

# Reconciling Marshfield

*Of time, place, and memory*



Tower Hall in downtown Marshfield, Wisconsin, in late February 2019.

*by Craig Lancaster*

**W**hen I was in high school thirty-plus years ago, I knew a girl. A hell of an opening, isn't it? This thing could go in any direction. So many possibilities.

Well, I hate to disappoint.

When I was in high school, I knew a girl. And we were...friends. Are friends. Remain friends. It didn't amount to more than that, which is a strange observation to make, as if the underlying sentiment is that it should have been more. That's pretty damn presumptuous, isn't it? In what world is a friendship, let alone one that's lasted into a fourth decade, some kind of consolation prize?



Let me be clear: We were friends. Are friends. Will be friends as long as we both draw breath, I hope.

Yes, there was one little yip of an attempt at dating. We saw *From the Hip*, Judd Nelson's post-*Breakfast Club* would-be star vehicle. We had dinner at Whataburger. We had a good time. And we stayed friends.

Now, full disclosure: In any romantic endeavor that doesn't work out, there's generally one party who's more injured than the other. I was that party. It's no

big deal, now. It seemed like one then, but if I had to permanently live where my seventeen-year-old emotions took me, I'd be forever writing bad poetry in front of a Domino's Pizza in North Richland Hills, Texas.

To put it in the modern parlance, I was friendzoned before I knew what the friendzone was. (Note to future essay-writing self: Consider a piece on what a horrible concept this friendzone is and how the mere idea says so much about how generally fucked up we are when it comes to human relationships.)





The reason we became friends is common enough: We had friends in common, classes in common, interests in common. GDI that I was in those years, I didn't have a crowd so much as friends from many crowds. I was equally at ease hanging with the jocks and the guys from auto shop, which is about as far from an effective Venn diagram as existed in my particular school at that particular time in that particular town. Lisa was in the honors-English crowd. I could hang there, too.

She was also different and separate from our common crowd because she landed among us during high school, her family having moved to the area from out of state. This wasn't exactly unheard-of—even then, North Richland Hills was a big, thumping suburb in an area that rapidly swelled with newcomers—but in a big school full of kids who'd known each other for years, she was someone new, someone with a giveaway nasal Midwestern accent among a bunch of Texas kids who *y'all*'ed it up all the livelong day.



**Downtown Marshfield  
in August 2019.**



Rose Bowl  
Lanes in  
Marshfield.  
I sent this  
photo to  
Lisa just  
because  
the building  
caught my  
fancy. Turns  
out that her  
mother was  
in a league  
there.



Lisa was from Marshfield, Wisconsin. I can't remember when she told me that, whether she volunteered it or I asked. It doesn't matter. In 1987, she might as well have told me she was from Mars. I had no Wikipedia at the ready, no Google Earth on my phone (I didn't have a phone). I couldn't have conjured a vision of where she'd come from without a great deal of effort, so this information, something so foundational to who she was, went in one ear and...

Well, that's the point, isn't it? That's why I'm setting down these words. It went in one ear and it attached to my memory, and there it stayed as the years burned off, one by one by one.

And I think now of that occasionally heartsick boy, the one who wrote the bad poetry and read entirely too much of himself into the songs he heard (oh, Jesus, "Mandolin Rain"), and I see now a glimmer of the man he'd become. One who listened. Who remembered. Who learned to draw on memory and experience and use those things in his creative endeavors. For so long, I thought it a useless parlor

trick, the things I could remember, the trivia I could spit out, the places that seared into the deepest parts of me, that I could then recall with clarity years later. The imprints left on me aren't impressionistic; they are vivid, high-definition. It's how I see them, in moments and in memories.

When I married my wife in 2016, the processional was the Beatles' "In My Life," an apt choice. The triggered torrent of the places we remember, that's common humanity right there. The song gets us because we know those emotions. They're in our bones.

But what about the places we remember that we never saw?

What about Marshfield?

**I**n the summer of 2016, I was on a pipeline crew making a slow run through the gut of Wisconsin, from Superior in the far north to the Wisconsin Dells area in the south-central part of the state. I was working the day shift,



noon to midnight, and we skirted Marshfield in the midafternoon. The town's name, slotted into my random-access memory nearly thirty years earlier, emerged clean and prompted a Facebook message to Lisa back in Texas. Between sites, I took ten minutes and dashed into Marshfield, putting eyes on it. I sent a little scrap of video back to her. She said something funny, about how she hadn't been back in ten years.

Time is kinetic.

Do the math: At that point, we were twenty-eight years clear of our high school graduation. She was thirty years a Texan, in residence if not in blood. She was many years married, with two boys. I was nearly as many years gone from Texas, into a succession of places I called home: Alaska, Arkansas, Kentucky, Ohio, California, Washington, Montana. She's more Texan now than I've ever been.

Time is transformative.

As with so many, our ability to remain in touch has been abetted by Facebook. (At times, that simplified connection with people for whom I care seems like the only reason to keep the damn thing.) I've watched her kids grow up. Seen family vacations. Shared "likes" and comments. The occasional note gets sent across the transom, from me to her or her to me, mostly nostalgic in nature. It's nice. On one of my visits to Texas in the early aughts, pre-Facebook, she invited me to movie night at her house; she and her husband, Scott, had a whole spread in the backyard, the movie projected onto a screen on the fence. It was fun. It was good to see her, to meet him, to chat with their friends.

I have so many friendships like that now, the kind that started long ago and morphed into something new and better along the way. That's life, you know. It's beautiful. It really, truly is.

**I**n February of this year, I returned to Marshfield. It was a brutal day. I'd gotten stuck on a snowmobile trail I'd mistaken for a road, my work vehicle buried to the axles in thick snow, more of it coming down on a day when much of the state got hammered. I waited five hours for a tow, then had to push through fast-filling highways for nearly a hundred miles so I could bag some sleep in Marshfield and pick up the line at midnight, when my next shift began.

Before departing, I headed downtown after nightfall and took some photos at Lisa's request. We joked, via text, about cheese curds. I stopped in at a convenience



store and, the exchanges fresh in my mind, told the clerk I had a high school friend in Texas who was from here. She asked the name, and I gave it to her.

"Hmmm. Don't recognize the name," the clerk said, a predictable enough answer if also disappointing against my imagination. I wanted "Oh my God, how *is* she?" I got a blank look.

Time continually wipes the board clean and writes something new.

Lisa is 22 years in her house in Texas, deeper still into her marriage, she's raising boys born of the Texas soil, and she knows all of her neighbors' names. "Oh my God, how *is* she?" lives directly south of Oklahoma. It doesn't live in Wisconsin.

**S**o...about Marshfield.

Nothing I saw on that visit, or on one I completed just this past week, surprised me. I've seen a hundred Midwestern towns like it, and I'll probably see another hundred before I'm done. (Sorry/not sorry about the Gordon Lightfoot undertones of that. Marshfield, I think, is the kind of town he'd know well.) What I like about Marshfield is what I like about Wisconsin in general.



There's charm in the supper clubs and in the friendly people and in the many (many!) bars with Heileman's Old Style signs hanging out front. Wisconsin is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get place in a world that's increasingly a hall of mirrors.

Demographically, there's no getting around this: It's white. Really, really white. It's also alluring and fraying and in transition to some unknown tomorrow. A lovely downtown of brick storefronts has, in large part, been left behind for the strip-mall promises of the outskirts, and now those aspirations are being dashed in a world of commerce ruled by Amazon. Health care keeps Marshfield humming. Agriculture, too, as you might imagine.

One of the prominent downtown businesses is a reverse-mortgage outfit, which probably tells you something about where the future of the place might lie. And yet, Marshfield hangs in. It built steadily, and sometimes spectacularly, from the late 1880s to the 1960s. Since, its population has been more or less stable. Even as the Lisas move out, those who stay have enough babies to keep everything churning. Still others move in from elsewhere. And why wouldn't they? It's a pleasant enough place in a pleasant enough part of the world. I found a clean room at the Baymont and a decent Mexican dinner down the road a piece. (Although to believe it was "authentic Mexican food," as advertised, would require me to accept that cheesy bacon fries have a south-of-the-border

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## Wisconsin is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get place in a world that's increasingly a hall of mirrors.

provenance, and that's too much to ask even of me.)

Mostly what I find in Marshfield is a mental picture of something I'd have appreciated thirty-some years ago: a way of visualizing my friend in the surroundings of her hometown. I can also see what might have compelled her Wisconsinite parents to up and move the family to Texas—something Lisa confirms in a Facebook message. Her mom had grown weary of the winters, and her father saw better career opportunities to the south and west.

I also gain something I wish I could have offered her all those years ago, and that's some empathy for what it must have been like to leave your home for somewhere new. I'm feeling this particularly acutely now as my wife and I have just decided to end our time in Maine, a move we undertook with great hope more than a year ago, and go back to Montana and the community we so badly miss there. Lisa got moved to Texas and it stuck. We moved to Maine and it didn't. Both actions require moving the bat off your shoulder and taking a mighty swing.

**H**ow did I end up down the rabbit hole of Marshfield, that long-ago name of some mysterious other place? Partly, it was practical: I went there, compelled by a job. Partly, it was a manifestation of something I've been unconsciously cultivating all my life: I've built out human connections that return to me in surprising ways and at surprising times. Elisa, my wife, put it this way when I told her about what it meant to see Marshfield: "You have such an interesting life in that all these paths cross in all these places." I must say, though, that the people in my life seem so much more interesting than the life itself.

Two days after my latest Marshfield stay, I drove from Wisconsin Rapids to the Twin Cities for my flights home: MSP to ATL, ATL to PWM. I settled into my exit-row seat on the first flight, accepted an offer of earbuds from the flight attendant, and realized I've lived long enough to collect an iPhone that doesn't

### Marshfield's population by decade

Year	Total	Pct. change
1880	669	—
1890	3,450	415.7
1900	5,240	51.9
1910	5,783	10.4
1920	7,394	27.9
1930	8,778	18.7
1940	10,359	18.0
1950	12,394	19.6
1960	14,153	19.2
1970	15,619	10.4
1980	18,290	17.1
1990	19,291	5.5
2000	18,800	-2.5
2010	19,118	1.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

have an earbud jack, which means I've probably lived too long. I put those away and checked my Kindle. Most of my library was in the cloud, inaccessible to me if I didn't want to pay for WiFi access (and I don't, not ever). One wasn't. It was *Where the Red Fern Grows*, by Wilson Rawls. I settled in, knowing well what was coming, wading into the book anyway. And sure enough, from Seat 11B (yes, that's between 11A and 11C) of the Atlanta-Portland flight, I wept. When I read it again in a decade or so, I'll weep again. I'm not too proud to say this.

I got home at nearly 3 a.m. Crawled into bed with Elisa after a week away. Kissed her goodnight. Made one quick check of something because I felt a whole new rabbit hole beckoning me. Googled *Wilson Rawls*, just to acquaint myself with the biographical details. And there it was. I couldn't believe it:

*Born September 24, 1913, in Scrapper, Oklahoma.  
Died December 16, 1984, in Marshfield, Wisconsin.  
Well, I'll be damned.*