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# TRAVELER

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SPECIAL  
COLLECTOR'S ISSUE

## 50 PLACES OF A LIFETIME AMERICA



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# KENTUCKY BLUEGRASS

*Fertile terrain for tobacco, bourbon, horses, and history. By Nick Clooney*

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HAT GRASS IS NOT BLUE."

The visitor from Georgia was leaning against a board fence in Fayette County, Kentucky, looking at a wide field where fitful zephyrs rippled the ankle-deep grass.

"It's as green as my front lawn. What's up with this bluegrass propaganda?"

This was only the latest in a long line of skeptics. I would make the case for the grass itself later, but first, it was important to point out that "Bluegrass" is a great deal more than a grass. It is a region of surpassing beauty in the central plateau of Kentucky. It is also, some would say, a state of mind made up of equal parts pride, loyalty, tradition, and confidence. At its best, the mixture produces a person of textured civility, most sharp edges softened with humor and perspective. At its

worst, it produces an arrogant boor. Fortunately, the latter is rare.

But the dichotomy does bring me to the wisdom of my grandfather, Andrew Clooney, twice mayor of the Ohio River community of Maysville, a proud Kentuckian who nonetheless cautioned me, "Nicholas, you must remember we Kentuckians live on the sins of man. If people stop smoking burley tobacco, drinking bourbon whiskey, and betting their savings on thoroughbred horses, the Commonwealth goes back to the Shawnee Indians by treaty."

As I explained to my Southern visitor, burley, bourbon, and betting have seen better days, but nothing has been heard from the Shawnees, so far.

In fact—sins of man aside—the Bluegrass is prospering as never before. Bordered by sharp hills and steep, dark ravines and giving way to lowlands, floodplains, and corn fields to the west, the Bluegrass is Kentucky's beating heart. Its geographical and spiritual center is Lexington, home of the University of Kentucky, a city encircled by burley, bourbon, and thoroughbreds, but grown nearly independent of them.

The 20th century found Lexington developing from a town in which wealthy landowners ruled a closed society to one discovered by industry. By the time Nina Warren and I began our lives together in Lexington in 1959, the process was well

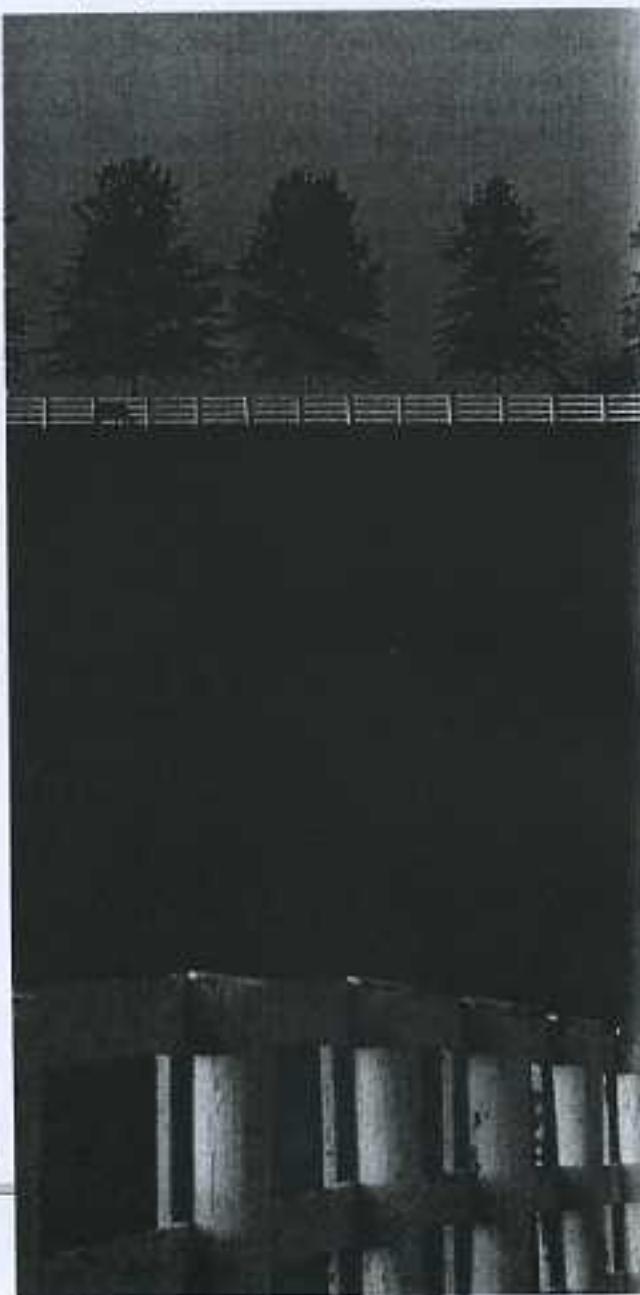
advanced. Our two children were born into a boom-town economy. The solid growth continues to this day.

There are remarkable attractions within an hour's drive of Lexington. My family and I always enjoy a trip to Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, a beautifully restored Shaker Village, and an overnight stay at the nearby Beaumont Inn, an antebellum treat in Harrodsburg, Kentucky's first successfully settled community. Also an hour from downtown Lexington is the surprising, majestic Red River Gorge and the adjacent



#### VITAL STATS

**Location:** North central Kentucky  
**Size:** 8,000 square miles **Population:** 686,003 **Notable:** Bluegrass country has more than 450 horse farms and produces 95 percent of the world's bourbon.



Natural Bridge State Park, where Nina and I honeymooned.

A drive from our home in any direction brought us in a few minutes to the endless white or black plank fences of the thoroughbred horse farms. Foals, weanlings, and yearlings played in fields, watched over by the mares. The stallions, of course, lived in splendid isolation, away from prying eyes. The fine-boned animals were always an engaging sight. Which made even more poignant for us the news of the devastating malady that killed hundreds of those foals and their mares last spring. The rare, naturally occurring poison in some grazing areas decimated a generation of thoroughbreds and struck the Bluegrass at its emotional—if no longer its economic—core.

Curiosity over that episode is what had led the Georgia acquaintance to lean over the board fence and look at a small group of horses munching grass of disputed hue.

"There is nothing even faintly blue about that grass."

I knew it would take a little time. Later that evening, I offered our visitor a mint julep: crushed ice filling a silver cup, the faintest powdering of sugar, a sprig of mint (gently broken, brushed around the lip of the cup, then inserted into the ice). The cup then filled to the brim with a fine Kentucky bourbon. The mixture to be sipped at a stately pace.

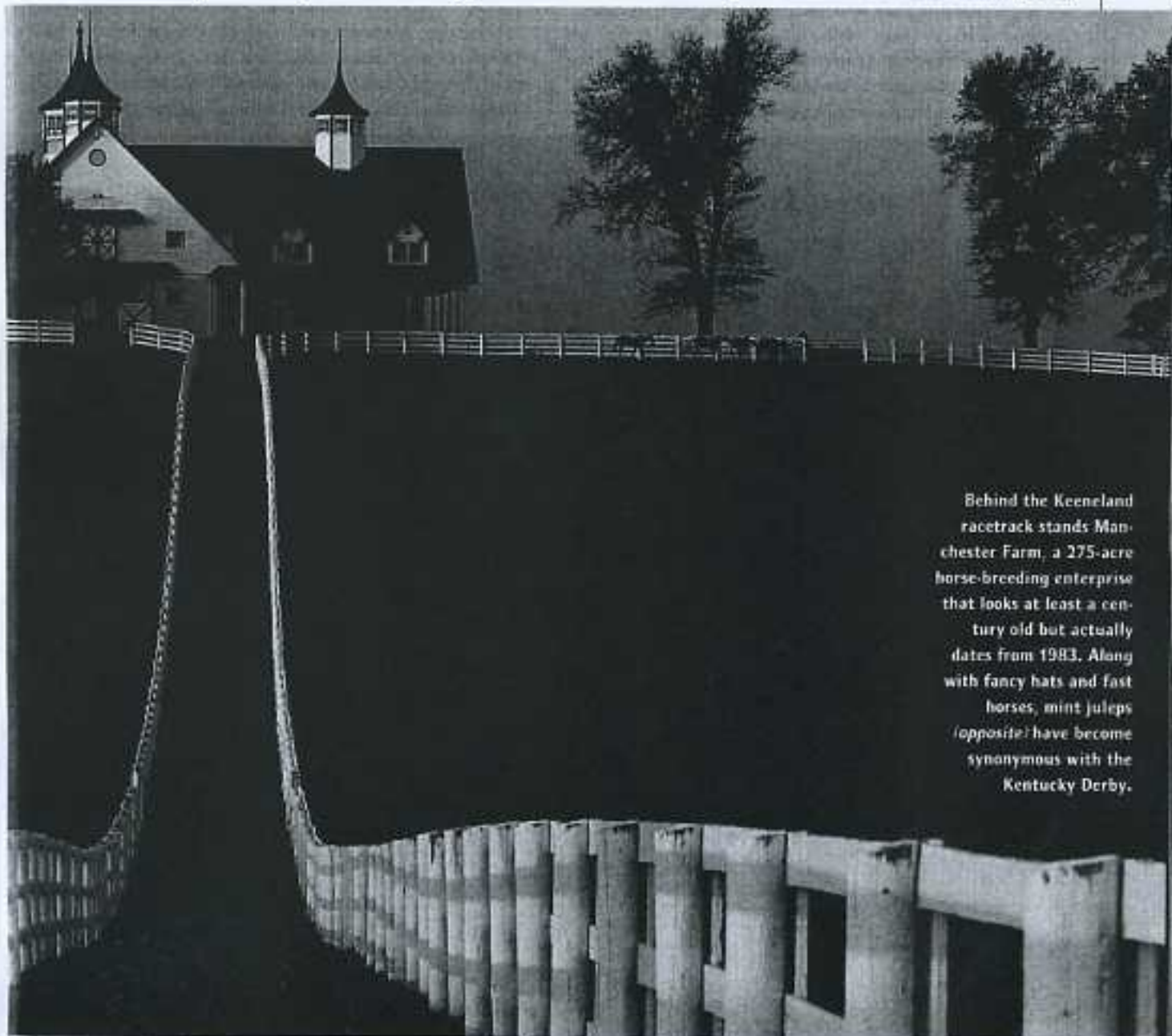
When the day stretched toward dusk, a second julep seemed appropriate. It was at that moment we retired to the back porch to take one more look at that grass. Light was fading. Moisture had risen. Fireflies were blinking.

"Well I'll be darned," said the man from Georgia. "It's blue. That grass is decidedly blue."

Works every time.

*NICK CLOONEY, a former TV newsmen at work on this third book, writes three columns a week for the Cincinnati Post and Kentucky Post.*

PHOTO: GARY W. BIRN



Behind the Keeneland racetrack stands Manchester Farm, a 275-acre horse-breeding enterprise that looks at least a century old but actually dates from 1983. Along with fancy hats and fast horses, mint juleps (opposite) have become synonymous with the Kentucky Derby.