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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: Sleepy Eye

When Thad Prout and I were writing up results from the UGDP, we met evenings in his office at the Greater Baltimore Medical Center. Me in a small squeaky chair and Thad in his stately Chairman's chair.

When we got into arguments over results (there were many), often I leaned back in my chair and proceeded to spin a yarn how we would settle the argument in Sleepy Eye.

About a year later I ran into Thad. He greeted me with "My God! There really is a Sleepy Eye!" (discovered while idly browsing a map of Minnesota). Obviously he had assumed my stories were about a fictitious hometown.

Everybody is from somewhere and I am from Sleepy Eye. More accurately, from a farm near Sleepy Eye, but that is more than people want to know.

I never longed to be from somewhere else. In fact, I have always been proud of the connection. Sleepy Eye is like Garrison Keller's Lake Wobegon "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average".

Often, at conferences when on the speakers platform, I would introduce myself as a farmer from Sleepy Eye and leave at that, with people wondering if the place was real or made up.

I have found the farmer label useful in a place like Hopkins, surrounded by people with fancy Ivy League degrees. I have used the characterization to dodge questions I cannot answer. "I don't know. I am just a farmer from Sleepy Eye".

Indeed, for several years I used the "farmer" characterization to fend off questions from my dean, but, eventually he wised up, coming to see it as a gambit akin to Sam Ervin's "I am just a country lawyer" as a prelude to a withering interrogation of a witness in front of his Select Committee on Watergate.

Everything is flat around Sleepy Eye. Before it was farming country it was prairie. A vast expanse of native grasses and before that ice.

Much of Minnesota has been covered by glaciers many times, most recently just 10,000 years ago. Indeed its claim "The land of 10,000 lakes" is due to the work of glaciers.

Everything is uphill from the Atlantic ocean. About 1,000 feet to Sleepy Eye. Another 1,000 feet to Rapid City and another 3,000 feet from there to Denver.

Sleepy Eye is about 120 miles southwest of Minneapolis, 80 miles north of the Iowa border, and 140 miles west of the South Dakota border. Its population when I was born was around 2,500 and about 3,600 now.

The town took its name from a native American chief of the Sisseton Dakota tribe, Ishtabkhaba. Dubbed by locals "Sleepy Eye" because of a drooping eye, probably due to ptosis. Chief Ishtabkhaba and his followers settled on Pretty Water By The Big Trees, just north of what was to become Sleepy Eye. Residents objected to a town named after an Indian and wanted it changed to Loreno, but the name stuck and the town was incorporated as "Sleepy Eye" in 1878.

Sleepy Eye is republican country - like much of rural America.

The town has about a dozen churches, the Catholic church being the largest, and two schools, one public and the other catholic.

The southern boundary of my birth place is US highway 14, a 1,400 mile east-west route that starts in Chicago and ends at the entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming (hence aka the Black and Yellow Trail because the road passes through the Black Hills on the way to Yellowstone).

Take Minnesota Highway 4 out of Sleepy Eye north 14 miles and you come to Fort Ridgely.

By the time I came along Fort Ridgely was a place to have picnics and summer outings, but from 1853-1867 it was an Army outpost that figured in the last Indian uprising in the U.S.

The Indians, confined to reservations, were starving in the summer of 1862. Little Crow and several council members met with Andrew Jackson Myrick (head trader for the Lower Agency) to plead for food. Myrick's reply: "let them eat grass". A few weeks later Myrick was dead with his mouth full of grass.

The uprising ended December 1862 with the hanging of 38 Indians by the Minnesota River in Mankato, about 40 miles from where the up rising started.

Go right out of our driveway and head west about 40 miles and you come to Walnut Grove. You will know the location if you watched Little House on the Prairie; a popular TV series (1974 - 1983) starring Michael Landon, Melissa Gilbert, and Karen Grassle based on Laura Ingalls "Little House on the Prairie".

Walnut Grove is a town of about 850 people, many fewer in the late 1800s when Laura Ingalls was there.

There were various occasions in the series when "Pa" went to Sleepy Eye for supplies by horse and wagon.

Dorothy was correct. "There is no place like home!"

I know I am coming home when I see the twin spires of the Catholic Church, as I approach from the east.