Braves, the North Platte Indians, the Superior Senators, the Lexington Red Sox, the Hastings Giants, the Kearney Yankees, and the Grand Island Athletics.

May I just say that last Thursday was a great day to be alive, to be COVID-free, possessed of a valid driver's license, and free of obligation to take a self-guided and free of charge⁷ swing through greater Nebraska, like this:



When everything was said and done, I covered approximately 530 miles in the old chariot, and spent the better part of a ten-hour day behind the wheel, although it went by in a flash. I passed much of the time listening to Gary Saddlemeyer on KFAB,⁸ and turning my nose up at comments made by his smug, know-it-all sidekick, Jim Rose,⁹ while at other times listening to Christmas music and just enjoying the gorgeous scenery of rural Nebraska.

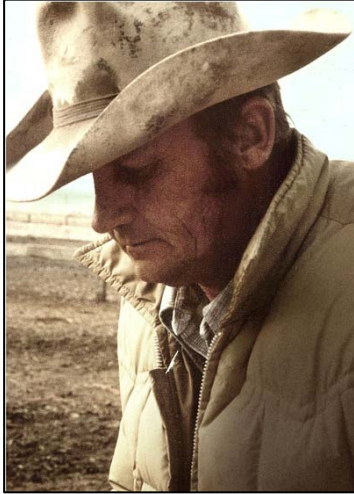
While much of my drive last Thursday was in counties and places that were new to me, there were portions of the drive that were familiar and which brought back some former repressed memories. In particular, when I drove the stretch from Elwood to Holdrege, I passed through the small (population 750) farming hamlet of Bertrand, home of the Vikings, but also home to my college sweetheart, we'll call her JF, who I made a couple of different visits to see during my senior year in college. The first was during Spring Break, which I guess would

⁷ Well, almost free. The two tanks of gas set me back about 40 bucks, and of course an unknown quantity of marital chits, TBD.

⁸ A respected and trusted voice that I listen to most days on the way to work.

⁹ Yes, *that* Jim Rose, the former Husker football announcer, who drives me absolutely batshit with his arrogant and condescending Mr. Know-It-All attitude about everything. On that particular morning, Rose was postulating that the Chinese have had the coronavirus vaccine since well before the end of last year, and that the Chi-Coms inoculated most Chinese citizens against the disease before unleashing it against the rest of the world, with the goal of becoming the most powerful nation in the world. In fact, he wasn't just hypothesizing, he was stating this to be a hard fact. Take off your tin foil hat, Rosey.

have been March of 1979, when for reasons that are not germane to this discussion I took a Greyhound bus from Lincoln to the Bertrand area to spend an entire week with her and her family at their family farm just outside Bertrand. I'm sure I made a great first impression. While details are foggy, there was no doubt a cover story for the bus trip involving an elaborate pack of falsehoods, which no doubt endeared me to her gruff farmer father, whom



Swede, father of JF

everyone called "Swede," right from the git-go. That, and the fact that I only brought with me my city slicker wardrobe, and no working man clothes or boots.

Much to my surprise, Swede came down to my room¹⁰ early the next morning after my first night on the farm, like 5 a.m. early, and threw me some working clothes to put on and led me to his truck so we could head to town for breakfast before starting farm chores. Say *what*? He probably got a real kick out of showing off his daughter's fancy "University" boyfriend--a soft city-type who didn't know the difference between "dinner" (lunch) and "supper" (dinner)--to his tough old farming buddies at the café.

In the end, while old Swede got a few unanticipated working days out of me on that visit, the trip wasn't without a few perks¹¹ and in the end, it was a week about which I still have fond memories, but haven't thought about for a very long time.

My second trip to the area was in the summer of that same year, when I dragged my younger brother Dan¹² along with me for a brotherly bonding camping trip to nearby Johnson Lake which, as luck would have it, would allow me to spend some time "reuniting" with JF once Dan was sound asleep.¹³ I wonder how Dan remembers that trip--I'll have to ask him one of these days. For me, it couldn't have been better.

Anyway, my drive through Bertrand last week rekindled some great old memories. As I drove down Main Street, I looked for the café where Swede took me for breakfast, but it's either boarded up now or housing some other business, sad to say. As I was thinking about JF, I remembered the crazy stuff that I did--I was a 21-year-old male, okay?--to curry her favor and/or spend time with her, such as scaling the back-alley fire escape to the top of the building next to the Brass Rail in downtown Lincoln so my friend Kurt Rohren and I could look down into the Beer Garden and see if JF and her sorority sister that Kurt was sweet on were inside, which would make the hour-long wait to get into the Rail worthwhile. Unfortunately, that little caper was spoiled by one of the Rail bartenders in the back Beer Garden, who spotted us and yelled that he was going to call the police, sending us scurrying for safety.

¹⁰ And damn good thing I was *in* the room.

¹¹ Some great ranch-hand meals, a chance to spend time on a true family farm with some very nice people, and beyond that, well, you'll have to use your imagination.

¹² Someone had to set up the tent, and cook, for gosh sakes.

¹³ After a few doses of Benadryl.



Just helpin' a brother out.

While there are several other stories which could be told about Kurt and my tandem efforts to woo these comely young coeds, decorum prevents me from sharing them here. Those were some fun years. As the Chairman of the Board sings at the very end of one of my favorite Sinatra ballads:

It was a mess of good years.

BASEBALL SHORT HOPS

Since this is supposed to be a publication primarily about our National Pastime, why don't I go ahead and actually include a few things having to do with baseball:

- I heard that Bubba Starling has been given his walking papers by the Royals, whose patience with this "can't miss" prospect finally ran out after 10 years. In two years with the Royals, Starling had a total of 245 at-bats, 50 hits, a batting average of .204, scored 31 runs, hit 5 home runs, and had an anemic 17 runs batted in. Oh, yes, and 83 strikeouts. The "can't miss" prospect just kept missing. Have to wonder whether anyone will pick him up.
- In my current read about Roger Angell (*No Place I'd Rather Be*), the author refers to Angell's love of the World Series and his reflections about how certain famous moments in the Fall Classics are etched into his brain, like Willie Mays' amazing catch in the 1962 Series, Don Larsen's perfect game in October 1956, Bill Mazeroski's walk-off home run against the Yankees in Game Seven of the 1960 World Series, and, of course, Kurt Gibson's miracle blast off Dennis Eckersley in Game One of the 1988 Series between the Dodgers and the A's. Another such moment that he included, which I hadn't thought about in a while, was the game-winning home run by David Fries of the

Cardinals against the Texas Rangers in Game Six of the 2011 World Series, just a few innings after Friese had hit a two-run triple off the wall to tie the game up in the bottom of the 7th inning. As I read this account, I could remember exactly where I was sitting in my old house on the acreage, and yelling in delight at the absurdity of this comeback by the Cardinals, after the Rangers were only one strike away from their first and only World Series championship. Angell is right, such feats by the Mistfers of Octobers, seem to find a permanent spot in our memory banks.

- While decorating the Christmas tree the other night, we had on the TV *Moneyball*, the movie starring Brad Pitt as Billie Bean which I hadn't seen since it was in the theaters quite a while ago. I had forgotten what a grumpy Gus Art Howe was as the manager of the Oakland A's team of 2002 that Bean reconstructed after losing Charlie Damon and Jason Giambi to free agency. I'd also forgotten that the A's won 20 consecutive games¹⁴ to set a new American League record, and that in the 20th game they led the Royals by a score of 11 to 0, only to see the Royals tie it up at 11, following which Bean's "project" player, Scott Hatteburg, won the game with a home run in the bottom of the 9th. When I checked with Wikipedia to get a look at other MLB winning streaks, I read that the Athletic's American League consecutive streak had been surpassed by the Cleveland Indians in 2017 when they won 22 consecutive games. Do any of you even remember that? I must have been aware of it at the time, but somehow it has been scrubbed from my memory bank. Anyway, if any of you haven't seen *Moneyball*, ever or recently, it is worth the watch. Pitt is very good playing Billie Bean, and Philip Seymour Hoffman as the cantankerous Art Howe is alone worth the price of admission.



AND IN THE INTERESTING BUT POSSIBLY USELESS DEPT.

While adding Christmas songs to our Spotify play list, I learned that the song *You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch* was written by Dr. Seuss for the 1966 TV special, but that the voice of the person who sings it is not that of narrator Boris Karloff--who reportedly did not have a good singing voice--but some cat by the name of Thurl Ravenscroft and--wait for it--that he is a native of Norfolk, Nebraska. A great little piece of trivia that you can feel free to use at the next company Christmas party, like in December 2021.

¹⁴ For perspective, the 1927 Yankees, believed by many to be the greatest baseball team of all time, had only a 9-game consecutive winning streak in that campaign.

IN CLOSING

This edition of *From the Bullpen* is dedicated to one of the most beautiful persons I will ever know, my sister Kathi Lou Ernst Krause, who passed away 20 years ago yesterday, and whose wonderful memories are so dear to so many of us.



Best wishes of the season.

Skipper