

34. Memorable Event

Not this year, but November 1, 2008, Sam and I went to hear Barack Obama speak live in Springfield, Missouri. It was a near last minute effort by his campaign to win Missouri (Oklahoma being hopeless), so three days before the presidential election the Obama Roadshow rolled in.



MoveOn.org sent out the call to supporters and Sam and I hit the road. A bit surprisingly, none of my Obama Buddies made the trip. Guess they didn't have a day to give.

When we got to Springfield, we were stunned at the length of the line. If this is not Obama territory, what the hell happens when it is? The line just kept going on and on, past thousands of people, most having the good sense to bring their lawn chairs and coolers.

Camaraderie and jokes as Sam and I just kept going and going and going, winding away from the stadium, street after street. Even when anti-Obama cars

drove by, the chants and catcalls were not vicious or unkind.

The speech wasn't until 8:00 pm and we were in line by 2:00 pm and we were latecomers.

Ever so often, Obama campaign workers would come through, working the crowd, and giving special entrance tickets to the most enthusiastic. Everything perfectly planned, just so Obama would have a backdrop of game show crazy enthusiasts behind him.

Security at the gates, like you wouldn't believe. Camera got in, but they certainly looked all through my bag and x-rayed everything.

Vendors just outside the gates, selling t-shirts, flags, posters, bumper stickers. Oh where oh where has my "Rednecks for Obama" bumper sticker gone? Perhaps it keeps company with the stolen yard signs and the magnetic car stickers that disappeared all through the campaign. And then it's time...

We're all in the stadium and we can see the bus caravan all lit up, approaching the long way, motorcycle troopers on all sides, and the band cranking out loud upbeat music.

First, the press bus unloads. Then staff and supporters. Then we have to hear from local politicians, jealous of their moments in the spotlight.

Finally, Michelle Obama comes out running, as if it were the first day of the campaign and her energy were limitless. Followed soon by her husband and daughters holding hands, running too, glad to be here, and hopeful of what America might be.

Obama worked that crowd - welcoming the audience from Oklahoma, from Arkansas, from Kansas, from Texas, and from Missouri - bringing everyone to their feet clapping and yelling, just because it felt so good to be part of these possibilities.

I know most people in that audience weren't Obama supporters, and Missouri didn't go for Obama, but for that hour we were all true believers in our best selves.

I remember when our yard boy ran over his foot with the lawn mower and mother couldn't let him in the house to tend his wounds. She couldn't even take him to a hospital to get it treated. And this was Amarillo, Texas, in 1960, not the Deep South at its worst.

I remember three years later, in May 1963, when "Bull" Connor unleashed the dogs on the protestors in Birmingham, Alabama, Walter Cronkite chose to run the film footage. On the evening news. During dinner. And my mother laid her head down on the table and sobbed.

I remember when I first began teaching in a predominantly black high school and everyone asked me why I couldn't get a job in a better school. Millwood had the hardest working, most gifted students I've ever had, no matter what color. No, I couldn't get a job in a better school; there was no such thing.

And November 1, I get to see a black man who might have a chance?