

The sun is inching its way over the horizon on the sleepy little town of Middlebury, at the close of winter 1988. The first sights of dawn are on the Amish farms east of town. There the roosters are crowing and other farm animals are stirring. Soon the cows will be milked and the work horses will be fed.

It has been another excruciatingly long, hard winter with continually piercing cold for the area. The local patrons spent many days and nights immersed in the warmth of their homes, welcoming the delightful pleasure found by a fireplace or wood burning stove. Yet they are now struggling with cabin fever and clamoring for weather to improve and yearning for spring to arrive full force so they can emerge from being house bound.

Today's sunny beginning brings joy to the locals as spring time may be about to break forth. They have been anxiously anticipating its arrival. Soon they plant flowers, tend to their gardens, cut the grass and enjoy the full extent of spring time. They will be delighted with warmer weather. Well at least until the heat and humidity of summer are baking them.

Many of the locals are already immersed in their day. On Main Street, some of the local, senior men are congregated at the liar's table at the Village Inn Restaurant. A local hangout providing breakfasts that have long been favorites of the townspeople. Eggs, potatoes, sausage and bacon are staples. Along with savory sausage gravy and biscuits. Seldom do customers talk of the food quality. They just down the food as it tastes as they expected. It is good food.

Downtown Middlebury was built in a valley. But with increased population, citizens have built in the hills leading to the valley. Yet the town has retained its charm as it remains looking like the imagery of an ideal local small Midwestern town. The town and surrounding township of Middlebury has a population of nearly nine thousand citizens.

The population consists of 95% white, 3.2 Hispanic, and a small percentage of African Americans and Asians. There is hardly any talk or actions of racism or bigotry in the town. The majority of people get along and enjoy the companionship of others. There are of course, exceptions to the concept of getting along.

The big news for Middlebury is that there is going to be another stoplight installed. Amazingly, it will now be a two stoplight town!

A lone jogger is out running through hills and valleys of the area. He stops for a moment by the entrance of Krider Nurseries Park as he spotted something. He ventures over by the little building with the water wheel and smiles with happiness as he spies the first blossoms of crocuses of spring. There peeking through the last remnants of snow are the small white flowers. A true sign of spring! The remainder of his run is filled with a fresh burst of energy not that he has seen the first pleasures of spring.

Middlebury is converting from a farming community to a manufacturing hub. Especially in the RV (Recreational Vehicle) and mobile home manufacturing industry. Approximately 10,000 workers drive to Middlebury each day for work. The largest RV manufacturers are Coachman RV and Jayco. Those companies were most surprised at the economic growth in the first half of 1988. It was anticipated there would be economic fallout because of the October 1987 stock market collapse. Owners and management were jubilant that the economy was expanding in 1988, not contracting as had been predicted.

On the outskirts of town, near U.S. Highway 20, is a very well-known Amish themed restaurant, inn, and conference center and retail shops. The famous restaurant, Das Dutchman Essenhaus, is the most magnetizing of the tourist options in the town. People come from many

states away to taste the 'Amish' cooking, browse through their shops, take a ride in a horse drawn buggy and buy gifts.

The Middlebury Community School system is a major attraction for young families. Many families are moving to the area for quality education. The school system is made up of three townships (Jefferson, York and Middlebury) that merged 1969. A new high school was built across from the street from Das Dutchman Essenhaus. The high school was named Northridge, with a nickname of Raiders. The kids gravitated well to each other during the merger. It was a time to advance new friendships and retain old relationships. For the most part the transition worked quite well.

It seemed that with the three combined schools, Northridge would be able to advance their sports prowess. Northridge joined the Northern Lakes conference where the competition would be fiercer in all sports than either Middlebury or Jefferson schools had encountered. Success did not unfold positively at the onset.. Not even in basketball. Indiana is a state of basketball hysteria and Northridge high school was no exception. Neither the boys nor girls teams basketball teams excelled out of the gates.

Yet there remained hope for all sports and spring sports were about to start their seasons. The track teams looked to be middle of the back. The boy's baseball team coach hoped to reach middle of the pack by sectional time and maybe win a game at the sectional championship.

There was talent on the girls' softball team. Coach Willig had aspirations of achievement for the team.

As he stepped into his car that bright sunny morning he felt a warmth that brought a ray of hope to his soul. He reached for his sunglasses which he hadn't used for months and felt a rising of his spirit. Being an analytical, his mind wondered why the joyful increase in his spirit.

He thought it could be that the team was just about to start outdoor practices. But he knew that was only a small part of the sensation. Not the root of the joy. He thought of the team as he turned the ignition over in his car. As he began driving east to the school, directly into that beautiful orb of sunlight, he contemplated more deeply. He considered the conference teams and the challenges of facing the best schools. Would his team be able to do more than compete? He confirmed in his mind that yes they could. He conjured up thoughts of the year end sectional tournament. Of course, his mind turned to potential opponent Elkhart Central, who was already ranked #4 in the state. He already wished for a good seeding in the sectional for Northridge. Maybe they could win two games and make it to the sectional championship game against Elkhart Central, if the seeding bracket draws worked in Northridge's favor. While he settled into the twenty minute drive to the school, he knew there was still something else stirring his spirit about the team. He thought of the talent on the team. He was very aware of infielder talent Shelly Riegsecker and outfielder Staci Dempsey. They both could be excellent teammates in driving Northridge forward this season. They were talented and were team oriented.

Coach Willig knew there was yet one other reason for the joy in his spirit. He knew what it was and now he allowed himself the pleasure of immersing himself into those delightfully pleasurable realities and dreams. There was an amazing talent on the team. This girl had giftedness beyond any he had coached before. Annette Evans had more talent, ability and potential than anyone else he had ever coached. A smile crossed his face as he thought of how far she could actually take this team.

Annette not only had speed, strength and hitting ability, but she could hurl like only those of advanced age and skills. It was obvious to Coach that she was committed to accomplish all she could possibly achieve this year. Her final year in high school. He could tell her attitude was superior and she had set a high, very high standard of achievement for herself and the team.

She had worked on her pitching and it showed. Her form and delivery were improved and she was starting to have amazing control. Her efforts to be in shape and to mentally excel were advancing her achievements.

Annette's talent could make it a very memorable season for her and hopefully the team as well. Now if she could just stay healthy, invigorated and not get burned out by all the pitching she would need to do this season. She is the 'arm' of the team. The team's season is going to rest on that.

Coach was anxious to get her outdoors and to see her hurling abilities on the mound. Enough already with indoor practices he says to himself as he pulls into the school parking lot. He thinks maybe they would practice outdoors today on this delightful sunny day. That should build team enthusiasm.

As Coach walks to the building, he is trying to control his zeal to see the achievements of his team this year. He is not known as a teacher/coach who smiles often, so he is trying to erase the smile from his face. However, his mind is racing about the potential of this year's team. Maybe they will even be runners up in the sectional championship. He allows himself a sigh of joy.