

Is this Heaven? No, it's Iowa
Stoia Reunion July 7 – 9, 2006
By Gail Grenier Sweet © 2006

The Land

Simon and Garfunkel sang “We’re all gone to look for America...”

I lived that song again crossing from Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin to Red Oak, Iowa for Justin and Jenna Stoia’s wedding....

Farmland unbelievably rolling, like Wisconsin. (Glacial like Wisconsin?)

Deepest greens, like Ireland.

Corn high, deep green, tasseled.

Ground-hugging legume crops, lighter green.

Ripe oats shining like the softest gold in the sunlight.

... And all the crops blowing in the breeze like waves on the sea.

Barns with cupolas – not Wisconsin barns.

Cows cooling off in a river on a 93-degree day.

Hills and hills and hills. The freeway had to curve this way and that to handle the hills. I couldn’t take the curves at 75 mph, had to slow down to 70.

We stopped in a couple of small towns – Morrison, IL, to retrieve Anna’s lost wallet (God bless the person who turned it in!), and Red Oak, Iowa for the wedding. In both towns, the tallest building is the grain elevator... an *IMPRESSIVE* grain elevator!

It’s easy, living near a metropolitan area, to assume that all of America is “big city.” In the four days we traveled, we never saw a big city. Charlie and Katie were on a weeklong road trip from Wisconsin through South Dakota to the wedding and back, and the biggest city they visited was Mitchell, SD, home of the famous corn palace.

Most of America’s population may be centered in cities, but most of her living area is rural.

Endless cornfields, marching into the horizon: this is the landscape imprinted on the optic nerves, and on the hearts, of both Jenna and Justin. Jenna is from Red Oak, IA

and Justin from Somonauk, IL. I'll never forget driving through the very flat Somonauk farmland years ago, tall corn on either side of the "blacktop." I felt like I was driving through a green tunnel.

We crossed rivers about 10 times. About four of those crossings were for the same winding river. All the rivers had people in them, fishing or boating. How I wanted to join them.

Sunday night, as we neared Illinois, a strange sky rolled in... it looked like it was holding a storm and wouldn't let go. The clouds were backlit over a dusky sky pink white and blue.

Iowa is now my second favorite state. It is beautiful! Like heaven.

The Reunion

What a crazy family reunion – four generations from age 84 down to age one – talking, laughing, eating, drinking, dancing, teasing.

Some of the highlights of the wedding:

- Climbing the hill outside the reception hall with assorted females of various ages and bellowing together, "The hills are alive with the sound of music." (I later learned that Ben Sweet dubbed me his "special needs aunt" after that stunt.)
- The best man's speech:

Justin's friend, Bradley Lewis, told the story of Justin and Jenna meeting at a wedding and of their instant attraction. Later, Bradley had to face the questions of the Sharpe family and others from Red Oak. They asked of Justin, "Can you trust him? Where's he from? What does he do? What's he like? Can you trust him?"

To me, it tells something about the people of Red Oak that being *trustworthy* is their greatest concern.

- The matron of honor's speech:

Jennifer Claggett, Jenna's cousin, mentioned the two secrets she's learned for a happy marriage: "Have a sense of humor and a short memory."

- Cool moves on the dance floor:

"The shopping cart"

"The sprinkler"

"Catching stars"

“Dog off the leg”
“Monkey off the back”
“Screw in the lightbulb”
“Big fish – little fish – cardboard box”

-- All executed with elan by Miss Anna Rose Sweet, leading the pack.

But the most interesting and newest move to me was “Catching the fish,” executed by the Lepak family -- Linda, Sarah, Billy, Bobby, Ben and Brian. One of them cast an imaginary fishing line out and another became the fish, getting caught, complete with fins a-waving (hands waving off cheeks). Particularly interesting rendition performed by this TALL family (average height about 6 feet, as opposed to the Sweet family whose average height is about 5 foot – 5).

- “Kung Fu Dance”:

Invented and executed by Mark Pappas and me. Mark graciously did not punch me out even after I snuck in a couple of jabs at him. How nice that the young defer to the aged!

- Brothers and sisters dancing with each other.
- Siblings ripping on each other as only siblings can do.
- Younger ones asking older ones, “Now who is that again?”
- Kitty Stoia, age 70-ish, dancing rock and roll style to “I like big butts” by Sir Mixalot.
- Making a new friend – a little girl named Rosie gave me a hug the last day. She’s a grandniece of Peggy Stoia’s and she lives in California. I’ll probably never see Rosie again. But there’s no better honor than winning the heart of a child.

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