

First Person

A “not-college” road trip

By Polly Ingraham

At the end of August, we took our high school senior to visit a couple of Pennsylvania colleges she was curious to see. Having done this kind of thing before, I was determined that we would expand our trip a little, particularly for the benefit of our unenthusiastic 12-year-old.

And so, on the first day, here's how it went. Our daughter had an interview, we all went on a campus tour with a guide whose words came out like a fusillade, then our student/athlete met with a coach. It was all very pleasant, and yet it wasn't conclusive: Cora couldn't say one way or the other whether this college was the place for her. That was fine, especially because we had somewhere else to go that afternoon — Amish country.

“A young man leaves school at about 15,” our Amish buggy driver told us. “By the time he's 20 he knows just about everything he needs to know.”

As we rode along in a buggy driven by a taciturn elderly man, we entered a vastly different realm. The Amish are not interested in getting ahead; in fact, they've chosen to be left behind. They don't use cars or phones or computers. They are an agricultural people, living in close-knit communities and doing things the old-fashioned way. Children attend Amish schools until the eighth grade. Their education continues after that, just not in a classroom. Our driver put it this way: “A young man leaves school at about 15; by the time he's 20 he knows just about everything he needs to know.”

That “everything” would include operating and repairing a variety of machines, caring for animals, growing crops, building things. No SATs, college visits, applications — just gaining knowledge enough for a simple life. As our buggy passed a fruit orchard, I wondered who was missing what, exactly.

THE NEXT DAY we visited another campus that was strikingly similar to the first one. We went on a tour and attended an information session. The person in charge asked us, “Are all the colleges you are visiting becoming more distinct?” A girl in the front row shook her head and said, “No, they're actually smooching together more.” Our daughter returned from her meeting with another coach carrying a glossy magazine chock full of impressive statistics about the team she might play on.

I could tell she felt drained. Fortunately, we had a way to shift gears: a visit to a famous battlefield.

In the next few hours, we tried to imagine what it must have been like for the tens of thousands of young men who — unprotected by any college — fought at Gettysburg 150 years ago. We watched a film at the visitor center; against a

backdrop of exploding cannons, soldiers' faces flashed across the screen. I thought of my other son, back at home doing yard work, not needing to load a gun over and over while fearing for his life.

Afterward we drove past

miles of rolling fields that were once scenes of unspeakable destruction. Cora wondered, “How could the men have had enough energy to fight since they must have been tired just from walking so far to get here?” The enormity of the place was staggering.

On the long trip home, jumbled images filled our heads: state-of-the-art playing fields, huge barns with birds swooping in and out; students hunched over their laptops, Union soldiers carrying their muskets; girls in tight shorts talking on cell phones, girls in bonnets and long dresses tending chickens.

It was the “college and the not-college” trip, and all of us got an education, that is for sure. □

Polly Ingraham lives in Shutesbury.

First Person welcomes submissions from readers. Email columns of 600 words or fewer to MClcary@gazettenet.com.

snow farm
THE NEW ENGLAND CRAFT PROGRAM

Artists Seconds Sale

2 MORE WEEKENDS!
Nov 18-20 + Nov 25-27
fri, sat & sun 10am – 4pm each day

new artwork each weekend!
\$1 admission fee per adult
5 Clary Road, Williamsburg, MA | 413.268.3101
snowfarm.org



HOLIDAY FARM TOUR

Saturday, November 26 & Sunday, November 27
10:00 am - 3:00 pm
Refreshments will be served
Rain or Shine

Come meet our beautiful Alpacas and visit our farm store which offers Alpaca socks, hats, yarn, quilt battings, roving and more. If you can't attend, please call us at **413-665-6622** or **413-531-9958** to arrange a visit.

TALL GRASS FARM ALPACAS

Directions - Exit 24 off I-91 in Whately MA, then South on 5 & 10, at the flashing light turn left onto Christian Lane, Tall Grass Farm is .7 miles on the left.



November 20th at The Carle

Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of *The Phantom Tollbooth*

12:00 – 5:00 pm

Free with Museum Admission

- Meet Norton Juster and Leonard Marcus—co-authors of the newly-annotated version
- Listen to a conversation about the book and enjoy a book signing
- View original Phantom Tollbooth artwork in the East Gallery
- Enjoy pun-filled activities in the Art Studio and Norton Juster books at Storytime
- See Norton Juster's film: *The Dot and The Line*

Visit our website for the day's schedule.



125 West Bay Road, Amherst MA 01002 413.658.1100

www.carlemuseum.org