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Editor's Notebook

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very summer our family packs the car, leaves Massachusetts behind and heads for the Midwest to visit grandma. After years of traveling to the Midwest, the trip has become something of a tradition and a sure-fire means of keeping the family together, even if that means enduring the inevitable backseat fights, the roadside pit stops and the endless stream of fast-food restaurants.

But if the trip has taken on certain unavoidable regularities, it has also given our family an opportunity to reflect on life in the Midwest. Naturally, as residents of Massachusetts we are convinced that the Commonwealth is the epicenter of civilization in the United States and blessed with endless beauty. But as our car rambles through the Midwest on route to our destination in Wisconsin, it becomes increasingly clear that there is indeed life outside of the Bay State, and in many respects a superior quality of life.

One of the first inescapable observations upon leaving Massachusetts is that the price of almost everything goes down, from gasoline to food to lodging. What is more, the people who are providing the gas and food and lodging are usually more pleasant and considerate. This economic and personal "culture shock" forces us to look more closely at life in the Midwest. As we move west we pick up a newspaper in Buffalo and find nary a hint of political infighting, but rather a litany of human interest stories. We drive through Cleveland and see that the city, despite its rusty image, is booming with construction including a new baseball stadium. We stop for dinner in Indiana and meet people so laid back and respectful that our faith in mankind is restored. And we attend a state fair in Wisconsin where the sense of community and pride in the simpler things of life is overwhelming.

Being true believers in the cultural, educational and medical superiority of Massachusetts, however, we at first are reluctant to see Midwestern hospitality, stability and simplicity as anything more than quaint rural qualities. But quickly we find that what the region may lack in terms of world renowned orchestras, dance companies, theater groups, universities and hospitals is matched by good government, low taxes, efficient services and healthy economies. The Midwest is certainly no utopia and has little of the intensity and the ambition of Massachusetts, but there is an undercurrent of common sense and non-partisan cooperation in this part of America that is sadly missing back home.

What many from Massachusetts would characterize as wide-eyed naivete and unsophistication is really the traditions of neighborly trust and attention to the more basic instincts of family, home, and church.

Perhaps the most attractive characteristic of life in the Midwest is that a stay there leaves one more relaxed and refreshed. Because the pace is slower, the people friendlier and the daily concerns more traditional, there is less attention paid to what is wrong with the world. The Midwest is not known for its angry talk show hosts or its preoccupation with political intrigue or the frenzy associated with sports and sports heroes. Call-in radio programs usually offer advice on home improvements, politicians are still public servants not the enemy and sports is more a polite social event with tailgating and good cheer rather than a crusade for victory. In such a climate one cannot help but feel relieved and forget the barrage of criticism and disappointment that seems to dominate life in Massachusetts.

But alas the week at grandma's house comes to an end and the family packs up the car and heads back to Massachusetts. As we enter the western part of the state the memories of life in the Midwest begin to fade and we become entranced with the beauty of the Berkshires, the confidence of the people and the societal drive for excellence. Circling Boston on Route 128 we are reminded that Massachusetts is a place of new ideas and new solutions, a truly international crossroads where the future is being shaped on a daily basis. We pick up the paper and listen to the radio and find that life in the Commonwealth has not changed much while we were gone - there are still stories about corruption, political infighting and rude behavior. But we are home, where the good mixes with the not-so-good in ways that at times may be frustrating but are always invigorating and challenging. The Midwest may be a place to rest and reflect but Massachusetts is a place that is exciting and demanding, two conditions that are irresistible.