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# FIELD NOTES FROM THE EDITOR



by Mark A. Gonzalez

## Prodigal Son

Bismarck is my hometown. For various reasons, I left North Dakota at the age of 18, only weeks after graduating from high school. For the next 22 years, I pursued an education in earth sciences, worked in several different government agencies, traveled to exotic places, and taught at two different universities. One evening, while contemplating my future and that of my family, I came across an advertisement on the Internet for the position that I now hold with the NDGS. Would I ever accept a hefty pay cut to return to North Dakota? (It's a lot of money to me, and it's not a very exotic place.) For the right job, I might; and by writing this column, I guess the answer is obvious.

Why return? In my return to Bismarck, I have rekindled old friendships, forged new acquaintances, and become involved and engaged in my state and community in ways unimaginable in the anonymity of the large, impersonal metropolitan areas I once resided in. These friendships and the sense of involvement are priceless rewards. And North Dakotans are a special, if not an endangered, breed. Where else does one find the civility, generosity, and hospitality that typify North Dakotans? Where else does one stand out in the open landscape and feel their lives are so significant? Like the shade trees on the Dakota prairie, we are few, but we cast long shadows and have a wide sphere of influence.

Example, one day I was returning from northern Stutsman County, where I had met a driller and inspected the installation of a geothermal energy system. I could have taken the quick way home on I-94 but felt that part of my new job required me to observe, study, and learn the landforms in those parts of the state I had yet to visit. I chose the back road, State Highway 36. A few miles west of Pingree, the road climbs out of a glacial outwash channel (the valley of

Pipestem Creek) and onto the steep flanks of the Missouri Escarpment, the leading edge of the Missouri Coteau. Wow. This crossing of the Escarpment is nothing like the relatively subdued topography along I-94. A piece farther and the road traverses the high-relief, roller-coaster topography of a dead-ice moraine. At the crest of a particularly high ridge, I pulled to the side of the road and surveyed the landscape. The sun had sunk low in the western sky, and its warm light was now shimmering on the gilded surfaces of countless prairie pot-holes below me. Myriad ducks, summer residents of this fertile plain, cartwheeled overhead. I tested my memory to recall some poetry of Clell Gannon who expressed, as well as anyone I know, a profound appreciation for the subtle but unmistakable beauty of North Dakota. Another traveler stopped and got out of his car. First question was a helpful "Anything the matter with your car?" After I informed him that the car was fine, he faced west to absorb the same view that I was enjoying. Second question was a friendly, "Mind if I share the view?" In a large metropolitan area, one is usually suspicious of anyone who pulls off the road to offer assistance. In North Dakota, I find a landscape that engages me professionally, that beckons for study by a Quaternary geologist. In North Dakota, I also find a landscape, an environment, and a people that [who] satisfy my soul.

This is my debut as the editor of the *NDGS Newsletter*. It's not the *Saturday Evening Post*; it's just a newsletter of a small government agency. Nevertheless, I hope there are many editions under my watch, because that means I will have had many opportunities to study this fascinating landscape, to gaze deeply upon the countryside, to visit with great people like you.

Lastly, I am indebted to Linda Johnson, whose experience and patience with me greatly improved the layout and design of the *Newsletter*.