

A journey to help fight Covid fatigue

By Ed Breen

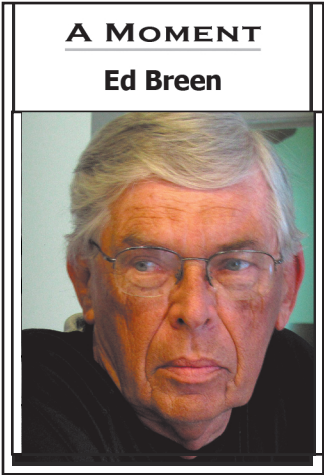
Bob Foley was one of the few people I met on a drive across a large chunk of the Midwest last week who wasn't really unhappy. He was grumpy, but my guess is that he usually is. That's Bob, although I'd never met him before; grumpy is his normal condition. That's okay. I like grumpy.

Bob sells stuff to tourists who come into his shop on Main Street in Galena, Ill. He has metal work and cast iron stuff to hang on the house or garage. Horse shoes, skeleta fish, that sort of thing.

Now, what with COVID shutting down most of the Upper Midwest, I started the conversation gently.

"Bad summer?" I asked, expecting a har-rumph or some other form of agreement. People stayed home by the millions through summer and fall. Still are. No tours, no cruise ships, no concerts. No reason to go anywhere.

"No. Good summer. Best in years," he said. "We had a lot of people



in here and they were buying stuff because they had money to spend and there was nowhere else to spend it. They wanted to buy something, you know. They couldn't go to the amusement parks like Six Flags and Cedar Point because they were closed or might as well have been. We did good."

But Bob Foley, even in his grumpiness, was one of the precious few across all of Indiana and Illinois and a chunk of Iowa and a slice of southern Wisconsin who was not unhappy, not suffering from some degree of COVID fatigue or depression that we encountered on a four-day jaunt that was intended, quite

frankly, as an escape from COVID fatigue right here in the neighborhood.

Even the state highway departments were in a funk. On those big illuminated signs over the interstates the messages were dour: "Masks and Seat Belts Save Lives." "Mask Up. It's the Right Thing to Do." Messages like that. Not a single word about speeding or drinking.

We drove across U.S. 24, that road that runs all the way from Toledo to someplace in Colorado without going through Chicago. Wabash, Peru, Logansport, Monticello, Reynolds, Wolcott, Remington, Goodland, Kentland, and on over to Watseka, Ill.

The message at every stop: Carry-out food only. No mask, stay away and if you must come in, keep your distance. Gas stations were open; pump your own, pay with a credit card and don't come in.

But bad news is always good news for someone. Somebody is making big bucks printing those circular signs that are six feet part in the aisles and

checkout counters of every convenience store in America.

And what with traditional retail politics out of business – no parades, no meet-and-greets, no service club lunches – yard signs of all ilk abound on every main street in mid-America.

I'm sure some pointy-head has studied this, but I had never realized that streets divide political loyalties. On one block, clusters of Biden-Harris signs on one side and Trump-Pence on the other. Not next-door neighbors, but across the street from each other.

And in this political season, the yard signs sprouting like a late season crop, you can plot your way across state legislative and Congressional districts. In the Fourth District, Republican Jim Baird, whom I have frankly never heard of before, is wanting a second term and is opposed Democrat Joe Mackey, who is cleverly using the same "Joe" typographic style that is Joe Biden's choice. Baird took Todd Rokita's House seat when Rokita found something else to



One of the many sites during the trip.

run for a couple of years ago. That's all over in the Cass-White-Newton-Jasper County area.

West of Kentland, when you get over into Illinois, the yard sign king is Sen. Dick Durbin seeking his fifth term and flags – both Trump and Biden – flutter from front porches and fence posts. The most egregiously offensive: A Trump-Pence flag flying from atop an elevated grain auger at a mega-farm somewhere in Newton County.

But it is COVID that

has changed the landscape for a simple drive from here to there in the Midwest. People are fearful. A popular street in tourist-friendly Galena was populated by a couple of dozen people all properly masked and distanced.

What had changed, what was alarmingly different was that not a one of them was speaking to anyone else on the street and if they were smiling, well, you couldn't tell that either . . . because they were masked.



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