

The Piece I Missed by Toby Fesler Heathcotte

As a girl, I always dreamed of living in a big city with streetlights and pavement. There no one knew my name and everyone minded his or, more importantly, *her* own business. Such a social environment would be the complete opposite of Pendleton, Indiana, where I knew every one of the three thousand inhabitants and had been inside practically every house. Everyone knew me too and everything I did, at least it seemed to me, especially when some neighborhood lady raised the blinds to check the time I came home from a date or with whom.

The years I spent on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University solidified my intentions. I didn't want to return to a small town. I craved an adult life with the intellectual stimulation of a university and big city life. I turned out to be something of an intellectual snob, particularly when I learned about the brain drain. All the best and brightest from the Indiana countryside headed for Indianapolis, Chicago, Denver, and points west for better-paying jobs.

Moreover I had made my own decisions for four years and wanted to continue. I needed to live away from home to express myself, to create new pathways, to live by my own agenda. The city embodied opportunity and anonymity. That's what I hoped for in my future.

During my senior year of college I met Bryan Heathcotte, two years older than I but a year behind me in school because he'd spent three years in the Army. We married and soon our sons, Brandon Fesler and Brock Jason, were born.

Bryan wanted to live elsewhere, too, probably more than I did. After sampling life in Germany and Denmark, he found little to appeal to him in the way of society or work in Evansville or even in Indianapolis. Once he completed his doctorate, almost all jobs open to him would come from outside Indiana.

We were well suited to each other on this issue, both excited about the prospect of living in a new and more prosperous environment and also about finding a special place to raise Brandy and Brock. We thought our leaving Indiana and moving to Arizona blazed an original trail, doing something daring and unheard of in our family.

By 1969 the rest of my family had caught the moving fever at least to some minimal extent. My folks, Beulah Crosley and Howard Fesler, bought a house with some acreage along a state road between Pendleton and Ovid. My sister, Trena, and her husband, Landy Myers, bought the house on Adams Street in Pendleton. As Bryan and I prepared to move to Arizona, my sister and her husband came to Bloomington to pick up a bedroom suite that belonged to my folks. We had been using it, and now Trena wanted it for her new home. Old home, actually.

The difference sizzled between us. As I committed to a life far away, my sister committed to a life in the house where we'd grown up. When we said good-bye, Trena and I both sobbed and cried. I'd known all along that I would feel bad when the final moment came, but to see her devastated made me feel horrible.

The next week Bryan and I drove our two little sons cross-country in a new gold Oldsmobile Cutlass convertible. We passed through Kansas during a rainstorm and saw some motorists trying to fix a flat tire. We stopped and gave them our umbrella. They wanted to pay us so we could buy another one, but I said, "No, where we're going we won't need one." Bryan and I were exuberant at the prospect of our new life in Arizona.

We had jobs to go to—Bryan taught finance in university, and I taught speech, drama, and English in high school. I sidelined my plans for a writing career, and we manifested a middle-class way of life very quickly. We built a house, bought good furniture, had nice clothes, and went partying every Saturday night. The boys had every toy on the market and more clothes than they needed or wanted.

In the Valley of the Sun, we became accustomed to “under construction” signs. The growing population required constant building. Almost every year the boys went to a new grade school because of rezoning and construction. Not just the schools but everything about the Valley was new—streets, houses, stores, highways, bridges—a dynamic lifestyle.

We flew back to Indiana several times over the years mostly in the summertime because I wanted us all to maintain relationships with our families there. I felt guilty for separating my loved ones from each other. I hadn’t left because I didn’t love them. I did.

My parents never emotionally accepted the fact that we had moved away. My dad refused ever to come to visit us, and my mother visited only rarely. As a result all of the relationships weakened or never matured. I felt torn between anger toward my parents and guilt for instigating the whole mess.

After the deaths of my parents I felt estranged and rootless. I recalled many times when my dad had mentioned his family or lack of it, rather. He had said that we had no Fesler relatives except his brothers and sisters. Although many people in the area were named Fessler, they spelled their names with two S’s and thus were unrelated. As a kid I often cut peonies from bushes in our yard, stuffed them into glass jars, and carried them to the graveyard we tended. I saw several Fesler graves there, but my dad said they were no relation to us. He said his father had come from Germany as a young man, and that’s why our name was spelled differently.

In my grief I wanted to do something to reconnect with my own roots and ease the guilt I felt about the fractured relationships in my family, especially the ones between my sons and their grandparents.

Perhaps genealogy could redeem me. I joined ancestry.com and did quite a bit of research. I uncovered a whole raft of people named Fesler, or Fessler, same family, and all related to us. When Indiana became a state, they had moved from their previous homes in Berks County, Pennsylvania.

The story of the nineteen-year-old German immigrant turned out to be true, but he wasn't my dad's father. He was my dad's great-great-great-grandfather, Johan Albrecht Fessler II, who immigrated to Pennsylvania from Germany in 1753 with his father of the same name. Previous to that they had suffered persecution by the army of King Louis the Fourteenth during the purge of Huguenots. I imagined they brought cherry seeds from their abandoned home in Switzerland as a symbol of hope.

I drew an imaginary through line from the first generation I had a name for in the Fesler family right up to my grandchildren and the babies they'll rock someday. I created imaginary Swiss cherry orchards replanted in Germany and America. From their trees, Fesler men carved, whittled, sawed, and hammered the cradles, coffins, trunks, and rockers needed to sustain their courageous lives.

That disconnect my dad always felt had been mended, finally. I wanted to document all the relationships through the generations as a way of letting my dad know that he did have a family. Of course, now that he's in the Afterlife, he knows far more than I've pieced together.

Loss of awareness of personal history, like my dad and I experienced, is partially a consequence of the American push to explore, settle, and subdue the land. It's also human nature to look toward the future and unconquered territory.

It's important for people to have a sense of their family history and heritage. It helps us define our place with each other and in the world. My dad's life is an object lesson of what happens without that sense of history.

An Oldsmobile Cutlass was a far cry from the Conestoga wagons of our ancestors, but my family and I felt the same thrill of excitement and hope that our ancestors felt when they crossed the Alps or floated up the Rhine or slept in the hold of a schooner on the Atlantic.

Here's the piece I missed until I did the research—the trail gets blazed by generations, not by one woman or one family unit. Yes, I could leave the older generations, but I can't leave the younger ones. I need to stay and serve as a base for them. That includes rocking them in our cherry wood rocker, that piece of Switzerland still with us, at least symbolically. I see the same preferences playing out in previous generations. They left their parents or waited for them to die before striking out for a new land.

My maternal grandmother, Mary Elizabeth Hayden Crosley, told me one time that the Crosley family was Dutch. For years I believed they came from Holland until I found the Crosley genealogy. A Crosley married into a family named Apple (Apfel). The Apples came from Germany via The Tulpehocken in Pennsylvania where they are often referred to as Pennsylvania Dutch or Deutsch. The Crosleys and Apples moved on into Ohio, then Indiana, a similar migration to the Feslers'. So our roots are German in part on both sides of the house.

Previous to doing the research for this book, I had few opinions about German culture that didn't have something to do with the two world wars. Now I have a far different view. I

reference Thomas Sowell in *Migrations and Cultures: A World View*. (New York: Basic Books, a Division of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1996).

For centuries German people emigrated from their homeland because of continuing wars fought both within their own country and against others. Once the immigrants resettled, they tended to retain certain of their own cultural values—a reputation for hard work, honesty, integrity, apathy about politics, deference to authority, political loyalty to the adopted country, a military tradition, loyalty to German language and customs, importance of education from kindergarten to college, acceptance of the cultures and political organizations of other groups, productivity and efficiency in farming or business, and beer making.

Practically all of the characteristics Sowell mentioned my Fesler ancestors demonstrated throughout history right down to my own generation. In Europe and Colonial Pennsylvania they lived within the structure of the Reformed Church. The churches kept all the birth, marriage, and death records. They rang the bells to awaken workers. Community life revolved around religion.

When the United States became independent from England, the State took on some of the functions of the churches like record keeping. The new citizens had to learn to take political, social, and moral responsibility for themselves, hefty tests for these adventurous souls. They built schools, roads, factories, and armies. They invented or explored a multitude of religious expressions. Part of the American experience is finding new ways to deal with old human problems.

I am proud of my ancestors and not just of the staunch, brave pioneers. I'm also proud of the poor mill worker and his frugal housewife who strove just to go on despite being trapped, victims of the economic hardships of the early twentieth century. We all are at risk to become

victims of the social milieu into which we are born. One definition of courage must be to rise to the challenges of our times.

The first generations of Fesslers to emigrate—Albrecht Vessler from Switzerland to Germany, Johan Albrecht Fessler I from Germany to Pennsylvania, and George Fesler from Pennsylvania to Indiana—made the critical decision, the big geographic break, like I did in moving from Indiana to Arizona. The next two or three generations solidified the identity with the new place.

Perhaps my grandchildren or my great grandchildren will strike out to colonize another planet or the ocean floor. When they do, they'll believe that they are the true adventurers. They'll probably think the previous generations of the family were less courageous or fascinating or bold or whatever.

I know it takes as much courage to remain the bedrock as it does to fly over the moon. I just hope they carry the rocker onboard.

It's appropriate that I finished writing about my ancestors on Memorial Day weekend. Whether you call it Decoration Day as I did as a kid, Day of the Dead as in Mexico, or Samhain / Halloween from Celtic lore, most cultures have holidays to celebrate their dead. People bring offerings such as flags, food, drink, or flowers and place them on the graves of their ancestors.

This work is my offering—my American flag, my bratwurst and beer, my cherry pie, my glass jar filled with peonies. I bless my ancestors. I honor their trek on this day and always.

(Excerpted from an unpublished manuscript entitled *Backlight, a Fesler Family Chronicle* by Toby Fesler Heathcotte)