



# Road trip

## How an Englishman's drive through the Dairy State in 1942 revealed the genius of the Wisconsin Idea

BY WARREN KOZAK

On a campaign stop in Madison just a month before the 1952 presidential election, Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic nominee, set aside the race for the White House for a moment to praise the vision of the state he was visiting. Stevenson, who was the governor of Illinois, looked at a concept that was hard to define — the Wisconsin Idea — and in his articulate way, actually defined it.

Saying it was more than just a simple belief in the people, he called it the application of intelligence and reason to help solve the problems that every society encounters. “It meant a deep conviction that the role of government was not to stumble along like a drunkard in the dark,” Stevenson explained, “But to light its way by the best torches of knowledge and understanding it could find.”

In other words, the Wisconsin Idea is the very best that can come from a free people, electing far-thinking leaders who are able to design a plan that will help everyone — especially those in the future

— live better lives. Amazingly, given the inherent problems with government competence today, that brilliant ideas are created at all by a bureaucracy seems closer to a miracle.

All of this may sound very esoteric, like something that should be left to the philosophy department of a great university. That is one of the reasons that the Wisconsin Idea has been so hard to define over the past century. It's also hard to find concrete examples of it.

But I stumbled across a real, live example, perhaps the greatest application of this mystical idea. I found it in the most unlikely place: buried in a book, *The American Home Front: 1941–1942*, that was buried itself for more than 60 years in a forgotten manuscript



unpublished until 2006. Written by an elegant British gentleman during an auto tour around the United States, the book explains the Wisconsin Idea through, of all things, a story about powdered milk.

Yes, you read that correctly ... powdered milk.



Alistair Cooke was the American idea of the sophisticated British gentleman. AP photo

**For anyone over the age of 50, the name Alistair Cooke** conjures up images of *Masterpiece Theatre*, the very popular PBS series broadcast on Sunday nights. Cooke was the American idea of the sophisticated British gentleman — handsome, incredibly articulate, refined and, of course, there was the pitch-perfect upper-crust accent. Cooke was the host of the weekly broadcast from 1971 to 1992. And in his introductions, he helped Americans understand the cultural nuances of their British cousins through his own personal experience.

So what possible connection does this dignified gentleman from public broadcasting have to do with the Wisconsin Idea and powdered milk?

It turns out that Mr. Cooke had a very important earlier career. He came to the United States as a student during the Great Depression and became a U.S. citizen on Dec. 1, 1941, just six days before Pearl Harbor.

Cooke worked as a correspondent for the BBC and would come to write and broadcast the wildly

successful weekly radio series called *Letter From America* in which he explained to the English what their American cousins were like, what they were thinking, who they really were. In essence, he started out doing the reverse of *Masterpiece Theatre*.

Shortly after the United States entered the war, Cooke took to the road with an audacious idea. He would drive across the country to see just what Americans were thinking and doing as they transitioned from the Great Depression and an isolationist economy into the arsenal of democracy and, ultimately, the most powerful nation on earth. His idea was to write a book about this enormous transformation, which he did, but not until the war was over. By that time, everyone was war-weary and didn't want to hear about it. So the manuscript sat in a box in his closet, only to be discovered after Cooke died in 2004.

Nearly 70 years later, the book is a magical time machine to an America that is no more.

**The Wisconsin Idea has been hard to define over the past century. But the author stumbled across a concrete example in, of all things, Alistair Cooke's writing about powdered milk in World War II.**

**It took the discerning eye of the outsider to give us** the most honest account of what was happening in America in those crucial months after Pearl Harbor. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville stands out as the best chronicler of an earlier America, Alistair Cooke serves that role a century later. Bear in mind that there were no interstate, four-lane highways — they came a decade later in the 1950s. Gas was rationed during the war, and there were no tires at all because rubber was reserved for the war effort.

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On an early Sunday morning in spring, halfway through his trip, Cooke left Minneapolis for Wisconsin. On this leg of his journey, he reminds us that, unlike the European continent where he grew up, he could drive from one state into another — much like crossing a border into a new country — without any guards or checkpoints, not even a discernable border.

That's something Americans take for granted to such an extent that we believe it is our birthright. Yet Cooke reminds us that this freewheeling ability of movement has an impact on our national personality. It makes Americans more mobile and, in a sense, freer than other people.

The next thing he observes is that he can't find breakfast! Cooke was looking forward to a wonderful Sunday morning breakfast in one of the many roadside restaurants that were unique to that time. Long before chain restaurants gave us the same menu and taste with absolutely no individual personality, mom-and-pop establishments dotted the country's highways.

Cooke discovered that all the owners of these small restaurants, who were often the cooks and managers and sometimes the waiters, had boarded up their establishments to work in the more lucrative war industries that had sprouted up overnight across the 48 states. Never mind, our British friend finally found sustenance in La Crosse and was quite pleased with his breakfast.

As he drove through the "luscious" farmland in the southern part of the state that Wisconsinites seem to take for granted, he observed the war's demands on the dairy industry. Prior to the start of the war, he

tells us, "Wisconsin provided just under 12% of the nation's milk supply and 50% of its cheese."

But with the start of World War II, everything changed in America, and the Wisconsin dairy farmer was no less a miracle worker than Henry Kaiser building his ships or Ford transitioning from Lincolns

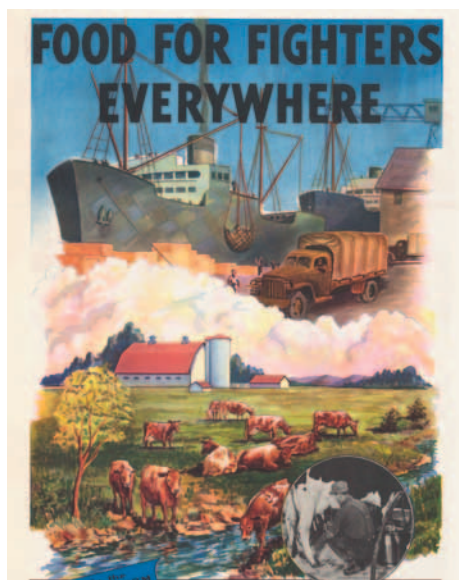
to Sherman tanks. "Before the war, there were no egg-drying plants here," writes Cooke. "Now there are a score. Wisconsin produced in the first six months after Pearl Harbor between 90 [million] and 100 million cases of powdered milk."

Just as Americans traveled across state lines without giving border crossings a second thought, the dairy farmers of Wisconsin produced unimaginable amounts of solid, nutritious food as if it were no big deal. It is the foreigner who has to stop the

reader and point out that many other countries could not even feed their own people, let alone the rest of the world. It is the outsider who says, "Wait a minute here, you take this for granted but no one else can do this — anywhere."

Napoleon said that an army marches on its stomach. Wisconsin's dairy farmers would feed not only the millions of American servicemen who were stationed in the most remote and far-flung battle zones, but they would also provide hearty nutrition to children across the globe who might otherwise have gone hungry.

**American GIs, who were used to the pleasures of fresh eggs, complained constantly about the dried eggs they were served for breakfast. A British youngster, who was severely rationed and often**





hungry, was just thankful. TV journalist Ted Koppel once told this writer: “I never understood the ease with which everyone denigrates Spam. It was one of the only protein staples in our diets, and we thought it was wonderful.” Koppel was a child growing up in London during the war.

With typical Wisconsin understatement, the dairy farmers with whom Cooke spoke surely didn’t see themselves as anything special. Instead, when one farmer heard Cooke’s accent, he complained, “Britain is only taking about 60 million cases” and “[they] take only the top grade of our dairy products, and the lesser grades are on our hands.”

Alistair Cooke does something rare. He accurately places the credit where it belongs. Yes, it is the rich farmland that contributed to this amazing

abundance. And of course, it was the hard-working dairy farmer who woke up at 3:30 in the morning on frigid winter days to go to the unheated barn and start the train that eventually led to a soldier’s or child’s stomach thousands of miles away. But there was one more crucial piece that made it all possible.

“You cannot roam over the dairy country of Wisconsin and talk to the agricultural staff of the university without feeling the fair mating of intelligence and pride,” Cooke wrote. He tells about the university’s extension service, which disseminated its research to every hamlet and farm in the state.

“One of its staff,” he writes with amazement, “invented in 1890 a machine for testing milk. This machine records the cow’s history and her horoscope, the farmer knows that this cow’s milk has 3.1% butterfat.”

But it is precisely because of discoveries like this

one at UW-Madison that Wisconsin’s dairy farmers were able to double their output per cow when the rest of the world was starving. No big deal to the farmer in West Bend or Black Earth, but a very big deal to a mother watching over her starving children. (By the way, the inventor of that butterfat device? Stephen Babcock, whose name brings a smile to tens of thousands of people who have left the doors of Babcock Hall with a very large ice cream cone in their hands over the years.)



**And it is here where the**

Wisconsin Idea comes into play with two important dates. Wisconsin became a state in 1848, just about 100 years before Alistair Cooke drove through it on his mission. The University of Wisconsin was founded in that same year, 1848. The far-thinking men who transitioned the state from a territory in that vital year could not have foreseen a world calamity that would slaughter more than 60 million people and cause incalculable suffering a century later.

What they did understand was that in the first half of the 19th century, they were far removed from the more advanced East Coast with its industry and

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longstanding centers of knowledge. They understood that they could not be dependent on the East and would have to create a partnership of private industry and research on their own if the state was to advance.

And, yes, they understood that they may not benefit from this act immediately, but future generations would have better lives because of it.

The state's first governor, Nelson Dewey, signed the bill that formally created the university. The state's constitution spelled out "the establishment of a state university at or near the seat of state government" that was to be governed by a board of regents and administered by a chancellor.

Later, UW President Charles Van Hise was so influenced by the Wisconsin Idea that he stated in 1904: "I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the university reaches every home in the state."

A few years later this was acknowledged nationally when President Theodore Roosevelt wrote, "In no other state in the union has any university done the same work for the community that has been done in Wisconsin by the University of Wisconsin."

Within 50 years of its creation, UW was influencing colleges everywhere else. Jack Stark, in his analysis called "The Wisconsin Idea: The University's Service to the State," wrote that the benefits were a model for all other colleges and universities. "The Wisconsin Idea certainly appears to have been important not only to this state but also to the development of

American higher education."

Stark points out that the university's partnership went far beyond agriculture. "Professor Frederick Jackson Turner, who in our era would be called the most influential American historian, would travel the dirt roads of late-19th-century Wisconsin to give extension lectures. ... Professor John R. Commons

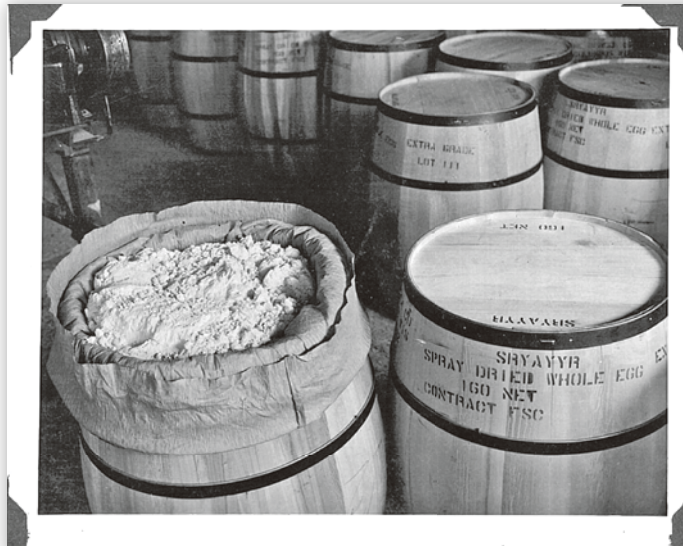
would repeatedly aid in the planning and drafting of legislation that would make Wisconsin the first state to solve difficult social and economic problems." The state clearly and immeasurably benefitted and would continue to benefit from the research and partnership between the university and the residents of Wisconsin.

This outreach

function, especially its attention to practical problems, is a good example of the Wisconsin Idea at work.

The university conducted 57 educational institutes during the winter of 1886-'87, and approximately 50,000 farmers attended them. Over the years, the innovations that came from the partnership have saved industry millions of dollars and have, therefore, benefitted not just the private sector but the entire state and beyond.

"The real beauty of the partnership," explains Jim Harsdorf, a dairy farmer and former state legislator and former Wisconsin secretary of agriculture, "is that the dairy producers see it as a partnership, which isn't true elsewhere, and the university is a good listener.



The dried eggs of Wisconsin chicken farmers helped feed the world in WWII.  
UW-Madison Department of Animal Sciences photos

“We’ve had the ability to try new ideas and keep at them even if they don’t work at first,” Harsdorf explains. (It would be hard to find any great invention and inventor who didn’t fail the first few times.) “The other great and important impact was pushing education for the children of farmers so that now we have one of the best-educated dairy farmers in the world.”

### The Wisconsin Idea

was not just a concept that began in the 1800s and ended in the last century. At the end of the 20th century, a Republican governor, Tommy Thompson, and a liberal Democrat serving as the UW-Madison chancellor,

Donna Shalala, became pragmatic partners in a building boom on the Madison campus that would serve as another incubator for new innovations today in bio-medical research, computer science and engineering.

It was also Thompson, according to Terry Shelton, outreach director of the UW’s La Follette School of Public Affairs, who saw the California emission laws in the 1990s as an opportunity to engage Wisconsin industries like Harley-Davidson, Mercury Marine and Briggs and Stratton to follow the lead and improve their engines ahead of the new standards.

“I’d say it is very much alive,” observes Shelton. “But it has evolved from the Wisconsin Idea to the Wisconsin Ideal. We are now working on regulation reform and poverty issues that can be used not just in the state but throughout the country and beyond.”

Shelton also reminds us of a symbolic rule that



was put in place when the university and state were founded and is maintained to this day. Those early politicians and university officials said that nothing could ever be built between the Capitol and Bascom Hill that would impede the view. That way, the two would always be on equal footing — a partnership.

Back in 1942, Alistair Cooke was serving not just as a cheerleader for America. He also offered his

Tocqueville analysis of the country’s faults as well, and they are not pretty. But when it came to Wisconsin, Cooke was only positive. And that might come from Jack Stark’s observation that the Wisconsin Idea may have actually led to a more decent

and more understanding citizenry throughout the Midwest.

As Cooke notes: “America is no better, or worse, than all the strains of men that have made it. And against the shiftless and callous rapers of the Southland and the West, we can stack the hard, decent Yankees and independent German liberals who came to Wisconsin and respected the land.”

Above all, Cooke offers us a reminder that government does have the ability to function with astounding results that may not be seen today or even tomorrow, but generations down the line. ■

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