

**2008 Essay – Loving In Middle America (LIMA)**  
A Travelogue Describing Exciting and Exotic Lima, Ohio

Shortly after we moved to Lima, somebody told me about a documentary called “Lost In Middle America” (aka LIMA) by PBS. Hal Halbrook narrated the documentary describing Lima as the stereo-typical rust-belt, mid-West city losing factory jobs and scrambling to recover. It provided a short history of Lima, and then concentrated on the social-economical forces in the early 1990s of a world economy shutting jobs down in middle America. Ironically, the original Standard of Ohio refinery in Lima, went from almost shutting down in 1994 (sold for 200 million) to being a gold mine in 2007 (sold for 2 billion). That refinery example typifies Lima: when you look at it originally, it is ugly, but, after a while, it becomes sort of precious.

Emotionally, the “Lost in Middle America” special did for Lima what Jesico White did for West Virginia in the PBS documentary titled “The Dancing Outlaw”. Probably only my West Virginia friends will understand the power of Jesico White representing West Virginia. Let it be known: before you move to West Virginia you should watch “The Dancing Outlaw”; before you move to Lima you need to watch “Lost in Middle America”.

When Jeanne saw the “Lost in Middle America” video, she refused to accept the premise. She said, “Now that you and I are in town, we’re going to call it “Loving in Middle America”. She sure has been trying to live up to that statement ever since she made it.

At the plant, we had a group of sci-fi enthusiast who paraphrased the “Star-Ship Trooper” quote when we spoke about Lima: “It’s an ugly town.... It’s a bug-ugly town”. (That is another reference to obscure movies that most of you have not seen. By now, you wondering about the movies I like to watch).

Lima is an ugly town. It’s a bug-ugly town. When you first meet the town, you wonder how such a large population (about 60,000 in metro area) can be so isolated and so run down. It is exactly half way between Dayton and Toledo (both of those towns are economic disasters) on I-75. It is out in the middle of “flat land” with only creeks and riverbeds bringing relief to the monotony of corn, wheat, and bean fields. (They don’t have fence rows in this area because nobody runs livestock. They just plow up to the bar-ditch. You have to watch carefully at farm-road intersections because the corn is so close to the road you can’t see oncoming traffic.) It has a 40-year old shopping center out on its northwestern edge and a deteriorating downtown. Many of the houses are not kept up and after a fire, can remain standing empty, with blackened windows and doorways for years. I once took an engineering candidate to our excellent Thai restaurant. After driving through the town back and forth for lunch, he refused our job offer. “No way am I putting my kids in that town.” I guess the good food couldn’t sway him.

In April of this year, the newspaper ran an article and map of “shots fired” calls made to the Lima police department. There had been 300 shots fired calls made already in 2008, so there were 300 red dots on a map of Lima. My math says this: 300 calls means there were probably twice as many actual shootings; with an average of 3 shots fired per shooting, there were 1800 rounds fired off in Lima over 4 months. Only 2 people were shot and only one of them died. Obviously, people in Lima can’t shoot worth a darn.

Lima is the only place in my life I have actually seen policemen with their pistols pulled and aimed as they walk forward. We see that all the time on “Cops” and other TV reality shows, but, I had never seen it in person until I moved to Lima. My daughter was intimidated about moving to Lansing, Michigan, because of its crime. On the web, she discovered Lima was worse. Now, she doesn’t want to come visit us and would rather remain in Lansing where the odds are better.

I suspect there is a race issue in Lima. Lima has a large minority population and as many other towns, minorities tend to be the ones without jobs and involved in the shootings. During the summer, they

have a “Bash on the Square” each Friday night with beer, bands, and dancing. I go there and see 1000 whites and only one or two blacks and they look like resident homeless people. What is wrong with that picture?

Also, Lima is the only place I have lived where 20 years of savings (in 401ks) have disappeared in a matter of months. Obviously, Lima has nothing to do with the stock market tanking with the mortgage debacle, but, it is where we lived when we lost half of our retirement savings. I say, “Give back my 401k and I’ll gladly pay \$4 a gallon for gas”.

So, how can I say “after a while, it becomes sort of precious”?

First of all, we don’t live in Lima, and the social-economic factors in the area are not bad. Believe it or not, there are actually “suburbs” of Lima and there are a lot of good jobs in the Lima area that supports nice housing and sub-divisions around Lima. In fact, it is hard to find very many houses in the \$200-\$250k range, but there is a large selection of houses in the \$300-800k range for sale in the area. Lima has two, large, medical centers that drives a strong medical related economy. There must be 500 medical doctors living in Lima. The refinery and adjacent chemical plant complex provides a strong job base. There is a huge defense facility that rebuilds Abrams tanks next to the refinery. All of this results in what I consider to be a solid, diverse, local economy. Another economic advantage in the Lima area: there is little dependence on the automotive or housing industry. If anybody really needs a job, we even have two Wall-Marts.

Then, there is the cost-of-living advantage of Lima and Ohio. Services and prices are actually as low as West Virginia. Property taxes are slightly higher, but, the local governments seem to do a good job of providing services.

Very importantly, the golf courses seem to be underutilized, and I have no problems getting tee-times. Lima area does not have as many local courses as Dover, Ohio, but it is easier to get on them and prices are reasonable. The courses are much flatter in Lima. (Everything is flat in Lima.)

The real advantage of Lima is its people. We have lived in Iowa, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Ohio. By far, the folks in Ohio have been the easiest to live with, relax with, and just work and play with. Jeanne and I have been amazed at how comfortable it is to meet, great, and interface with all people in Lima. This includes minorities, young people, old people, church people, work people, people who serve you at drive-up windows and in the check-out line. (This could be because Jeanne and I are getting older, or because we are getting along with each other better now that the kids are gone.) We really think there is a general level of politeness and respect shown between people in Lima we haven’t noticed in other areas.

Have you ever lived, worked, and went to church in an area where you really enjoy the people? That is what Lima has to offer. Let’s be honest: relationships with people counts more than local economic factors. That relationship is what builds and sustains neighborhoods and communities. That sort of relationship is what Lima offers.

If you are ever driving between Toledo and Dayton on I-75, come on over and see us. We’ll show you the refinery and tank factory.

Fred Paschall  
12/08