

milk

Thursday, October 17

Biscuit, sausage, gravy, fruit, juice, milk

Friday, October 18

Cinnamon roll, yogurt, fruit, juice, milk

Lunch**Monday, October 14**

School Holiday

Tuesday, October 15

Chicken Alfredo, broccoli blend, breadsticks, milk

Wednesday, October 16

Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, brown gravy, green beans, hot roll, milk

Thursday, October 17

Creamy chicken bacon pasta, sweet carrots, garlic bread, milk

Friday, October 18

BBQ on a bun, coleslaw, potato salad, pinto beans, milk

...West of 98*(Continued from page 3)*

Its heritage, the opportunities I was afforded in this community, and above all, the people, dramatically shaped my young life and worldview. In college, I felt an unshakeable pull towards a certain piece of Scripture. In Luke 12:48, we are told that from those who are given much, much will be expected. This verse was a clear signal and direction of my life's path and purpose. I knew I had to give to the place and the people who gave so much to me. As I moved through college and law school, this goal met some surprise and skepticism. The message was not always outright, but it was certainly implied: "WHY are you going back to Stamford?"

I grew up under no misconceptions about the decline of Stamford and rural America in general. I could read a population trend. I saw the vacant buildings. I knew our school had dropped a classification over the prior decades. I heard stories of the scores of businesses that once thrived but existed no longer. Yet, I was not prepared for how this influenced those who questioned my return. To some, small town life was a purely foreign concept. Choosing that path simply did not compute. To others, it seemed as if I was voluntarily climbing back on to a sinking ship. Why would I do that when I had received an education and safety awaited me in the lifeboats of so many booming suburbs and metropolitan areas?

Luke 12:48 and Stamford beckoned anyway. One need only view my teenage haircuts to confirm that I was never one to chase a trend. Not only did I personally aspire to live in Stamford, I believed that Stamford and places like it still held great promise, despite the larger trends. As I looked across the landscape of American real estate development, I saw subdivisions and suburbs galore oriented around ideas like "small town atmosphere" and "welcoming community." I saw developers constructing new faux town squares in the 21st century to replicate the likes of the downtown square laid out by the Stamford Townsite

Company in 1899. Humans wanted what places like Stamford could offer, even as decades of economic "progress" pushed them farther away.

I was never much of a political partisan. I was raised to vote for a person before a party. Rural politics, for reasons that correspond with the nature of life on the Great Plains, rarely fit neatly within national party affiliations. The "conservative Democrat" was long powerful in rural politics, but before I even registered to vote, that particular dinosaur was all but extinct and effectively despised by both major political parties. Cable news and social media were the gasoline that fueled a partisan wildfire in the 2000s and 2010s that made the discourse more toxic and unproductive. I grew ever more disgusted. During the middle of the 2010s, I all but retreated from it entirely. I began to read deeply an author whose name I knew but I had read only lightly until that point.

His name was Wendell Berry.

In Berry, I found a wise elder who believed in the potential of rural America in the same manner that I did. He was uninterested in political partisanship or economic trends. He did not find rural America's salvation in carving it into sprawling suburbs and exurbs. He took accurate and deeply uncomfortable positions, like identifying the relationship between rural America and the rest of our country as that of an exploited colony and a ruthless colonizer. He centered decades of writing around the idea of man's duty to love God and Creation and to love our neighbor. He avowed that we pursued this calling by loving our place, stewarding our land, and living in community with one another. My lifelong vision of revitalizing Stamford was set into overdrive.

My study of Berry's ideas led me to other brilliant thinkers. I already knew some of them, but others were fresh to my mind. There were the ecologists. Aldo Leopold spoke of a land ethic and a human responsibility to care for natural resources regardless of religious view. Allan Savory revolutionized viewing ecosystems holistically and considering man's impact on each piece of that system. There were authors like Wallace Stegner and Larry McMurtry who shaped my historical view of the West and its settlement, for good and bad. Then came the famous but radical Christians like Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. Day devoted herself to a life of poverty in service of the least of these, utterly disregarding the reliability of government or big business in favor of Christian charity. Merton wrote from his Kentucky hermitage to deepen man's spiritual connection with God. I read John Graves' "Goodbye to a River" and other works before I even knew Berry's name, but returning to them, I found an even keener sense of place than before.

Then, I discovered Paul Kingsnorth, a former radical activist who was a prominent author and leader in leftist environmental movements. He journeyed through atheism, Buddhism, and the Wiccan priesthood before he was dramatically pulled into Orthodox Christianity and a new life of homesteading in Ireland. There, he writes about finding true purpose in life amidst man's quest to replace nature and faith with technology and modernity, a peril he has dubbed "The Machine." Each of these people, and many others, have deeply influenced "West of 98" and my own mind.

This journey dismantled my views on rural America, shook out the cobwebs and ill-fitting pieces, and rebuilt them with a more vigorous and assertive spirit. It removed my interest in mainstream conversations about faith and politics in a period when those conversations took on a tone that was unhelpful to my happiness and to my work on the future of rural America. I have no interest in culture wars or red team/blue team nonsense. Yet, I am extraordinarily more secure in my beliefs and in my passion for rural America. At a time of intense polarization and anger, I feel more serene and peaceful than ever. Our life west of the 98th Meridian will not succeed if our leaders do not focus on the issues that truly matter to our life in this unique place.

That, my friends, is why West of 98 exists. I am thankful that my mind has been shaped to care about the causes and issues that matter to us, regardless of the national discourse. This is the work that matters to me. I believe that work starts with Wendell Berry's precepts of following the Greatest Commandments. Loving God and loving neighbor requires something deeper than the typical politician talking about it. It requires a focus on place and community and a fidelity to both. For many reasons, we have disconnected ourselves from both place and community over time. You can blame technology. You can blame government policy. You can blame mainstream culture and entertainment. You can blame the Industrial Revolution. You can blame simple human nature. In each case, you would be correct, but complaining about it merely delays the inevitable and important work to come.

By restoring a connection and love for our individual place and community, we restore vital connections that have frayed in modern society and left us in a precarious state. It restores our ability to provide our people with the fundamental economic provision of food, clothing, and shelter, instead of depending on distant factories, mega-corporations, and fragile supply chains. It prepares us to better withstand natural and man-made disasters and to keep our people safe if help never arrives. It restores a sense of purpose in



Donation! The Robert Lee Volunteer Fire Department recently received a \$2,500 donation from Electric Transmission Texas.

our lives, both individually and collectively. It improves our mental and physical health. As we restore and repair these connections, we impact the world at large and encourage others to follow suit.

I turned 40 earlier this year. I will admit that I haven't always "fit in." I was a nerdy kid who aspired to become more athletic but was wholly unable to do so. I had unique hobbies as a child that occupied my brain in necessary ways. The same has carried through to adulthood. I have struggled with wanting to fully express myself while simultaneously valuing the opinions of others whom I respect but who might not always understand me. I have long known that I was destined to live in rural America, even when people told me I was crazy.

Today, I care much less about fitting in. I think a lack of conformity is necessary for this work, although I am still learning the mental peace associated with reducing my "people pleaser" tendencies. Each of these writers who influenced me were not conformists either. Many of them have been considered deeply controversial at some point in time. They often struggled for acceptance, even from people who once embraced

them before their life's calling made them more difficult to understand. Their failure to conform did not make them any less impactful. It probably made them more impactful. I know that Stamford and similar places will not thrive if our leaders are concerned about popularity at higher levels of politics or if they confine their concerns to the arbitrary boundaries of conventional politics, economics, faith, and culture. This work requires us to focus on the actual needs of place and community.

I want life to be a little better beyond the 98th Meridian. I want our people and places to thrive. I want our communities to uplift their people, no matter their background, their last name, or what they look like. I want us to live with the harmony required by our unique land and its brilliant harshness, even if it requires differences from life "back East." I want our places to be those that others wish to be part of. These notions sound simple, but in the 21st century, they are radical. They run contrary to the trends of our society and The Machine in practically every way.

To my readers old and new, welcome to a growing and invigorated West of 98. Conformity is unnecessary. Love for place and community is essential.

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