

Pancake Democracy in America

The prairie grass was very tall, spread wide as the eye could see, an immense, shaggy hide over undulating hills, grass so tall and thick that it was a hazard for those white folks who determined to settle the land here. The only way to be sure you knew where you were going, should you want to walk with the family, was to hold hands and not let the kiddos get lost in the mess. Such things happened. In those first weeks and months, the only way to be neighborly was to dig trenches between the soddies.

So they did--all of these brand new Americans, regardless of their station in life. They made paths to the rivers, the only distinctive geographical features in an otherwise endless ocean of grass, and paths to the neighbors too.

Two ladies determined to call on a neighbor some distance of away. These were ladies were not just common. They had, well, some significant social standing in the old country. With a neighborly visit in mind, the ladies followed the furrows in the newly plowed land until they discovered a brand new soddie or dugout they'd not seen or visited, where they found the burly good wife brewing up a batch of pancakes, it being summer and the stove standing outside the sod house. The good wife, who was herself plentiful, was overjoyed to have visitors and begged the ladies to stay for a plateful of hot cakes.

They gave each other sideways glances, but to their credit, they did stay, albeit hesitantly.

They knew that just such a threesome would never have happened in the old country where one properly punctilious, but out here the vast wilderness, wind, and rain, new rules for neighborliness just had to be written. When Alexis de Toqueville traveled the country in the 1830s, he liked what he saw immensely and simply assumed that the kind of equality he'd witnessed across the length and breadth of this frontier nation was a pure democratic blessing. He titled his travels *Democracy in America*.

After stirring up the batter, the good wife turned around to take care of something or other, garbling her low German language. The moment she turned, the family dog, a big, toothy black thing named Caleb, started snorting pancake mix and loving every bit of it. When the good wife saw--and heard--what was going down, she pulled that mixing spoon out of the batter and began banging Caleb, whipping him with that foot-long mixing spoon until he ran off in a torrent of untoward whapping. Then she smiled, grumbled about her much-loved mutt, let well enough alone, and simply plopped that spoon back in the mix, gave the batter a few more hefty turns, and churned out a ball of hot cakes that splashed on the griddle.

"Hep je honger?" the fat lady said.

Neither of her visitors could quite draw breath. They had clearly noted all of Caleb's whapping, as well as the spanking he took with that same wooden spoon.

For just a moment, the old country sunk farther away than it had during the three weeks they'd spent on the ship. Both of the women, simultaneously, took a deep breath and told themselves it was now, for very certain, a brand new world.

So there was no turning back. When the good wife served up hot cakes, bedecked with sugar, the ladies simply could not refuse, even though they took not a bite without visions of that black dog's floppy red tongue.

Later, when the two of them departed, their stomachs full, they were still a bit queasy as they followed those rugged lines of fresh furrows homeward.

All of this happened right here on recently broken Siouxland prairie. Those two gracious ladies, in an undeniably brand new world, learned some uncommon neighborliness, from, what we might call, "the American way."