



## Origins



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 **tacit**

<https://tacit.livejournal.com/>

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This is the "town" of Venango, Nebraska:



(<http://www.obsidianfields.com/lj/venango-large.jpg>)

I put the word "town" in quotes because this particular town, the small cluster of houses and roads on the left-hand side of the image, has a population of around 170, no paved roads, and a single stop sign. If you like, you can click on the picture in order to see a larger view of the horror.

The house in the middle right, which I've enlarged in the inset, is the place I spent a number of my formative years.

Looking at the picture now, it's amazing how little has changed in the twenty-six years since I left there. There used to be a barn just above the house, in the place where the rust-colored scar in the dirt is now, and the town used to have a few more people in it (at the time I lived there, the population was 242). Other than that, it looks pretty much exactly as it did back then.

I went to elementary school in a class of eight people--the largest the town had seen in a decade. The class one grade ahead of me had two people in it. If one were to plot a map of the popularity of the handful of kids at the school, I'd be at the bottom of it, no question about it. I was the only person in the entire school whose parents weren't long-time Nebraska natives, and the only kid who didn't much care for football. I was the only kid with a computer (a Radio Shack TRS-80). This, in an environment that prized conformity above all things--conformity of speech, of action, of thought.

Now, American schools are not, and never will be, places that reward anything but conformity. In this tiny town, though, it was as if someone had taken all the need for conformity, all the closed-minded intolerance, and all the petty assbattery you can imagine dredging up from the lowest strata of the human condition, and refined it, distilled it down to its purest and most elemental essence. The drive toward conformity permeated every part of the town, to where one could scarcely tell its citizens apart. It expressed itself even in the casual, offhand racism that made up the sum of the town's attitude toward others--despite that fact that not one of the people I knew, not one single one, had ever even met any person whose skin was not white. Not once in their entire lives.

I survived the years in Nebraska by keeping to myself and by doing things that nobody else in the town could even understand, much less relate to. I built and flew model rockets (and occasionally lost them in the wheat fields surrounding the house), and I used antique bulletin board systems with a crude, slow 300-baud telephone modem that set my parents back some \$600 (at the time, there were only a handful of such systems out there, CBBS Chicago and Magnetic Fantasies in California being the two I most strongly remember using). I read a *lot*, mostly science textbooks and fantasy novels.

And I developed a very strong, cast-iron case of don't-give-a-fuck-what-other-folks-think.

Even back then, as the least popular kid in class, the one who was regularly bullied and beaten by the other kids at school (I particularly remember two rather obnoxious meatbags, both named Mike, who everyone called Mike A. and Mike C.; I don't remember their last names, though I distinctly remember a number of thrashings at their hands), I would not even for a second have traded lives with any of them.

At the time, living in that benighted hellhole was the worst, most miserable thing I could possibly imagine. I came away from it with an ironclad belief that my life belongs to me and it simply does not matter what anyone else thinks of that, and that's really not such a bad place to be.

I'm curious whatever became of Mike A. and Mike C. I suspect they didn't escape.

**TAGS:** [origins](#), [philosophy](#).



21 comments



February 20 2008, 00:00:56 UTC

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I grew up in the Big City. At the beginning of high school, my class size was well over a thousand. I remember moving (from one Big City to another Big City) and realising that nobody really knew that I was the New Kid, which was both terrifying and enthralling simultaneously. Nobody knew my family or cared to. You stuck out if you did something exceptional (good or bad) but for the great masses of in-between, you could go your entire K->College career and not make an impression on anybody.

I was not one of the masses of in-between... I wasn't the best in my class, but I was in the top 10% easily. (#38... of #900+) I had one friend, and we were never best friends really. (I still don't really have many friends, as it were)

I however can't possibly imagine such an isolated existence. I much prefer my near-anonymous non-existence to that stupid magnifying glass.



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[February 25 2008, 23:28:14 UTC](#)

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Amen to that. After elementary school, my family moved to Florida, where I entered a high school with 6,000 other students. Having experienced both, more people is better.



[February 20 2008, 00:11:57 UTC](#)

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Yow. I'm always so impressed by people who come out of an environment like that without permanent damage. Go you.

About eight years ago I went to my wife's 20 year reunion in St Marie's, ID. It's a small town, but bigger than yours - I think her graduating class was 90 people, at least half of whom had never moved away or even traveled out of the state. Showing up as a lesbian couple with a 13 year age difference and a definite butch/femme thing going on was probably not the best idea, but we did it anyway. Most people just pretended I didn't exist.

Actually, I'm still surprised we survived that weekend. At least the bed and breakfast owners in the next town over were nice. And we got to meet Christina Crawford.



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[February 26 2008, 00:38:15 UTC](#)

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I can't even imagine trying to be in any kind of non-traditional relationship in that sort of environment. Fortunately, my family fled the desolation the same year I went into high school (and God knows I never intend to go back!), so I won't have to face that problem...



[February 20 2008, 00:30:18 UTC](#)

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

The numbers speak for themselves, don't they? All the people who moved out, did something better with their lives.

Go you.

I grew up in a smallish town, about 100,000 people. It's a parochial, backwards town. I went back there about 10 years after high school finished, and met my old crowd. They were stultifyingly boring. Monday: coffee at girl 1's place. Tuesday, coffee at girl 2's place. Wed, thurs, same. Friday, trip into town for coffee. Saturday night, the pub with them and their respective menfolk.

Conversation: mindnumbingly trivial.

Prospects: more of the same.

God. Whatever I suffered being the odd one out as a child, they are suffering far worse now. I asked one friend to whom I'd been closest in school, how is your life? She shrugged, and said, it's okay I guess.

A life full of beige? Blech. Mike C and A had it coming to them.



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[February 26 2008, 00:39:09 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

"A life full of beige." Yeah, that sounds about right. :)

*Deleted comment*



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[February 26 2008, 00:40:52 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Dear God, no. :) My parents moved o Florida when I went into high school. It was a bit of culture shock; I left a class of eight and went to a high school with six thousand students in it. I doubt that in all of Venango there'd be even one person I was interested in (and compatible with), much less two...



[\[redacted\]](#)  
[February 20 2008, 03:27:51 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Wow. Reminds me of the town that my grandfather used to live in: Greenville, NY. Tiny, rural town surrounded by farms and the occasional resort since it's right in the Catskills. It was the major town in the area since it had one stoplight...that blinked (for about 15 years. Then they changed it to a regular light). To give you an idea, my grandfather's old street? County Route 309. Ok, so it's not quite Venango, but it's close. And frankly, I'm glad you made it out. I grew up in a small town, but it was nowhere near THAT small. I can't even imagine living in a town of 170 people.



[\[redacted\]](#)  
[February 20 2008, 04:03:28 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I find it interesting that your old home looks like a face...



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[February 26 2008, 00:41:37 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

BWAH! I didn't notice that, but it kinda does, doesn't it?



[\[redacted\]](#)  
[February 20 2008, 05:48:50 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

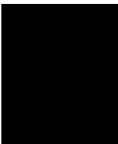
I though I grew up in a small town (population 9000)! I currently live in a town with a population of ~1030 and a density of about 42 people per square mile, having moved here from a town of ~4000 with about 92 people per square mile. I was also one of the most unpopular kids growing up, because my parents were from 'away', I didn't talk like everyone else, and I was overweight. I was also constantly beaten up and tormented at school. From 4th grade onward, it always took 3 kids or more to beat me up, because I was bigger and stronger than they were. ahh, the "good ole days". I guess going through all of that did make more tolerant of others, somehow.



[\[redacted\]](#)  
[February 20 2008, 15:41:03 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

well at least that gives me some hope for my cousin. her folks moved to wheatfeild, indiana. to send mail, i have to put a latitude and longitude on it.



 [February 20 2008, 16:22:57 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

And I bet they all voted for W. - 



 [February 21 2008, 03:25:56 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Well, there's one redeeming feature.



 [February 20 2008, 21:24:57 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

This was an absolutely fascinating read. Thanks for posting it. This kind of thing is one of my secret interests- what happens in these little microcosms, so close and yet so far from the world. Maybe it's because, big as we are here in the city, and despite all our power, places like that will probably exist until people don't anymore, and we'll probably be the first to go.



[tacit](#)  
[February 26 2008, 00:45:26 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

What's really interesting to me is the way the geographic isolation is reflected in a kind of cognitive isolation. Many of the people in my school had never been outside of the state, and couldn't really imagine any sort of life except the ones they lived. Even access to outside media was limited--at the time I lived there, there was no satellite television and no cable, so we got two stations (one of which was PBS). I imagine that's probably changed now, but it certainly contributed to the isolation.



 [February 20 2008, 22:49:19 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Oh, god. This sounds a whole lot like my formative years. Subtract some of the remoteness, add a lot more Southern Baptist mother.

It does make you stronger. I take some pleasure in running across people from "home" on MySpace. Never left town, never got more education than high school, don't realize that being a Baptist is being a Protestant. Etc.



 [February 21 2008, 00:11:43 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

*..."All my friends are buried there,  
and some of 'em are dead,  
so home is where I'll always hang my head..."*

-*"That God Forsaken Hellhole I call Home"*, The Austin Lounge Lizards



 [February 21 2008, 01:56:38 UTC](#)  CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

I really enjoyed this post. I mean, it made me physically ill of course, but it was really nice to see some insight into your past. I hope someday I can get that same "I don't give a fuck" attitude, w/o the crazy

conservative bastards.



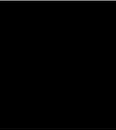
 **tacit**

[February 26 2008, 00:46:22 UTC](#)

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Seems like the crazy conservative bastards help in the development of that sort of attitude, providing they don't make you into one of them first...



 [February 22 2008, 23:42:38 UTC](#)

CHECK [COLLAPSE](#)

Very well-written. My own upbringing was not nearly as desolate or isolated but a lot of what you've written resonates just the same. I developed the same kind of attitude out of social necessity, though probably less reinforced. Of course time takes care of that.

My slowest modem was 2400 baud, though, if memory serves.