The Cottonwood that Bent the Highway

Legend has it that back in the fifties, when the county spread blacktop over the gravel on the road straight west to the South Dakota border, one farmer held out. “That cottonwood,” they told him, “is going to have to go before the road goes in. He’s too blasted close to the roadbed. Look there at the way he hangs over.”

Farmer shook his head, said no way. Farmer said he loved that tree, cottonwood or not, tallest one on his place, best shade too; and you know what?-- he could give a fig for that blacktop because who needs the traffic out here anyway?

Road crew was adamant. “We’re not interested in fighting about this,” they said. “It’s got to go. Law says it.”

Farmer looked out into the horizon. “Sorry,” he said. No smile. “Don’t mean to stand in the way, but I’m not going to take kindly to your taking down that tree.”

Road crew left that afternoon. They figured the old guy’d blow off steam that night and they’d do what they had to the next day.

So the next morning, when they got out there, they got out of the truck to find that farmer sitting in front of the cottonwood, on his rear end, legs crossed, arms cradling a shotgun.

Now, if you doubt that story, go see that old cottonwood for yourself. It’s even bigger today than it was seventy years ago, and it still leans over B-64 west of Sioux Center. Farmer is long gone, but that cottonwood still lords it over the blacktop, stubborn and crooked as the guy who once held out with a shotgun.

That characters of that old story are the stock fare of prairie life. The farmer is lean, his shoulders stooped, a road map of a face—a man who might step out of a portrait by Dorthea Lange. And that cottonwood, majestic but bent up and torn by big winds.

And all around, a looming third character is the wide prairie, so featureless the first white men here called it an ocean, a sea of grass on rolling hills beneath the big bowl of broad horizon. It’s a land described with elegance by dozens of writers—Willa Cather, Mari Sandoz, even a couple of discoverers, William Clark and Meriwether Lewis; and our own ancestors--Rolvaag, Manfred, and Suckow.

The open prairie makes the farmer's story go. A prairie sun blotches the skin on his face; prairie winds twist that cottonwood. The wide land we live in frames their mutual stubbornness, makes the farmer look up at that cottonwood as a sidekick in the prairie epic.

Trees are no mere commodity here. They stem from immigrant stock, as most of us do. Even today, locked in the security of luxurious tractor cabs, a farmer’s livelihood is determined hailstorms and the grace of threatening winds.
It’s easy to get stubborn out here, in the cold and the heat and the forever wind. It’s not hard to get stuck in the old ways--immovable, armed to the teeth, as if forever holding our claim.

When strong winds stagger the trees out front, we hear startled branches through closed bedroom windows. We all worry about our trees. Lose a branch from some maple out front—who hasn’t?--and what’s left looks like a spread compass, that snapped limb half-hanging to the ground. There are moments out here when we all become a stubborn old farmers sitting beneath our trees, shotgun in arms, saying no.

We measure ourselves by the reach of our trees, after all. They grace our lives with their comely brokenness, show us what beauty is and isn’t; at times before them we stand in awe, sometimes in sadness. Our trees are our stories.

There’s a time for everything, says the preacher: "a time to weep and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance. A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones." Maybe even a time for a shotgun.