
FIELD NOTES

Cold Comfort

By Lorraine A. Manz



Standing on top of a windy butte in Grant County recently, I reveled in the warmth of the May sun and once again thanked providence for leading me to North Dakota. Surrounded by views that seemed to stretch to the edge of the world, canopied by blue, springtime sky, and serenaded by meadowlarks: field work simply doesn't get any better than this. What a pity it can't always be this way! A couple of weeks previously, I was working in another part of the state, where things did not turn out to be quite so sublime. I do not blame this on the location, but on the vagaries of North Dakota weather which, as most of us know, can be exceedingly capricious and annoyingly unpredictable.

Winters are long here and, for the most part, too cold for field work. So when the first robin of the year shows up in the backyard and the skies are streaked with long lines of geese heading north to their summer home, a geologist starts to get antsy. I had some mapping to do and I was anxious to get into the fresh air after six months of office confinement. By mid-April things were starting to look promising. I studied the short and medium-range weather forecasts for a few days, and decided it was time to go.

The light rain showers that were moving through the region were supposed to be gone by tomorrow afternoon at the latest and the rest of the week promised to be fine. I arrived in Devils Lake early in the afternoon and was a little disappointed to discover that a misty drizzle had settled in over the area. Parts of the lake were lost in low cloud and everything was damp. No matter, the weather would be much improved by tomorrow, so I made what observations I could from the truck until a thick fog rolled in and I was obliged to call it a day.

Next morning, the drizzle of the evening before had turned into a steady, soaking rain. Water dripped from the ghostly silhouettes of trees near the hotel parking lot, and great, muddy puddles were everywhere. I sat in my room staring moodily out at the lead-colored sky and wondered if I ought to just give up and go back to Bismarck or sit tight and wait for the rain to stop. I waited. After all, the weather forecast still promised clearing by the afternoon, and I was pressed for time. Most of the mapping my Survey colleagues

and I do is governed by very strict deadlines, and the one for this project was fast approaching.

When the rain began to let up a little around 10 o'clock, I thought I might as well go out. Unfortunately I had forgotten to take into account the fact that it had apparently been raining fairly heavily all night. The gravel roads, which, last summer had been dry and dusty, were as slick as grease, and the fields had turned into black, evil-looking quagmires. Some were flooded and completely inaccessible. Still, not to be beaten, I put on my rain gear, hauled the hand auger out of the back of the truck and set off. Retracing my steps to a site I had visited several months ago, I soon discovered why the landowner had never bothered to plow up this part of his field. When it rained, down below the thick mat of years of accumulated grassy vegetation, a small lake formed. Invisible from above, I quite literally put my foot in it. Cold water gleefully trickled over the top of my boot, and into its cozy, warm lining. Before I realized my mistake, my other foot was in there, too; condemning both for the remainder of the day to the kind of chilly, damp discomfort that only soaking wet footwear can provide.

Testily resolving to watch my step in the future, I located the site I was looking for, collected what I needed, and headed back to the truck by a different route. At the next site I had only to cross a gravel parking lot, some stony, thinly vegetated ground, and a stream that fortunately was small enough to jump over. Not that it mattered now. I found the little pile of disturbed soil that marked the position of the hole I had augered here last year. I stabbed the bucket into the ground next to it and started another one. As expected, about eighteen inches down, I encountered a rock that refused to budge. Determined not to have to start over (it was raining steadily again) I set upon it with a desperation that doubtless would have been the source of much amusement to any bystanders (fortunately there were none).

Suddenly there was a metallic-sounding crack and the auger was moving freely, too freely. When I raised it out of the hole, I discovered to my dismay, that the noise I had heard was not that of the rock breaking loose, but that of the bucket detaching itself from the auger shaft. Decades of use and abuse had finally taken their toll on the poor old thing. There would be no more drilling today.

Wet, cold, and thoroughly miffed, I sat in the steamy confines of the truck and pondered my situation. I still had a few sites to visit and I needed to get some photographs of local landforms and structures for another publication I was

working on. Augerless, I drove to the remaining sites and did what I could as the rain reverted to a sullen drizzle. Slipping and sliding up and down muddy embankments I took photographs of levees fading into a misty, early twilight and fog-shrouded homes long ago abandoned to the rising waters of Devils Lake. Finally acknowledging defeat, I returned to my hotel room and wished misfortune upon all weather forecasters.

The rain finally stopped at around 7:00 p.m., and by morning, things, including my boots, had begun to dry out. Perhaps today, my last day in the area, I'd be able to salvage something from this trip and at least make some good use of the camera. It was wishful thinking. The final entry in my field notebook reads: "No rain but too foggy for photos. Left at 9:30 in disgust."

(Final note: The auger has since been repaired and I returned to Devils Lake on a lovely evening in early summer and got my photographs using a brand new Nikon D70 digital camera. They are perfect.)