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## Uptown, Nebraska

Some people say that Uptown used to be a sprawling Aztec city, with canals, hanging gardens, pyramids, and paved roads. Uptown has paved roads, but it doesn't have canals or pyramids today or, for that matter, hanging gardens, and no one has ever come up with evidence that there was an Aztec city anywhere near where Uptown is situated today. In fact, Uptown is a very normal place, located just off Highway 80, roughly 30 miles west of North Platte. Although its population is relatively small – just 12,819 inhabitants at the last census, some people say, but that was before Mabel Fillmore gave birth to twin girls and before the census records were lost – it has its own international airport, with an 8-seat Cessna making weekly flights to Denver. The Federal Aviation Administration griped about this at one time, alleging that Colorado is not a foreign country, but the Uptownians are proud of their “international” airport and don't want to give it up. Besides, America is a free country and you can call things what you like.

Since Uptown is small, most people have two roles. For example, the town mortician is also the town florist – which makes sense. The dentist doubles as a therapist and frequently psychoanalyzes his patients free of charge while their mouths are stretched open with metal clamps and a plastic sheet. The only supermarket, if you can call it that, is attached to the gasoline station, although there is also a 7-11 in town, run by a young immigrant from Kansas named Martin Glover. There is no crime in Uptown, and most people don't play with matches. So Geena Dorbin, the police chief,

AKA the fire chief, runs a barber shop in downtown Uptown. It has the familiar barber pole and looks like a barber shop, but the sign reads "Police Station and Barber Shop". There is also a non-denominational church in town with a nondenominational pastor. When it comes to spiritual matters, he can do almost anything you want. Pastor Jim Grace regularly hears confessions from Catholics, knows what he describes as "all five Presbyterian hymns" (no complaints about the small number so far), and once officiated at a bar mitzvah. Rumor has it that Pastor Grace had been a Hindu monk before he came to Uptown. Old Man Marlowe has been mayor for at least 40 years, though no one remembers electing him or having any elections at all. But he doesn't get paid for his mayoring, since he makes a decent living from his saloon, The Fancy Turtle Saloon: this is the town's most successful venture, with people coming over regularly from the towns of Filibuster and Stonewall, both about 20 miles away, since the county in which those towns are located doesn't allow alcohol. For the children, there is the Buffalo Bill Cody Elementary School, which includes grades 1-6. The school library, with its strong collection of children's literature, also serves as the town library. A favorite watering hole is Daisy Doo's Candy Shoppe, where you can also get milk shakes and root beer floats. Across the street from Daisy Doo's is the Museum of Animal Curiosities, where visitors can see a two-headed rabbit, a goat with three tails, a parrot that has learned to sing the Marine Corps Hymn, a "winged mouse" (actually just a dead Big Brown Bat, one of the most common bats native to Nebraska), and what is advertised as the world's largest collection of dead flies (preserved in formaldehyde). There is also a small bookshop on Main Street, but people say that this is just an FBI front and so they won't enter. And yet the shop stays in business. So it probably *is* an FBI front!

About 12 miles west of Uptown, close to the international border with Colorado, is the University of Western Uptown. No one seems to know why it is called "Western", since there is no town by that name, let alone an "Eastern" Uptown. Maybe the name was chosen in order to produce the mellifluous acronym UWU. The university calls itself a "concept university", by which it means that it has only a few departments, which correspond to its concept of education. These are the departments of English literature, astron-

omy (UWU's smallest department), physics, archeology, zoology, political science, music therapy, spiritualism (where students take part in séances), entomology (the study of insects), art mechanics (a real field of study), automobile safety (the university's major contribution to reducing the death toll on local highways), foreign languages (where Spanish, German, Hopi, Algonquin, and Arapaho are taught), history, and a joint department of philosophy and religious studies. Since UWU is located precisely on the traditional tribal land of the Arapaho, there have been some protests that Arapaho is not a "foreign" language, but the university administration has always replied that, if the language was going to be taught, that was the only department where it could fit. With just 13 academic departments, the university has fewer than 240 regular faculty members and just over 2,300 students, some of them from out of state. All of the departments offer baccalaureate and master's degrees, and two of the departments – spiritualism and automobile safety – also offer Ph.D.'s. After hours, many of its professors frequent the Country-Western Palace, which is where Jeremy Shazoo, the dean of the faculty, met his sweetheart, Debbie Sue Stefanovich, who became the assistant dean. Jeremy wanted her to take his name, which would have made her Debbie Sue Shazoo. But she stood up for women's rights and kept her name just as it had always been. As for the students, they tend to congregate at the local Bingo parlor or play games of chicken on the railroad tracks which run through the town. The students also enjoy a good hootenanny and many of them can play the kazoo. Since the students all live on campus, inevitably some of them like to meet in the Student Union building, where one of their favorite pastimes is to imagine history playing out in different ways. For example, what if the Wright brothers had invented a machine to move from one dimension to another, instead of the airplane? Or again, what if Timothy Leary, who had championed psychedelic drugs in the 1960s and founded the League for Spiritual Discovery, had won the election for Governor of California in 1970 – would that have changed the history of California? Could he have been elected President of the United States in 1980, instead of Reagan? Or again, what if there was no okra in Nebraska? – *that* was something to send chills up one's spine. Of course, the students had homework as well, which, for

those enrolled in classes given by the department of spiritualism included practicing séances with their fellow students. They had many conversations with the dead and among those with whom they made contact was an Aztec warrior who never tired of warning them about a cursed dummy. At first, the students insisted that he must mean an Aztec *mummy*, but he was insistent that he meant what he said and the students did not think that it was smart to argue with a ghost. Students majoring in automobile safety were also known to practice their driving skills by cruising in North Platte. They were well loved by the North Plattians because the UWU students had all been trained to be courteous, self-effacing, and indulgent of others' driving preferences. But on the drive between Uptown and North Platte, UWU's automobile safety majors often practice the pit maneuver against each other, sending each other's cars into the ditch.

Such was life in Uptown and UWU – happy, tranquil, and undisturbed until, one day, a stranger moved in. Since he had come from California, Isaac Beanhead Tecumseh Floorboard was immediately treated as a foreigner, since everyone who is not a native Nebraskan is, by definition, a foreigner. Floorboard was a native of Disneyland, well Anaheim, and had served two terms as a congressman from California in the U.S. House of Representatives followed by a two-year stint as president of a university in New Mexico. Now he had been hired in as president of UWU, and there was a lot of excitement both at the university and in the town, where there were some exorbitant expectations. Some folks said that he would bring the next World's Fair to Uptown, others thought that he was going to entice Sears to open an outlet in town. Still others dreamt of NASA moving its headquarters to Uptown. There was even a rumor that he was going to entice the Disney Corporation to open a small version of Disneyland next to Uptown. It's not clear how these stories started, but once they got going some people wanted to believe them.

Foreign or not, Floorboard's arrival was the talk of the town. It was, for Uptown and UWU, the big event of the year – the most exciting news since Professor Joe Friday published an article in *The American Political Science Review*, when – as you can imagine – folks both at the university and in the town could talk of nothing else for

weeks on end. Townsfolk decorated the town with banners and streamers, and put up huge posters everywhere. No one seemed quite sure what should be on the posters, but they knew that they could not go wrong with giant posters of American presidents. But amid posters of George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Millard Fillmore (a local favorite), and Abraham Lincoln, there were also posters of Jefferson Davis, Aaron Burr, William Tecumseh Sherman, and George Armstrong Custer, none of whom had been president, although Custer had wanted to be president. The town hall was painted bright yellow for the occasion, and the sheriff's office was painted red, white, and blue, with the result that it now matched the barber's pole.

When the great day arrived, the incoming president was driven through town in an emerald green convertible limousine, while confetti and other colorful objects such as small plastic animals were thrown around in his honor. People lined the streets to witness this great event. The roof of the convertible had been lowered and the university provost, Zoe Ryan, sat in the vehicle together with Floorboard and Floorboard's wife, Eustadiola von Kletten, daughter of a latter-day Austrian waltz king and a Prussian mother, who had taught von Kletten how to handle the world around her. Preceding the limousine was the university marching band, which played Meyerbeer's "Coronation March". Following the presidential convertible were six further convertibles, in which the members of the political science department sat, and at the end of the parade, the members of the university's curling team marched in their bright uniforms, followed by the pupils from the elementary school and their teachers. It was a great day for Uptown. The parade halted at the edge of town in the town park. From there, the limousines drove over to the university. The members of the band climbed into their van and followed the limousines, and most townsfolk got their cars and drove over to UWU in a state of wild excitement and sustained ecstasy. Once everyone had reached UWU, the band reassembled in the bandstand and played a round of "Rule Britannia" – apparently by mistake, and there was some controversy about that later – and then the provost ascended the bandstand and addressed the university's faculty members, staff, students, and those townsfolk who had driven over to the university to hear and remember the speeches.

“My fellow Uptownians,” the provost began. “Today is a great day.” Everyone knew that already, but it was worth emphasizing. “Today we welcome our new university president, Isaac Beanhead Tecumseh Floorboard of California. As you all know, we lost our dear president, Sylvester McElroy, two months ago. He had been the president of our university for the past sixty-two years and those decades were years of success, joy, and self-congratulation at UWU. Now we welcome a new president and hope that he will be with us for at least sixty-two years of success, joy, and self-congratulation. Floorboard is an enthusiastic fisherman” – roars of approval from all assembled – “and plays a wicked saxophone” – more roars of approval – “and has a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley” – no sound from the audience at the mention of his Ph.D. “He served as president of the University of Truth or Consequences in New Mexico before coming here and has written and published five books, including the near-bestseller, *The Governator in Action*. We are also delighted to welcome his wife, Professor von Kletten, who will join the political science department here. You will all be excited to know that she has written two influential books about the Aztecs” – at the mention of the Aztecs, there were sounds of unbridled excitement throughout the crowd. “And now I shall let President Floorboard say a few words of greeting.”

“Provost Ryan, Dean Davis, colleagues, students, and townfolk – my fellow Americans – I am thrilled to be here in Nebraska and coming on board as president of UWU. This university is widely admired throughout our great country and, back when I was at the University of Truth or Consequences, scarcely a day passed without someone making some favorable remark about UWU. From what I have learned, the budget is strong, the university cafeteria has one of the best chefs in this part of the country, and most of the faculty get along famously. But I have already learned of some problems that need to be addressed, perhaps especially in the departments of spiritualism and physics, where there have been constant arguments between these two departments about whether both of them are actually needed at the university. Today, standing here before all of you, I pledge to take UWU, a first-class university sitting on a high promontory of academia, to even greater heights of glory, until we feel that we are literally flying in orbit, with our ivory tow-



ers pointing to Mars. If we all work together, there is nothing we cannot achieve – except maybe to rescind the law of gravity, but we wouldn't want to do that anyway."

And with that, the crowd roared its approval, the band resumed playing "Seventy-six trombones", with the members of the curling team singing along, and the president and his wife, together with the provost, walked up the steps to the university's presidential palace and disappeared behind the giant oak doors.