

“Field Guide”

Henry Johnson

Freshman year in Annenberg, I small-talked with a classmate who asked where I was from. “Illinois,” I told him, to which he excitedly responded, “Oh cool! I have family in Michigan.” He meant well but ignored a little-known geographical fun fact: that Illinois and Michigan are not the same place.

It’s a forgivable offense. After all, this is a school where Midwesterners are outnumbered by both legacies and economics concentrators. For many Harvard students, the region is only familiar through movies like *Fargo* and TV shows like *Fargo*.

With this in mind, it’s time that you, the uninformed coastal elite, learned about the Heartland. Let’s talk for a moment about America’s tight-hugging, beer-guzzling, big, meaty, sweaty sweetheart: the Midwest.

The first question we need to ask is where the region starts. Purists will tell you that no state in the Eastern Time Zone should count, but this would exclude Indiana, where every bowling alley is full and every building is a bowling alley. That’s a loss we simply cannot afford.

Instead, Pittsburgh should be our Checkpoint Charlie. It’s post-industrial, it’s football-obsessed, and its residents are called Pittsburghers. For reasons I can’t explain, that is the most Midwestern thing of all time.

You should briefly familiarize yourself with Midwestern slang. We use a bunch of quirky, local phrases like “hello” and “thank you for the holding the door for me.” We often go as far as to converse with strangers and, admittedly, lose an ungodly amount of time in the process.

You might recall times as a kid when a parent would see someone they knew at the store, and you'd have to wait through their long conversation. The Midwest is like if you lived at the store. Once when I was young, I asked my mom who she had been on the phone with for the last fifteen minutes. Her response was, "I'm not sure. I dialed the wrong number."

Last semester, my government professor explained that pollsters have to statistically adjust responses from the Midwest because we're too willing to cooperate with surveys. My people are destroying political science with weapons of patience and landline telephones.

No incident better illustrates this patience than a brief tale of theft. After leaving his keys in the ignition, as usual, my dad awoke one summer morning to find that his car had gone missing. An unknown number soon called him, and the voice on the other line said, "Hi there. I think my brother stole your car." Thanks to the heroic tactics of the burglar's brother, the vehicle was returned without damage. My father decided not to report the theft because he, in fancy legal speak, quote "didn't want the guy to get in trouble." And here's the epilogue to that story: twenty minutes later, his car was stolen again. Again, he got it back. And again, he didn't tattle.

This shows an unmistakably Midwestern faith in humanity. Midwesterners are optimistic in the way New Yorkers are smart or Californians are beautiful or Bostonians are angry that I called New Yorkers smart. When I was back home for Thanksgiving, a house caught on fire. The local newspaper reported that the owner's property had been damaged but "at least one of his three cats was saved from the fire." Think about that. Midwesterners make lemonade when life gives them two dead cats.

And while it's convenient to see us as pitchfork-wielding yokels, it isn't fair to make such broad assumptions about an entire region of people. That shows a level of smallmindedness that I

only would've expected in the South. Dig deeper, and you'll find that our trademark positivity makes the Midwest a *progressive* leader, too.

After all, the Heartland was home to the country's first co-ed college. And the second. And the third. It's the region that brought us the first openly gay senator, the first two Muslim members of Congress and the first Black president. It also produced the first and only Abraham Lincoln, until he was brutally murdered on the East Coast.

There's a tendency for outsiders to quote "distill the Midwest into blank flatness," as stated by David Foster Wallace, Midwest Class of 1962. But nowhere with such high spirits can be simply blank or flat. The Midwest is cool because it doesn't care about being cool. It only wants to be nice, and it's awfully good at it.

So please swing by. Pack some warm clothes and \$20 to pay for the month's rent. I love the Midwest, and I love you people, and I can't help but think that you'd get along.