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The 53rd Annual Pope County Deer Festival

It had been a while since I had been home, and an even longer time since I had attended a small-town community festival. On Friday, November 22nd, at approximately 6:00pm, it was a bittersweet homecoming walking into the dim, smoky tent of the 53rd annual Pope County Deer Festival. The tent was a block long, and situated outside the historic courthouse of Golconda, Illinois – just down the street from the Ohio River. Vendors, food, and hunters were huddled within to escape the severe cold, creating a salt and pepper, orange and black mixture of mingling locals and visitors.

“The concept of continuity suggests the importance of time and repetition as the process of tradition, but it is also used to acknowledge that traditions do not always come to us from generations past.” (Sims and Stephens, p.70) The community festival itself emerged after many years of deer drought – meaning that the deer population dwindled so significantly, the species was nearly depleted. However, in the early part of the 20th century the state government reintroduced the White-tailed deer (as well as the turkey) back into the wild. Unexpectedly, the numbers boomed - and ever since then, deer have been looked upon as pests by rural locals, like those who dwell in Pope County. In 1957, there were over 1700 deer harvested in the state of Illinois, and 110 of them were killed in Pope County, creating a trend in non-local hunters to hunt and contribute to businesses within the surrounding townships, namely Golconda, IL (which has a meager population of about 600, according to the 2012 census). Therefore, the festival was not only born of community belief and similar view, but out of commodification. Nevertheless,

The five day celebration repeats year after year – creating new meanings and establishing self-identity in Pope County for generations to come.

Because of the newly found commodity, the community found it beneficial to advertise the county as a superb hunting location, and it soon became a hunter's paradise. "Without deer hunting, there would be no Deer Festival.", states the Golconda Rotary Club edition newspaper while advertising some of the largest bucks killed in the area by locals. The entire origin was aimed to put Pope County on the map. Within the hustle and bustle of Saturday's tent and vendor setup, I interviewed Herman Adkerson, the General Chairman of the Rotary Club of Golconda for over forty years, and this year's President. He is a shorter man with a grandfatherly appeal, and I don't think I have ever seen without a Rotary Club hat. In 1957, Adkerson, and his wife (who at the time was a teacher) decided to move to Pope County for a couple years' experience. In the long run, they fell in love with the community and ended up staying. "I'm a slow learner!" he justified.

There, amongst the crowd of community elders and food vendors, I learned invaluable information concerning the roots of the festival I know and love. When I told Mr. Adkerson that the information was to be used for a university-based report, and that it may go into the archives, he seemed more than happy to divulge in the festival's history. Even when I told him about the ever-so-suspicious-looking release form, he was not deterred and instead replied, "I don't care who hears me. I want Pope County to get all the recognition it can get!"

"The festival...it's a community project. The Rotary Club used to have about thirty-five members, but now we only have fourteen. I generally put one person at a station [grill, buns, drinks, t-shirts, license plates, etc.] but when someone needs help, somebody'll come over and give them a hand. Because of that, they call me...something like a 'top sergeant'. We get our

wives to help, too! They seem happy to help.” said Mr. Adkerson. The esoteric methods within the high-context group of Rotarians not only comes from the long years they have spent together, but also due to the close proximity in which they continually stay within.

The now huge festival and community-recognized tent was once a fraction of its popularity. “It started out in the early years with the Shawnee Hills Recreational Association, advertising and feeding coffee and donuts to hunters passing through. After a while, more and more came to Pope County, the Rotary Club (and its barbeque) took over in 1960, and now over the years...it’s grown to the size it is now.” This is one way how the festival has changed, yet stayed the same. He explained that the Deer Festival is a fundraiser for the Rotary Club, a humanitarian organization dedicated to bettering the community, to add to their scholarship fund (in which \$87,000 has been raised, to distribute \$1,500 to a high school senior each year) and donate to various charities.

In another attempt to raise funds and spread the news about the glorious deer bounties of Pope County, the Rotary Club has issued a specialty license plate each year – of course, featuring a deer - since 1988. The artwork is always done by an art student at the local high school or by alumni, and the plates can be shown for the sixty day period leading up the festival. Each number is correlated with the amount sold, and it is yet another tradition that the Rotary Club President receives plate #1, the President-Elect #2, and the Club Secretary #3. Many times, the winner of the license plate competition will continue to enter and win year after year. I have personally won it three years in a row, from the 50th anniversary in 2010 to 2012.

This year’s deer plate and t-shirt logo was done by Ryan Rumsey, a PCCHS alumni and fourth time winner. It features the incredibly detailed bust of an eight-point buck, centered

between two green banners, stating "Pope County". I have to say, it is one of the best I have seen.

The tent itself has grown substantially. What was once held in the yard outside the town library, grew from a 40'x 40' to a 240'x 40' main tent with a 120'x 70' entertainment attachment. The sizes evolved with the continuation and prosperity of the ever-growing festival, which not only sells donuts and coffee, but barbeque, fajitas, and fried foods in between.

While the festival officially begins Wednesday night with a church service, and proceeds with Thursday's baby pageant, the main events kick off with the Deer Queen Pageant Friday night, in which several young ladies from the local high school compete against each other in a series of personality and beauty-defining interviews and tedious struts down the catwalk. This year, there were twenty-three girls, specifically, ranging from the freshmen to senior class. The pageant's roots originated a few years after the initial conception of the Deer Festival, in 1964. This year's theme was exclusively based around the personalities of the girls, collectively. The stage was garnished in yellows, baby blues, and pinks. Bright colors for bright minds, is what the coordinators announced, but it personally looked like the backdrop of a cheerleading clown show. I know that in recent years, the theme has differed from Motown to Taylor Swift, and the entertainment is selected accordingly. These performances are done by paid and invited outsiders (who generally don't know much about the festival) that provide exoteric presences within a generally esoteric, though relatively low-context, community.

The pageant takes place on an offshoot of the main tent, which wraps around one side of the courthouse. Three sets of bleachers line the perimeter, while several metal chairs on the grassy floor allow easier access for the disabled, elderly, and judges at the panel. Though slightly separated from the main area, the event tent is smoky from the fumes of the Rotary barbeque,

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Fajita Ladies' fajitas, and several fried-goods stands located around the corner. These vendors have been situated within the tent for years, and have gained much attention and excitement for their return each festival-time.

Each girl aspires to be a symbol of her community and school, and be recognized as a role model during her possible reign as Deer Queen. Within Pope County, the title is an honor. Many times, the girls will be second or third generation royals, or be closely related to one. This shows how distinct the tradition is, and that it possesses substantial meaning to the girls to carry it on. The contestants must go through rigorous social training and prepping prior to the event. They have a coach to motivate them, and help prepare them for the extremely important interview, which is the most heavily weighted judgment they face in the process.

“...there are profound differences between the state or national beauty pageants and the queen pageants that are part of small-town festivals. One difference in community pageants is that the candidates usually spend time together, sometimes as long as two or three months, preparing for the competition and socializing informally and formally through events planned for them by the pageant's organizers. Sometimes they are trained as a group in makeup, clothing, and standing and walking on stage.” (Lavenda, p.168) Then, on the actual night of the pageant, they smile, wave, and strut up and down the thrust stage, earning cheers and – unfortunately – some laughs from the audience of peers and family.

However, being crowned Deer Queen is not just the reward of having a pretty face. This year's winner is native Pope County High School senior Tori Vaughn, a beautiful girl with intellect and keen social awareness. I had a chance to speak with her after the Pageant, in the hustle and bustle of post-coronation festivities. When asked about the title and the responsibilities she is now expected to possess, she replied:

“The Deer Queen is basically a representative of the deer festival. Recently they have implemented community service into the action. The court and I are going to volunteer our time to Brookport [IL] cleanup [an EF3 tornado had destroyed parts of the village just days prior]. In addition to that, I am going to hold a scripture reading at the nursing home. I may also go to the grade school and talk to the children about the importance of getting an eye exam (because it is related to my major- optometry)”

I proceeded to ask her how she believes the community sees the festival – either as a tradition sprung from commodification, or as a cultural symbol that reflects who we are – as deer-hunting Pope Countians. Also, she presents some of her own thoughts on how the festival has changed within her lifetime.

“I do not believe that it is simply a recognition gimmick. Yes, it does bring in substantial profit to the community, but we are known for it. Traditionally, we put this on for excitement and community involvement. Let's face it, we are known for our deer! However, when I was younger, I only saw the deer festival as exactly a gimmick- like stated above. All I wanted was a corn dog and that's exactly what I thought the deer fest was all about: profit, tons of visitors, and food. Now, as I've matured, I realize that it's more than that. It's about "fellowship" so to speak (minus the religious aspect) and simply bringing the community together.”

“Festival energy is embodied, mobilized, and spatialized in the main parade, while it is objectified and concretized in the creation of festive objects.” (Gabbert, p.265) This supports that the Deer Parade (which is, in itself, a tradition within a tradition) is the symbolic event of the overall festival, and is the most heavily attended. It has grown from a small link to a grand chain of advertisement and fun. On Saturday, over sixty units (floats, cars, and other Deer Day

spectacles) lined up along the Golconda levy and Main Street to throw candy, advertise businesses, provide entertainment, and be a part of fifty-odd years of Deer Fest. "For participants, the parade is about being silly, having fun, and commanding attention." (Gabbert, p.267)

Mr. Adkerson's granddaughter, who has never missed a Deer Fest in her life, comes up every year to participate in the tradition –which has become just as much hers as the community's. "When she was small – her first Deer Festival – I had her up with me riding on a float in the parade. She's been on it every year since. This year...though she lives in Tennessee...she's coming up to ride with Grandpa."

This year, I road within the parade atop my palomino horse Tornado, wearing a fabulously-relevant deer-hat made of the actual head, antlers, and face of a four-point buck. The other riders and I serve as the closing spectacle of the parade, and while we waited for an hour to get moving, we practically froze. The temperature outside was eight degrees with the wind chill, and the sunlight was bright, but weak.

At noon, my friends had arrived in Golconda with our horses – a very high-context riding group in which I belong, bound by our love of riding, horses, and spectacle. Once I met up with them and ate curly fries from the smoky tent, we saddled up and took a pleasure stroll down the levy (to warm our horses up and get them acquainted with the loud horns, flags, and floats) only to turn around near my Aunt's house at the end – approximately one mile from the start. That is when the wind picked up significantly. The air was bitter cold. My deer hat threatened to flop off. My friends moaned and complained, and I had to keep reminding myself why I was doing this – not only for the love of this festival ("The celebration of the mass killing of deer", as my

friends like to call it) but my grade in my Folklore class depended on the experience. It was the coldest, and brightest, Deer Day parade that I could remember.

However, once I heard the blaring of trumpets and sirens, smelled the Rotary barbeque, and saw the spectacularly made floats lined up along the levy, I fell in love again. I was ready to gladly sit out the extreme cold and show the people of Golconda how proud I was to be a native Pope Countian, all while wearing a quirky-yet-relevant and undeniably different hat.

I sat on Tornado for a good hour, occasionally letting him stretch his legs, all the while shivering violently. I didn't want to give up, because riding in the festival meant too much to me, and I was too stubborn. I would carry on even if I were to contract hypothermia or pneumonia. It was pure dedication. I walked Tornado over towards the other riders outside of my close-knit group, some of which had been riding in the parade specifically for over thirty years. Altogether, the entire party of riders was very low-context, separated by generational gaps and differing views - as we are from different parts of the county (there is a ridiculously odd distinction between a north-Pope, like me, and south-Popes, them. I can only assume it is because of the subtle influences of the neighboring counties to the north and south of us) - but brought together by the excitement of doing what we love - riding - in our community parade.

These other folks do it because it's their tradition, which spans even generationally. There were a few girls I knew from my old high school, and they were riding with their mother and other older members of their family. One woman had a newborn baby cradled in the nook of her left arm while riding around. I could only assume that it was the beginning of what could become a tradition. Honestly, I was confused as to why there was a newborn babe out in the below freezing weather - at least my face was somewhat weathered enough to protect me against the cold.

However, there is nothing Pope County residents can do to surprise me. As a community, despite class and location, we celebrate festivals dedicated to deer hunting and shrimp. The school, PCCHS, is also so inclined to decrease in student attendance on the first day of deer season (which is always a Friday) that they cancel it all together in an invented holiday called 'Deer Day'. Hunting is a community event, not to say that people go out and shoot deer in packs, but after a day's good kill, they enjoy the performance factors of telling hunting stories and other personal narratives around the fires of the deer tent or over a good barbeque sandwich.

They may even drive around with a field dressed deer with a substantial rack in the back of their truck to show off to their peers. In an essence, our social tendencies to display prowess or superiority have not really changed from times long passed.

The parade, for me, only lasted a few minutes. As we were the closing section, we were the end. People were sweeping the road behind us. I could look wither direction and see children scrambling to pick up candy thrown from the floats, and as I passed by, many looked upon me with disbelief. "She's wearing a *DEER* head! *A DEAD DEER HEAD!*" some kids yelled. Many of the adults toasted me with their open beer can and complimented me on my 'rack'. Either way, I made an impression and had a wonderful time parading down Main Street with my friends and horse. After that, the festival wrapped up pretty quickly. Vendors were starting to sell the last of their goods and parts of the tent were sectioned off. Sunday was cleanup day, but I could tell that the Rotary wanted to get as much help as possible, as early as possible – they only have fourteen members, after all!

"In the context of the twin processes of globalization/localization, festivals serve as sites for the construction of identity and authenticity" (Magliocco, p.168). Even if the Deer Festival was created in order to produce traffic within the streets of Golconda, it allowed a whole

community to support it by recognizing it as a symbol of their identity and cultural belief. Pope County is recognized for its hunting opportunities, which is the idea behind the physical presence of the Deer Festival. I believe the traditional festival is a crucial element that correlates with the community's sense of identity, and without it, Pope County would have fewer ways to establish fellowship and provide homecoming opportunities for the children of the modestly-sized river community.

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