

Reflections on the Parke County Covered Bridge Festival

By Gary Cowan

As the torrid days of Summer in Parke County become increasingly distant memories of baked pavement, parched fields, and still Summer nights oppressed by stifling heat and the incessant hum of mosquitoes, a curious transformation begins to take place. The hills that we all know and love have become infused with a new vitality, an energy that touches US to the Very core. Once again, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, Parke County takes on a newly vibrant persona. The dog days of Summer have Passed; now is a time of joyous anticipation and contemplative reflection.

As Covered Bridge Festival time approaches, our senses are inundated with delights beyond compare. For some it is the breathless anticipation of Football season, with its amiable camaraderie of old and newly made friends, as the thud of a kicked football echoes in the air that promises just a hint of a chill. There is something warm and complete in that camaraderie, a place you can always visit and feel perfectly-well, "home!"

For many people it is a chance to touch the past by visiting a veritable plethora of truly living historical exhibits. It might be an opportunity to visit our many covered bridges to take a stroll down a sylvan scene and imagine a nostalgic era that appears to be straight out of Norman Rockwell's vision of rural America. It might be to visit Billie Creek Village, Bridgeton Mill, or the Parke County Museum to vicariously experience the Parke County of the past, so well preserved in its rich oral and written history. Maybe by touching the Past we add meaning to the present.

Yet for others it might simply be the food, as our senses reel from a dizzying mixture of old favorite foods and tantalizing new and trendy menu offerings. Parke County in the Fall is the perfect place to simply let go of our fad diet obsessions and bask in the buttery joy of a steaming baked potato, the mouth-watering aroma of a variety of meats prepared in a number of cooking styles, and just relish the sheer joy of the ever popular sport of people watching while clutching your own particular favorite comfort food. During Fall in Parke County, all the world truly is a stage and a smorgasbord!

My own memories are of a much more personal nature. I remember walking with my parents in Turkey Run State Park, kicking piles of leaves while my parents smiled at my happiness. I can remember my wife and I sitting in wide-eyed wonder at the panoramic vista that unfolded before us as we sat at the Neet Bridge. The only sound to be heard was the echoing rustle of the cornstalks as the wind gently tiptoed through the even rows of corn. It was a peaceful, slightly melancholy sound. It said to me, "God is near, and the wind in this valley seems like the feeling of forever."

I think that, to visit Parke County in the Fall, is to stop time ever so briefly in order to do some things basic to our sense of introspection and retrospection. We take time to revisit familiar places and to evoke the memory of old experiences. Revisiting the past helps reaffirm who we are and how we came to be the unique person that exists in each of us. By touching the tangible things of the past, we can truly feel that we are connected to something larger than ourselves, something to which we all truly belong.

We also stop time to slow down the frenetic, yet mundane cycle which constitutes our daily lives and see the greater cycle that existed before us, is now directly with us, and remains a timeless entity to be passed on in a beautiful way to those who will follow us. For me this cycle exists whenever I see a new class of students at Rockville. I remember their mothers and fathers and I can only smile. Some things never change. I remember a certain tree on the way to Bloomingdale that explodes in color every year – the same tree that awed my mother a half century ago. I remember my mother cooking breakfast on crisp Turkey Run Autumn mornings, the smell wafting through the trees as my father and I played catch and the chipmunks frolicked in the underbrush. Then came our trek to Sunset Point for quality time with my parents and time to admire Sugar Creek as it meandered into forever.

I have long realized that God is everywhere if we seek with open eyes and hearts. God is life and each Fall our hills come alive with the echoes of the past, the joy of the present, and promise for the future, as we step into our own very special little piece of forever.