



Why Small-Town Boys Become CEOs

The majority of the chief executive officers of the 800 largest corporations grew up in small towns or on farms while only 16% of the big-company CEOs were raised in cities of more than one million population. Howard Upton provides insight into why.



**Do what you can, with what you
have, where you are.
--Theodore Roosevelt**

FIFTY-SEVEN PERCENT of the chief executive officers of the 800 largest corporations grew up in small towns or on farms--this according to a study made some time ago by Arthur Young Executive Resource Consultants. Only 16% of the big-company CEOs at the time of the study were raised in cities of more than one million population.

To put it another way, the Captains of American Industry, for the most part, trace their origins not to New York or L.A., but to some improbable little burg like Mount Airy, North Carolina or Aurora, Missouri.

This is not exactly startling news. That there is a well-worn path from Main Street to Park Avenue is a phenomenon long noted and sometimes puzzled over. As a small-town boy myself, I herewith venture a theory as to why so many kids from the forks of the creek have ended up running our Exxons and General Motors.

A reasonably bright lad growing up in a little town acquires an inflated impression of his own competence early in life. He compares his abilities with the abilities of his peers in the tiny social universe in which he finds himself, and gets the notion he possesses certain qualities of superiority. He discovers he can draw more pleasing pictures, or write more interesting stories, or hit more inside curves than anyone else in town. He decides he is somebody special; he concludes he is destined for at least moderate fame and fortune.

Such a judgment in most cases is faulty, but no matter. If the young fellow believes he is superior in some respect, he develops an abiding sense of confidence early in life, and this is critical. By the time he finds out that there are tens of thousands of other people out there in the big world who are smarter and more talented than he, he is already well on his way. He has developed a thrust and a momentum, born of self-confidence, which will keep him going.

It is important to experience some triumphs early in life. Each small victory, however insignificant in the larger scheme of things, contributes to one's sense of upward momentum.

Such triumphs are more easily come by in, say, Tahlequah, Oklahoma than in Chicago.

It is no mere coincidence that the men who have recently occupied what is considered to be the most important office in the world began their lives in such towns as Hope, Arkansas; Milton, Massachusetts; Tampico, Illinois; Plains, Georgia; and Yorba Linda, California. Indeed, of the 16 U.S. presidents who held the office in the 20th century, only two were big-city natives. Theodore Roosevelt was born in Manhattan, William Howard Taft in Cincinnati.

Big cities are intimidating. A boy growing up in the city sees evidence of power and achievement all about. He discovers himself in a milieu in which it often appears prudent to settle for the safe job at the neighborhood assembly plant, and to hold on to it. But the small-town boy, innocently measuring his little triumphs against those of his local compadres, decides he is destined for some form of greatness. He is wrong, of course, but by the time he discovers he is wrong he has worked his way up to a vice presidency somewhere.

This, alas, is all changing. As a result of television and the Internet, small-town kids are now forced to measure themselves against a much wider world. The small-town success advantage will disappear.

Small-Town Grid Victory

You can talk of battlefield glory

Or the glory that once was Rome--

They're nothing compared to the glory

Of the team that's just won at home.

Howard Upton (now deceased) served as chief staff executive of the Petroleum Equipment Institute from that organization's inception until his retirement 37 years later. His management columns and light verse have long been featured in The Wall Street Journal. His contribution to this publication cannot be overstated. He was a model of integrity, objectivity, superior quality and a friend and mentor. (He is missed. JPH)