

I YOURS, FOR FIXING UP THIS WORLD

Although their grandson would grow up to become a United States senator and run for president, Thomas Henry McGovern and Mary Love McGovern lived on the edge of poverty practically all their lives. In 1849, when he was five, Thomas and his parents had immigrated to America from Ireland, fleeing the Great Potato Famine that would force more than a million others to leave their homeland as well. The McGoverns were farm people. They made their way to Illinois and eventually settled in Knox County. Their small farm never prospered. In 1865, shortly after his father's death, Thomas enlisted in the Union Army and served as a bugler. Upon mustering out he resolved to quit farming and went to work in a slaughterhouse. The following year he met and married Mary Love, whose own family had emigrated from Scotland. Mary would bear six children within twelve years. Joseph, their first and the father of the future Democratic standard-bearer, was born in April 1868, during the time of president Andrew Johnson's impeachment trial.¹

Meanwhile the McGoverns had moved to Pennsylvania and back again to Illinois so Thomas could take jobs mining coal, a trade that was hardly more healthful or profitable than the one he had left. Indeed, for most people who sold their labor in order to live, the decades between the Civil War and the turn of the century were arguably the worst of times in American history. Although the United States grew into the mightiest agricultural and industrial machine on earth during that era, chronic downturns and "panics" plagued the economy, climaxing in the country's first great depression, in 1893. Throughout the West and

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the South, farmers were in revolt over plummeting commodity prices and ruinous transportation costs. Drastic wage cuts and massive unemployment sparked hundreds of strikes and widespread violence. Moreover, apart from everything else, the United States was then far and away the most dangerous workplace in the world. In the final two decades of the nineteenth century, for the lack of safety regulations, 700,000 workers were killed in on-the-job accidents, while literally millions suffered serious injury. Thomas McGovern was among the latter. Mishaps in the mines laid him up with broken legs, cracked ribs, and shattered ankles, throwing him out of work for months at a time and making the family's lot all the more desperate.²

Even when he was able-bodied Thomas rarely made more than \$500 a year—not nearly enough to feed, let alone clothe, a family of five, then seven, then eight. It was essential, therefore, that the eldest son be taken out of school to go to work. And so, Joseph McGovern, at the age of nine years, began his career as a “breaker boy.” At dawn, Joseph often had to be carried to the mines, asleep in his father's arms. He would then trudge into the breaker with his fellows, tying on a bandana to cover his mouth and nose. Inside the breaker, a kind of processing plant, the coal rumbled down through long chutes; beside them sat the boys, their small, bare hands plucking out jagged pieces of rock and other debris mixed in with the coal. Here the twelve-hour day held for all, regardless of age. The scene was not uncommon. From the sweatshop to the factory, one in five of America's children thus contributed to the nation's industrial achievements.³

“Their faces are peculiarly aged in expression,” a contemporary journalist once observed of the youngsters of Pittsburgh's steel mills, “and their eyes gleam with premature knowledge, which is the result of daily struggle not for life, but for existence.”⁴ The reporter might well have been describing Joe McGovern. But it was not the toil in the breaker alone that so transformed the boy's mien. When he was thirteen, his mother died, less than a year after giving birth to his youngest sibling, George, after whom he would name his own first son. Mary's death at the age of thirty-five threw the family into dire crisis. Thomas did not know what to do. He began to drink heavily, and Joe had to take on the additional responsibility for looking after his brothers and sisters. The three youngest—Tommy, Anna, and the baby—were sent to live in Des Moines with their aunt, Kate McGovern King. Tommy and Anna's stay was temporary. Little George would remain, although his father would never allow Mrs. King to adopt him formally.⁵

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For Joe, having to give up his baby brother was a source of enduring sadness; he was determined to keep the rest of the family intact. To that end, within a couple of years, he discovered an unexpected way of breadwinning. Now and then on Sundays and after work in summer, Joe played sandlot baseball, the recreation of choice among late nineteenth-century working-class youth. Football, in contrast, was then the province of the wealthy eastern elite—those whose credo was “the survival of the fittest,” and the more violent the competition, the better to demonstrate their superiority. The sons of immigrants, however, defied hardship and peril every day and felt no need to build “character” through athletic rites that sporadically proved fatal. For them, baseball’s tamer form of mayhem was far more appealing. And Joe McGovern, his friends told him all the time, was really good at it. The constant physical exertions and dangers inside the breaker had nurtured a powerful body and a keen eye, and they enhanced his natural talent for the game. Almost miraculously, the sport lifted him out of the mines and into a paying job at second base on a minor league team in Des Moines, which eventually became a farm team for the St. Louis Cardinals.⁶

Throughout his late teens and early twenties, Joe traveled all over Iowa and the Middle West with his teammates and continued to send money home. Family oral history posits that he also became something of an archetypal hell-raiser, indulging in off-the-field enticements generally associated with itinerant, young bush leaguers. But whatever the extent of Joe’s companionship with those other professionals—hard-drinking gamblers, fast women, and the like—his quest to break into the majors came to an end. Sometime in 1891 or 1892, he forswore the glory and temptations of the diamond to seek the grace of God (not entirely unlike his famous contemporary, Billy Sunday, who also had played professional baseball and raised lots of hell before heeding the call).⁷

Joe’s religious conversion owed mainly to a young female acquaintance, Anna Faulds, of Pilot Rock, Iowa. The exact circumstances of their meeting remain unclear, but Anna apparently convinced her rough-hewn friend that he might lead a better life by following the compass of the Good Book. Before long they were married and, together, Joe and Anna aimed to propagate the word of one of the eighteenth century’s leading religious lights, John Wesley. Their means of ascent lay eastward. In the fall of 1893, they enrolled at Houghton Wesleyan Methodist Seminary, in the village of Houghton, New York, nestled in the Genesee River valley south of Rochester.⁸

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The founder of the institution, Willard J. Houghton, was a visionary lay preacher. In 1851 he had been “reclaimed” during a Methodist revival meeting at the local schoolhouse. That year, a 120-mile-long spur channel of the Erie Canal, running parallel along the unnavigable Genesee, reached Houghton Creek. Although the waterway to Rochester became the tiny hamlet’s lifeline, it was attended by horse racing, saloons, and other “evils of this world,” as Houghton called them. To counter such elements, he began to organize Sunday schools all up and down the valley. Then, one day in 1882, he was seized by the idea of building a seminary to train and send forth into the valley and beyond “young men and young ladies in whose minds are instilled the principles of sobriety and morality.” In fulfilling his mission, the Reverend became famous throughout the region—as an inspirational speaker, as a fund raiser so scrupulous in his record keeping that he entered into the ledger donations as small as five cents, and as an indefatigable letter writer who signed his correspondence, “Yours, for fixing up this world.”⁹

Everything about Houghton Seminary befitted Joe and Anna’s motivations, not the least the Methodist precepts of living, especially as they pertained to the influences that once had caused the breaker-boy-turned-athlete to go astray. In the preceding century, the followers of John Wesley had resolved to govern their personal and religious lives by strict “rule and method” (hence the name, “methodist,” a term of derision aimed at Wesley’s original adherents at Oxford University). Over the decades, the list of forbidden social activities was extended to dancing, drinking, gambling, smoking, attending the theater (later, the movies), and (as in many respectable communities back in Iowa) the frequenting of pool halls. The McGovern’s did not find any of these prescriptions unreasonable.

As for intellection, although Houghton was by today’s standards more of a high school than a college in the early years, its ten faculty members offered a sound curriculum. Anna and Joe started off with the basics of “classical preparatory”—arithmetic, botany, grammar, history, and spelling—to make up for certain deficiencies in their education. Their religious studies included courses titled “Bible Training,” “Discipline,” “Evidences of Christianity,” “Holiness,” “Natural Theology,” and “Plan of Salvation.” The fee for the preparatory year was twelve dollars; for the commercial and business program, eighteen dollars; tuition for Bible classes was free to those who pledged to enter Christian service.¹⁰

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The ultimate goal of most of the eighty or so students who enrolled in the seminary each year was to equip themselves for field preaching and other kinds of evangelistic endeavor. When Houghton was established, the concept of individual responsibility and repentance in seeking God's grace—with some assistance from circuit-riding preachers—had long since become commonplace. Near the end of 1895, Joseph was ordained a minister of the faith, and he and Anna were ready to carry on the Wesleyan tradition of helping plain-speaking, everyday folks open their hearts to Jesus. Like all aspiring pilgrims, the most important decision the couple now faced was where they should go to undertake their life's work. The majority of Willard Houghton's spiritual offspring tended to favor posts east of the Alleghenies. A few stalwarts, however, shipped out to distant provinces—to Africa, India, South America, or the Philippines.¹¹ The McGoverns fixed upon a destination across the inland ocean, one they well knew would present hardships only slightly less daunting than those they might have encountered overseas.

"Tell me the landscape in which you live," José Ortega y Gasset once observed, "and I will tell you who you are."¹² If Ortega had had in mind that vast expanse of plains and prairie bestriding the Missouri River valley that once was called Dakota Territory, then never was a philosopher's insight into the relationship between geography and human experience more applicable. If nothing else, there was the fact of the river, "a great vein running through the heart of the Dakotas," as a contemporary writer put it.¹³ Although surveyors would carve the territory horizontally into two states in 1889, the more apt halving (according to inhabitants then and now) would have been roughly vertical, following the Missouri's southeasterly course as it meanders down from northern Montana. As John Steinbeck wrote in *Travels with Charlie*, "Here is where the map should fold. Here is the boundary between east and west." For on the river's near side lay "eastern landscape, eastern grass, with the look and smell of eastern America"; across the other, it was "pure west with brown grass and water scorings and small outcrops."¹⁴ Indeed, East River, as it is known, is pretty much an extension of Iowa and Minnesota's tall-grass plains and prairie hills; they surround South Dakota's richest farmland—the Dakota Basin, 250 miles long and fifty to seventy-five miles wide and amply watered by not only the Missouri

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but also the James, “the longest unnavigable river in the world,” according to a historical marker. West River embraces the northern reaches of the Great Plains, an area tedious in its flatness and infinite, treeless ranges of buffalo grass. Here, cattle grazing predominates. Excepting the Black Hills, semiarid West River receives barely sixteen inches of rain annually, whereas East River averages twenty-four. John Steinbeck may have exaggerated when he said, “The two sides of the river might well be a thousand miles apart,” but, for most people, the differences determined a fundamental reality: Depending on which side of the river one lived, it was said, one either herded or plowed.¹⁵

Yet in the early days it was precious metal that drew the first wave of white migration—up to twenty thousand prospectors, with pan and pickax in their gear, who, in the Black Hills Gold Rush of 1875–77, braved the elements and the wrath of the Sioux whose domain they transgressed. Until then, agrarian settlers had yet to venture farther than forty miles beyond the Minnesota border. But the discovery of gold precipitated a series of events that changed everything—the final phase of the Plains Indian Wars, the reduction the buffalo herds, and the coming of railroads. From Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Paul, three companies now began to construct their steel-ribbon highways far into the territory and set in motion another kind of rush. By 1885, 1,500 miles of track were enough, along with the self-binding reaper, to have helped the population surge to 248,000 (up from 81,000 just five years before) in the southern half of East River alone. Thus the Great Dakota Land Boom had begun. By 1890, an additional thousand miles of rails had been laid, and land entries, through the Homestead Act and purchases, totaled over twenty-four million acres, while the US Census put the population at 328,000 for the entire state (with 182,000 for North Dakota).¹⁶

A good portion of this influx emanated from the Old World—mainly Germany, Russia, and Scandinavia. These immigrants often left their homelands in groups, as distinct ethnic colonies; they would make a lasting impact on the social character of the counties they occupied. They were the last true pioneer generation, whose collective flight and struggles would be immortalized in the novels of O. E. Rolvaag and Willa Cather. Most of the newcomers, however, were like Joe and Anna McGovern—native born, and the majority of them from the surrounding states.¹⁷ Nevertheless, a common experience bound all Dakota settlers together in their search for a new beginning: a life inexorably ruled by the conditions of the countryside and the dome above it.

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There were, for example, practically no trees when they arrived to stake their claims. Hence—for lumber, windbreaks, and beautification alike—they became devoted arborists. During a single week in May 1885, a dealer in central East River sold 200,000 small trees for planting. Meanwhile, a tent or wagon sufficed for shelter until a family could rive strips of prairie to build a sod house, itself a temporary dwelling. After that, the main task was to break open the earth with plow and ox and put in wheat, East River's first big cash crop.

Their ordeal did not end there. Settlers of the northern plains and prairie had to contend with a disheartening variety of natural calamities, most of them relating to the region's extremes in climate, with temperatures varying as much as 140 degrees in the same year. In general, winter was more so the rancher's bane than the farmer's. Massive snows destroyed whole herds of cattle on the open range in the late nineteenth century. (They would do so in modern times as well. In January 1949, four days of intense snowfall kept hundreds of families isolated for weeks and killed thousands of cattle.) In "the hard winter" of 1880–81, accumulations exceeded eleven feet, blockading the eastern portion of South Dakota from the outside world from October to March. The spring thaw only compounded the disaster when unprecedented flooding carried away town after town perched along the banks of the Big Sioux and the Missouri. Five years later cattlemen again lost upwards of 90 percent of their stock in unrelenting subzero temperatures. The Blizzard State's most infamous weather disaster, however, occurred on January 12, 1888, and Joe and Anna McGovern heard the story over and over from survivors. It was called forlornly the "schoolchildren's storm." It struck without warning in the middle of the afternoon and, though most of the teachers and students rode it out in their rickety schoolhouses, too many children had tried to get home on foot and ended up freezing in the wind-driven snow. In all, more than five hundred Dakotans froze to death on that day.¹⁸

For the farmers, who would become the Reverend McGovern's main constituency, spring and summer visited yet the greatest scourges, and these often approached biblical proportions. Gigantic swarms of locusts, for instance, descended upon South Dakota, usually at harvest time, throughout the 1870s and continued to do so intermittently into the 1930s, until the introduction of pesticides. Overspreading the horizon in immense dark clouds that concealed the sun, millions of hoppers would cascade down upon the fields of wheat and corn. Sometimes they might feast for days, leaving behind but a fraction of an entire

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year's crop. But there were other reasons why Dakotans lived by the words, "Never turn your back on the sky." For hail, too, could blow in from out of nowhere and, like innumerable miniature wrecking balls, flatten miles of ripening grain within minutes. (On occasion the stones were not so small; in one hailstorm, in July 1892, they measured six inches in diameter and put out the eyes of sixteen horses.) Finally, as if the plagues of Egypt were not enough, there were prairie fires. Fed by drought, dry grass, and high winds, a blaze could turn into a terrifying conflagration, sweeping over the countryside and consuming everything in its path—barns and farmhouses along with crops and grasslands. The worst of them, in 1889, 1909, and 1947, covered enormous stretches, over 400 square miles (a quarter of a million acres) before burning out.¹⁹

If any people needed reassurance that God was on their side, then, it was surely these folks, and, in the wake of the land boom and statehood, missionaries flocked in to minister to them. A dozen denominations already had set up churches when, in the spring of 1896, Joe and Anna McGovern entrained westward from New York. After stop-offs in Iowa to visit family, they proceeded by horse-drawn wagon to their objective, Richland, an obscure settlement of some thirty souls in South Dakota's southeast corner. As they surveyed the emptiness of the landscape around them, Joe and Anna must have had thoughts akin to those of a Methodist minister who, in a later era, found himself unloading his belongings in Faith, South Dakota. "I can see where it got its name," he sighed. "You would have to have faith to settle here." And so, not far from a site where Lewis and Clark once encamped nine decades earlier, the young couple from Houghton Seminary erected their first house of worship.²⁰

Richland Wesleyan Methodist Church was a modest, wooden-frame structure, two stories high and replete with a steeple that could be seen for a mile or so rising out of the prairie. To communities of so few people, so isolated and deprived of so many things, such a gathering place was an indispensable comfort. To them, missionaries like the McGoverns seemed to have alighted from Heaven. But Joe and Anna's lives were no less precarious, or less subject to random adversity meted out by the elements, than those who worked the land upon which they all depended. The relationship was reciprocal: the parson and his wife tended to the farmers' spiritual welfare while the farmers requited with offerings from their harvests, a welcome supplement to the meager stipend from the Methodist missionary fund.²¹

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The couple did not remain at Richland for the long haul. Joseph became what in those days was called “a building minister.” His assignment was literally to build churches and then move on to another such project after a while, and he was highly successful at it. His was not a flamboyant personality, but he possessed a certain kind of motivational charisma. Granite-like in his conviction in the work that he was about, he was able to get people to contribute money, material, and their labor; because of his own frugality and willingness to put his own broad back to the job of raising a church, his parishioners tended to redouble their exertions. The McGoverns would found several such ministries, none of them ever larger than fifteen to twenty families.²²

Then, early in the new century, life improved somewhat. Joe and Anna were able to put down roots when they graduated to a choicer post far to the north, in Aberdeen, a metropolis by Middle Border standards and one large enough to boast of a public library and a visit by William Jennings Bryan during the campaign of 1896. For Joe, this assignment was fortuitous for another reason: it allayed the recurring sadness he still felt over the abandonment of Little George so many years ago. For by now George McGovern King Jr. (he had taken his aunt and uncle’s name) had grown to manhood, married, and had three children. He had also established a flourishing lightning rod and X-ray machine company in Des Moines, with branches in Winnipeg and, auspiciously, Aberdeen. George’s frequent business trips there rekindled the fraternal bond, and Joe took great pride in his brother’s success. Occasionally George would bring his children along to see their uncle and hear a sermon. These reunions meant a lot to Joe, partly because Anna was unable to bear children, and he enjoyed involving George’s in prayer meetings. George and Joe also managed to make their peace with their father, who had since remarried, sired seven more children before being widowed again, and now resided at a soldier’s home in Milwaukee.²³ Joseph McGovern, it seemed, had finally achieved a measure of contentment.

It did not stay long. In March 1913, the old man expired. Then, in June, George, thirty-two years old, suddenly collapsed during a fishing trip and slipped into a diabetic coma. He died within the week. Losing his brother twice—this time to premature death—was something Joe had never counted on, and he did not accept it easily. Yet an even greater blow was near at hand. In 1916, Anna was diagnosed with cancer and died the following winter. She was the woman who had turned his life around and who, for a quarter of a century, had withstood all the trials

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of a preacher's wife on the Plains and lived by Willard J. Houghton's injunction about "fixing up this world." What would have happened to him, Joe wondered many times, what sort of blighted life might he have led if he had never met her? Now, at the age of forty-nine, Joseph McGovern suddenly found himself alone, widowed, and childless, in Aberdeen, South Dakota. For months afterward, he often could be seen kneeling in prayer at Anna's gravesite in the churchyard. No one could understand better than he the meaning of the passage from the Bible he was often obliged to quote to console others, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away."