

The tribulations of transplants

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My Generation
By HOLLY SPANGLER

HOW long do you have to live in a small town — or in a farm community, for that matter — to become a “local”?

Several years ago, I was talking with a farmwife who shared the story of a grizzled old farmer neighbor who told her that no matter how long she lived there, because she hadn’t grown up there, she’d never be a local. She was surprised; after all, she’d already lived there 25 years at that point. I chalked it up to an anomaly — one man and his opinion.

But lately I’ve wondered if that farmwife and her neighbor might have been onto something.

Marrying and moving

While the farm folks out in the country generally have a reputation for being nurturing, there’s a distinct possibility that breaking into the social circles of a small town — particularly if you’re a young person — might be a touch harder than it seems.

Why? Young couples generally don’t just up and move to a small town (which is another story in itself); those who are there, in most cases, grew up there. They tend to already have their circles of friends, many formed through school. And there’s nothing wrong with that; it’s our natural tendency. Heck, I’m still really close to the girls I went to school with, and we live five hours apart.

The exception to all this is the situation where the guy marries a girl from college, then brings her back home to live and farm, or work nearby. This would be my boat, and that of so many of my girlfriends. In some strange way, the general consensus among us is that this situation seems to almost be harder than if we had moved someplace that was new to both spouses.

One of my friends in particular shared that when she goes into town, people know her but she doesn’t know them. If I had a nickel for every time I’ve been somewhere around town and was asked, “Now which Spangler is it that you’re married to?” And after a little questioning about which brother he is (“the one that farms with his dad”), they’re satisfied and move on. It seems that in a small town, it may be enough to know about a person, without actually knowing the person.

Route to friendship

And there’s also the feeling of being watched, even if in only the nicest way.

Not long after John and I were married, I remember going to the grocery store and my husband saying to me the next day, “Hey, so-and-so said they saw you at the grocery store yesterday.” I recall clearly thinking that I hadn’t seen anybody I knew. How did they know me? It was a bizarre feeling, given that I’d grown up on a farm and in a small town where I actually knew the people who knew me.

And then there’s the school system. Another friend shared lately that the

school system in the small town into which she’d recently been transplanted was something of a puzzle. She described all sorts of things that the school just assumed she’d know, like that registering her kindergartner wasn’t enough to get him on a bus route; she had to also call the bus barn.

“How are you supposed to know these things?” she laughed.

Fortunately, she found friends and family with kids in school, and they

were kind enough to help her out.

Maybe that’s part of the grand plan: Make it all just mysterious enough that you have to reach out and find friends who know stuff like that. But maybe not. Who knows?

Small towns are wonderful for so many reasons, many of them relatively quirky. (Literally. Everyone’s related somehow.) I used to wonder why it was easy to make so many casual friends around town, and not many close

friends. Yet over the years, I’ve found contentment in watching really good friendships evolve with other “transplants” and with extended family.

But that’s not the only route to friendship. Another friend even wound up bonding with her husband’s old high school girlfriends.

Hey, whatever works.

