

Rural questions - Sam Feldstein

How often would you go out to eat?

I grew up on a small farm in a small town in Iowa called Bondurant. When I was twenty-five I moved to town called Alpine in Far West Texas. They were both rural settings, but quite different from each other, so I'll try to answer these questions on both fronts.

Food-wise, there wasn't much going on in Bondurant. There was one pub in town that served food and I think that was maybe it. As far as I know, no one in my family has ever been there. At some point a Polito's Pizza opened, but why go there when you have Casey's? We lived only fifteen minutes from Ankeny, a large suburb, and only twenty-five minutes from Des Moines (the capitol), so if we wanted to go out to eat we'd go there. Usually eating out was reserved for special occasions, but that was more due to my parents' scruples than our geographic circumstances.

There were places to eat in Alpine and the surrounding area, but not many, so the only thing you were starved for was options. It did make it very exciting whenever a new place opened, which was fairly often. A lot of people open businesses in that region hoping to capitalize on the tourists headed to Marfa and/or Big Bend National Park.

Where would you go for birthday parties?

In Bondurant, I remember going to the roller rink at least once. There was a Chucky Cheese in Des Moines which we might have gone to when we were really young. Otherwise you'd just go to friends' houses.

We lived on an acreage so my favorite thing to do, especially into high school and college, was to have friends over for a bonfire. And by bonfire I don't mean a ring of bricks. I mean a huge brushpile with an old couch or other junk thrown in for good measure. That's about as redneck as my family ever got. That, and

the time we bulldozed the old woodshed with the tractor. We burned that, too. (Ms. Chang has been to my house for at least one such bonfire, so she can tell you all about it.)

How obvious was it when someone was visiting from out of town?

In Bondurant, not obvious, at least to me. It wasn't an "everybody knew everybody" kind of place, because you did all your shopping in Ankeny. So it wasn't so isolated. If there was a new kid in school, that was obvious, because there were only around a hundred of us. But that isn't tiny, of course. In Marfa (the next town over from where I lived in west Texas), there twelve students in the 2021 graduating class.

In West Texas it was pretty obvious when somebody was new to town, because it was so isolated. Everybody did their shopping at the same stores, ate at the same restaurants, went to the same bars. So you saw everybody everywhere. New faces stood out.

What was the racial breakdown of Bondurant?

99% White. There was one kid in my class who may have been half-Black half-White, but I'm not sure. We were the only Jewish family in town, as far as I know. Jews aren't exactly a race, but it seems worth mentioning.

In Alpine, maybe 70% of people are Hispanic, but you wouldn't know it. Most of the business owners and employees are White, so the White people are who you see.

There were a number of Jews in the area, more than you'd guess, but no synagogue or anything.

What is a cornjerker?

I have no idea, but assuming it's not a euphemism, I'd guess it's somebody who picks corn.

Update: "Cornjerker" is not in the dictionary, as far as I can tell, but it does have a Wikipedia entry. The entry claims that the term does indeed mean somebody who picks corn, but does not cite a source. It does appear that there was a sports team called the Cornjerkers in some Illinois town.

If you want a related modern term, look up detasseler. It's someone who detassels corn, meaning they pull the tassels off before the corn is harvested. This is a common summer job for high-schoolers where I come from. I never did it because I hate working.

What percentages of houses had farm animals?

In Bondurant, I don't know. I'm sure less than half. Most people lived in town.

We had horses, sheep, and chickens (and dogs and cats). We knew a lot of people with horses because we were pretty involved in that community.

In west Texas there's a lot of big ranches but few small farming operations. So pretty much only the ranchers own livestock, with a few exceptions.

Did you ever work or live on a farm? If so, what was the work like?

I grew up on a small farm. But not a commercial one, so we didn't have field crops or anything. The work consisted of taking care of the animals. So you'd feed in the morning before breakfast, and again after school before supper. (Yes, we call it supper. And if you think that's twisted, wait till I tell you that my grandparents call lunch dinner.)

Any amount of livestock entails a certain amount of shit-shoveling, so we did some of that. And we helped our mom in her garden. So we'd pull weeds, mulch, chop horseweeds, fix fence, chop firewood, mow the pasture with the bush hog (a giant lawnmower attached to the back of a tractor).

I pretty much hated all of it, to be honest with you. Working outside in the heat and humidity, not for me.

What was the most common job people did in the area?

No idea. I mentioned detasseling for the high-schoolers. But for grown-ups, probably lots of things. We lived close enough to the other large towns and cities that lots of (if not most) people probably worked there. My dad was a lawyer in Ankeny, for example.

Name your typical friday night out?

I was pretty introverted as a kid, and a nerd, so my Friday nights were spent at friends' houses watching movies and playing video games.

In Texas, we went out to eat, went for a drink, sometimes went to the movies (there was one small theater in Alpine). You could usually find live music somewhere, even if it was one of the local bands you'd seen a thousand times. Nothing you can't do anywhere else.

What did people from Bondurant think of people in suburbs/cities?

Nothing in particular. Bondurant was a good mix of suburban and rural, so there was nothing to assume about one culture or the other, because you knew people from both.

I can tell you that some of my family members in northeast Missouri, a much more rural place than where I grew up, believe that people from cities look down on them. As someone who has lived in cities, I don't think they're wrong. I think a lot of people from the city think people from the country are ignorant. I'd argue that everybody's ignorant, just about different things.

That being said, this attitude only seems to arise in a political context. Some of my Missouri family came to Boston for my brother's wedding last year, and everybody had a blast. So while I think these attitudes exist, I think they tend to evaporate when people

from one culture come face-to-face with people from the other. Then everybody's just happy to be there.

How often would you go to the "city"? Where was "the city"?

In Bondurant, the city was Des Moines. About twenty-five minutes away. Hardly a foreign concept. I went to high-school there.

Texas was different. The nearest cities were El Paso and Midland, both about three hours away. I don't if the high-schoolers in those areas ever make the trek or not.

What were your dating opportunities in high school? (example: if you broke up with someone, were they "gone"? Or were they your neighbor and you couldn't avoid them?)

I only dated one person in high school, and she lived in a different town. So breakup scenario wasn't really relevant.

West Texas was like that though. If you dated somebody or had a fling, you were definitely going to see that person around. It was like living in a fishbowl. Actually, it was a little bit like high school in that everybody knew everybody's business, and there was a lot of gossip.

How far away would you bike?

I didn't bike. Not really a thing in the country, because nothing's close enough to bike to.

What did you like about the community you grew up in? What was the challenge?

I liked having a lot of space to play when I was younger. And it was pretty cool being able to do things like have bonfires in the back yard. I rode horses a lot growing up, which probably wasn't something I'd have been able to do if I'd grown up in a city.

In west Texas, you were never a stranger, which could be good and bad. Bad, because everybody knew your business, so it was

impossible to be anonymous. Good, because you didn't really have to make plans. You could just show up somewhere and be pretty sure there'd be people there you knew.

I didn't like being so far from everything though. I lived in Southern California for a while, which had its own downsides, but one of the things I loved about it was there was always stuff happening. Tons of music and movies and events. In west Texas, not so much. And when there was something happening, it was the *only* thing happening, whether you were into it or not. So as I said earlier, we were starved for choices when it came to...well, pretty much anything.

Would you move your family back there?

I don't have a family, but if I did I'd probably want to move to a city or at least a medium size town. A place where there's a good amount of fun things to do on any given weekend. I love movies and music, so anywhere with a good scene for either of those things (like Chicago!) is probably where I'd pick.