

“THE GREAT SAND CASTLE TOURNAMENT”

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Every town has traditions. Every town has those little celebrations, events, and characters that all combine together to make a good story. Every 4th of July in Inclement, we have done the “standard stuff” of any lake town. Hot dogs are vended on street corners, businesses have sidewalk sales, bands play on street corners, and the beach is full of babies with plastic buckets and shovels. Others of every age, shape, and size sizzle on golden sands or dunk themselves in cool lake water. Water skiers skim by, quantities of soda and beer are consumed, kids skirt around the edges of things with pockets full of firecrackers, lighters clutched in their sweaty palms. And everyone is waiting for night, when fireworks bloom and boom, reflected over the water, twice the show for the same price (free!). None of this is new stuff--it has been happening in one form or another for a hundred years, or maybe more. In Inclement, however, we have another tradition--our Annual Sandcastle Building Contest. Oh, it isn't different from any of the other hundred or thousand of those contests that are held every year all over the world, but it is Inclement's own, and this past summer--the summer of 2013--it was interesting, to say the least. The odds-on favorite ended up winning, no surprise there, but sometimes, when you are lucky, you get to see things that you never saw before. Sometimes, in the most predictable of places, you get a glimpse of something shining and magical. When I began watching the Contest in the early morning hours of the 4th, I had no idea where it would lead, or that the time it would take me to retell the story would be so vast for such a mundane tale. Kingdoms were not made or broken on that day, there were no dramatic births or deaths, no hostages were taken and aliens didn't land in the town square. It was, in many ways, a very ordinary 4th of July. But if you look closely, you will find the magic there.

4th of July, 2013 dawned like most other summer mornings--the sun rose hot to a burst of birdsong, and humidity hung heavy. Most folks didn't have to haul themselves out of bed to their jobs, but instead, lounged around for a while, played with their kids, and decided some sort of loose plan for the day. However, down at the Inclement Beach, the race was on. For weeks, posters had been plastered all over town trying to get teams of folks to build sand castles in, what else, The Annual Sandcastle Building Tournament of 2013. Five teams took the bait. They were competing for...well, nothing, I guess, but fame, fortune, and their pictures in the paper. Which is weird, because I think they photograph everyone anyway. Oh well. Each team received four five-gallon buckets, shovels, various hand tools for shaping, and an enormous bull-dozered pile of sand. Teams were limited to 4 people. More sand could be requested if needed. The contest began at dawn, and ended at 8pm, when the Mayor was due to announce the winner.

A group of local boys, Zack Marshall, and his friends Paxton Monroe, and Walt Clayton formed a team a couple weeks ago, while laying in the grass in Zack's backyard. They literally drew sandcastles in the air that day. By the morning of the 4th, they were working together enthusiastically to construct their castle smack-dab in the middle of the beach. They seemed to be having a ball, although they definitely possessed more enthusiasm than actual talent. But it didn't matter. The weather was hot, the water lay cool and blue just a few yards away, and the fireworks to come danced through their heads as they lugged and dug and piled and shaped.

Thorsen Poe, owner and chef at Poe's Pizza Pies, brought a team of employees down to see if maybe they could capture the title and some free publicity along with it. Poe's is kind of a tradition in town--an old establishment that has been around since forever with some amazing pizza flavor and homemade cheesecake that is to die for. Three teenagers and the aging but energetic Mrs. Annette Gomper, who had been waitressing for Poe's since 1971, toted buckets

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of sand and water dressed in red and black Poe’s t-shirts, which were emblazoned with, what else, a raven (THE Raven).

A group of Lake tourists banded together to complete a castle and their uniforms consisted of plain white matching t-shirts that said, aptly, "TOURISTS". These folks came to summer in Inclement most years, and while they weren’t quite “local”, to the year-rounders, they felt local. They told anyone they could get to listen all about the little, unknown gem of a town in Southwest Iowa where they knew EVERYONE and were treated just like family. The real locals mostly rolled their eyes when this kind of talk reached their ears. But of course, locals know which side their bread is buttered on, so it was a MILD eye roll, if you get my meaning, because summer tourist dollars are no joke in the corn-covered Midwest. The TOURISTS were on the far left end of things, meandering around their pile of sand in flip flops and floppy hats.

To the right side three tellers and the bank president, a Mr. Joe Puck, from Inclement Bank stood around in a loose group. They appeared to be very organized at drinking coffee out of travel cups displaying a bank logo, and surveying their pile of sand with very critical, appraising eyes. Each of them wore the neat, collared polo shirt with the tiny “Inclement Bank” embroidered over the left breast--their work shirts. Even though it was already warm, they appeared to be sweatless.

And far right, there was Map-Man-Stan. If you knew Inclement, you would know him as that "kinda-strange-guy who paints houses for a living (and does a good job) and sells old roadmaps out of a plastic milk crate strapped on the back of his bicycle in his spare time". Yup, that's him. Most towns probably have someone similar--a person that doesn't quite “fit the mold”, but they are harmless people, and often the funnest folk to hang around with. He lived in a tiny house beyond the watertower--about 500 square feet--and he had a garden you wouldn't believe. When he wasn't house painting, you could see him out there in the midst of gorgeous stands of sweet corn, a pumpkin-and-melon patch 10 times the size of his house, peas galore, carrots beyond carrots, and ten foot high sunflowers bordering the entire thing. On the 4th, he was in his usual uniform of paint splattered cut-off jeans, paint-splattered tennis shoes, and a faded Inclement Giants t-shirt (he made some extra cash by painting the bleachers every summer). He wore a similarly splattered cap over his long hair, which he had pulled back into a pony tail. A tiny, silver hoop glinted from each earlobe. He had a close-trimmed beard and looked just a bubble or so off-center. The old bicycle propped up next to him with the milk crate behind the seat full of old road maps that Stan had “altered” didn't help his cause much, but it was familiar, and thus, accepted. No one seemed to know his last name. Stan had done a marvelous job thus far. All of his original sandpile had been squared off, 5 feet in height, straight sides. All the other teams were in varying stages of piling sand, but Stan had it together. All in all, Stan was the man to watch.

The weather that morning was slightly overcast, but warm. A nice breeze floated in from the lake, and businesses began to set up booths for foods and treats. Zola's Worm Palace, which was just a few feet away on the boardwalk, had a great special on boxes of worms, and Gorgon's Pets, just next door, threw open their doors for all to experience their collection of snakes and tarantulas. SassyPants Bar-B-Que was smoking sizzling hunks of meat with a tantalizing blend of spices that tingled the nostrils. A line had already queued up outside their beach-side “walk-thru window” to gather up foil wrapped sandwiches and steak fries. Yes, it was morning, breakfast time, but it was also the Fourth! There was a clown making balloon

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animals while balancing back and forth on a unicycle. By the looks of things, the balloon swords were a big hit with the kiddies. Folks meandered about, eating their barbecue, biting off wads of cotton candy and generally checking out the situation. Later in the day, it would seem the entire town was there on the boardwalk, and it probably was.

BETWIXT, the local folk rock group, was on the schedule to do a live evening concert on the beach, but of course, there was no sign of the musicians yet. There was, however, an area roped off with yellow cones with a sloppy sign on bent poster board that said “Reserved for THE BAND”. Music floated across the beach from speakers nestled beneath Gorgon’s Pets eaves, a tinny heavy metal mix that would be replaced by Top 40 by lunch. There were softball tournaments planned for the afternoon, and of course a mean beach volleyball match down the beach a ways. The Presbyterian ladies had their Pie Stand set up, and if it was true to form, they would sell out by 1pm. But all of that celebratory nonsense would pale next to the show Harman would put on after dark. Harman was the son of Old Harman, and learned the art of firework shows from him, back in the day when you lit the fuses with torches. Now, with modern technology combined with Harman’s extensive knowledge of computer programmed pyrotechnics (he occasionally did the explosive effects for a few reasonably well-known bands on the West coast), the fireworks over the lake were simply phenomenal. All in all, the day was shaping up to be a fun but ordinary 4th of July celebration. But for the moment, before things really got going, the hours stretched out long and hot as the sun rose in the sky.

By mid-morning, each of the Teams in the Annual Sandcastle Building Tournament had made some progress. The team on the extreme left, The Tourists, had built something long and low in the sand. It appeared to be a log of some sort, although they were making more and more carvings upon said “log”, so it could only be assumed that this was just the beginning for them.

The Poe’s Pizza team had a tall, wedged-shape thing going. Like The Tourists, wasn’t clear yet what exactly they were doing, but clearly they knew their goal, even if no one else did. Thorsen Poe, owner and chef of Poe’s Pizza, showed up to encourage his team. Dressed in his normal chef’s whites and an apron with a large splat of tomato sauce on the front, he stood before his team’s project with his company mascot and personal pet, a large black raven named The Raven on his shoulder. Everyone in town called the nearly chicken-sized black bird “Edgar”, but Thorsen corrected anyone within earshot with a sing-song “The Raven is his na-yame!” Besides supervising his team, Mr. Poe handed out coupons for free pizza slices to be served later in the afternoon. Thorsen believe in marketing at every opportunity.

The Kids Team— Zack, Paxton, and Walt, and of course, Flash—were working hard on a traditional “castle”. They had lots of enthusiasm, but not a lot of technique. However, their building was, so far, 4 feet high, and had the beginnings of turrets on the sides. They surveyed the scene, eating what one can only assume were sandy Cheetos from a giant bag produced by Walt. Every so often one of them tossed a Cheeto to Flash, who snapped it out of the air with alacrity. Zack’s mom, Tess Marshall, stood by with her camera snapping away, and baby Zoe, Zack’s little sister, dug around in the sand at her Mom’s feet.

The Bankers had gotten it together a little bit. They formed a pile of sand into a large rectangle 6 feet long, 3 feet wide, and 2 feet high. It was a basic shape that could be anything at this point. Coffee still seemed to be a large part of their building strategy. They were, however, all sweating.

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Map-Man-Stan was doing some fairly interesting things with his sand. He had made a replica of the entrance to our very own Inclement Tunnel just east of town, and was now working inside the tunnel, apparently, well, tunneling deeper into his big block of sand. There were rumors flying about that he had asked for MORE sand to be delivered to his building site, which was allowed within the rules.

The Mayor had made her appearance, along with Gillian, the young woman who apparently keeps the Mayor together. Popular opinion around town was that the Mayor was a very nice lady. . She did a good job in City Hall, and she always tries to keep the tourism dollars flowing into Inclement. But she strikes most as a lady who loses her car keys. A LOT. Anyway, the Mayor and Gillian were the judges for today, and they meandered around the building sites, watching the action. The Mayor had given up her business suit for the day, and instead tripped around in plaid pedal pushers and high wedge sandals. She stumbled around in the sand often. Gillian had on sensible jeans and sneakers, and caught her boss by the elbow several times to prevent her from going down. They moved from team to team silently, not allowed to talk to the contestants.

So, the morning went at Inclement’s Annual Sandcastle Building Tournament. The sun rose higher, giving a taste of the hot afternoon that was to come. The clear waters of Lake Inclement beckoned. For Flash the beagle, it was obviously naptime. He settled back into his little spot of shade and closed his eyes. -----

By noontime, the Tournament was well begun. So far, the group on the far left--2 men and two women dressed in TOURIST t-shirts that were, well, a little too-tight for their ample frames--had managed to create what appeared to be a...person, of sorts, laying in the sand. At first glance, it was a little...macabre. The figure was huge--8 or 9 feet tall. It appeared to be holding something in its hands as well. Speculation ranged from famous presidents both living and dead to town founders to sports heros, and even a couple movie stars. One man in the crowd thought for sure it was Neil Armstrong planting the flag on the moon, but could offer no real reason other than “I just think there’s nothing more American than that Neil Armstrong up there on the moon”. He waved his beer vaguely toward the sky as he said it.

Poe’s Pizza’s entry had some trouble but they bounced back. After initially constructing a large wedge-shaped block of sand that collapsed, they rebuilt with vigor, and it became clear that they were actually building a small replica of the Poe’s Pizza Pies building, which was located in downtown Inclement. Mrs. Gompers had the teenagers in hand, telling them where to dig and where to pile.

The Kids--Zack, Walt, and Paxton--continued to add on to their actual castle made of sand. It was large and architecturally unsound, but very interesting in an M.C. Escher sort of way.

The Bankers carved what appears to be a giant, solid dollar bill into the sand, or perhaps a stack of them. Oh well. They were bankers, after all.

Finally, Map-Man-Stan, continued to eclipse everyone in the contest. He requested, and subsequently received another load of sand, which he toted and shoveled and carved and

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otherwise distributed to make....well....it seemed to be that he was making a map of sorts? Perhaps? Some sort of 3-D map made of sand? The entrance to the “map”--if that’s what it was--presented itself as a version of the Inclement Tunnel, which locals know as the actual entrance to the town of Inclement. Perhaps he was mapping our town? Whatever he was doing, it was impressive.

The sun beat down, but the area really began to fill up with people. They came for the hotdogs, the free pizza courtesy of POE’S, the free BBQ courtesy of Sassypants, balloon animals, t-shirt vendors, and of course, the lure of the Lake itself. The water was crisp that, bright blue, sparkling, perfect for swimming or floating or boating. According to local folklore, Lake Inclement held its own mysteries. Carpenter Clondyke, another of Zack’s good friends, was down at the beach handing out flyers for his grandfather’s new Inky Museum, which was celebrating its Grand Opening that day. For those of you unfamiliar, Inky is the monster that supposedly lives in the depths of Lake Inclement. Ben Clondyke, DVM, had many “artifacts” he claimed were proof that Inky exists, and he had organized these artifacts into a rambling museum of sorts in one of the many buildings on his property.