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# Field Notes



## First Impressions

by Lorraine A. Manz



I am not a native North Dakotan. I am not even an American. My roots are in the Old World, in an unremarkable little town that lies midway along the old Roman road between London and the sea, in the county of Kent, England. I took the long route to the United States, traveling via

South Africa, where I lived for almost five years and met my husband, who is a native North Dakotan and the main reason I am here.

My introduction to North Dakota came on a late April day in 1992. I had flown into Winnipeg from Montreal the night before and the first thing I noticed was that it was snowing. Now I am not unaccustomed to snow in April. British springs can be cool enough for snow and I recall several instances when my mother's daffodils and crocuses were bent under the weight of a covering of the white stuff. But at least we knew it was spring and that winter was fighting its last battle with the new season. The snow that was falling that night in Winnipeg was different than the soggy mush I was used to, however. The flakes were small and hard, and they stung when they fell onto exposed skin. During my short stay in the Grand Forks area in the days that followed a growing suspicion was confirmed: here was a place where spring was far away. The snow hadn't amounted to more than a dusting, but beneath it lay a seemingly lifeless, brown and black landscape, still deep in its winter slumber. It was with some relief that I flew into Denver a few days later to be greeted by warm sunshine and leaves on the trees.

About a year and a half later my husband and I returned to the northern Great Plains after spending almost five years in southern Africa. The transition was not the climate shock one might expect. It was mid-September, and we had simply exchanged a mild African spring for a warm northern fall. Harvest was still underway and the days were pleasantly warm and sunny. The first snow fell on October 1<sup>st</sup>. Once again it wasn't more than a dusting, but by Halloween that year enough snow had fallen to bury the ground in a blanket several inches thick. And it was getting cold. Never mind, I was looking forward to the first white Christmas of my life, and the prospect of a "real" winter with plenty of snow instead of rain and fog. On December 19th the temperature dropped

below freezing. It did not rise above 32°F for two months and by the middle of February the novelty was beginning to wear a bit thin. Even the northern lights, which I had never seen before coming to North Dakota, were beginning to lose their magic.

It was at about this time that I began to develop the disturbing feeling that the people who live in North Dakota and northern Minnesota must be nuts. What possible reason besides insanity would compel them to put up with such long, bone-chillingly cold winters year after year? When the snow finally began to disappear sometime in April the rivers began to rise and there was flooding. After that came howling spring winds that turned every kind of outdoor activity into a joyless chore. It was too much. I didn't want to live among crazy people anymore. When my husband was offered employment with a company in Ohio I couldn't wait to get away from this awful place. We escaped on a morning in early June, just before the ticks and mosquitoes arrived.

Except for occasional short visits we did not return to North Dakota for six years. Then circumstances brought us back again, and something in me changed. It was July and the evening was glorious. Clear, golden sunlight slanted through heavily leafed trees and bathed the ripening wheat fields in a warm haze. The air was still, birds sang and bees buzzed lazily among the flowers. As summer drifted into fall I began to take pleasure in being outside. For some reason the mosquitoes weren't quite as irritating as I remembered and I developed a habit of taking long walks along the gravel roads and cow trails that are so much a part of the Midwest. Day by day I watched the seasons change and came to know the woods and fields with a familiarity that was denied the occupants of the motor vehicles that now and then passed me by. I saw moose, beavers, foxes, more skunk than I would have liked (although the female that came trotting unconcernedly out of the long grass not six feet from me one day with her three kits following in line was quite simply delightful) and even what I am still convinced was an otter - an acknowledged rarity in that part of the country. I watched fall turn to winter, winter to spring and spring to summer, all the while growing more and more fond of the landscapes around me.

When I joined the North Dakota Geological Survey two years ago and moved from the Red River Valley to Bismarck, opportunities arose that have allowed me to explore the state in ways that might not otherwise have been possible. Every field trip is an adventure, not just because there is geology to

be learned and studied, but because, to paraphrase the words of TV Bulpin, one of South Africa's leading travel authors now sadly deceased, each one brings with it "... the excitement of discovery; long views; the lure of the of the horizon; surprises around the corner and the song of the wind."

North Dakota is beautiful. The long winters are a small price to pay for the breathtaking vistas of the Little Missouri Badlands, the high, grassy buttes, wide open prairie and

endless skies. I still have a lot to learn, both as a geologist and as a relative newcomer to the state, but what better classroom could a person wish for? I no longer believe that the people of the upper Midwest are crazy. I have discovered what they have always known: that this part of the world is a treasure to be guarded and cared for by those into whose stewardship it has been entrusted. There is nowhere else in this country I would rather be.