

By Isaac Kantor

Riding in the green shovel of a tractor after a snowstorm, past big piles of fresh shoveled snow. A pair of tiny feet, struggling for purchase in loose earth, searching for the top of a berm. A bowl of tapioca, warm and in need of eating, but strangely suspicious to my two-year-old mind. These are all that remains of my one-year residence on the Northern Plains; snapshots preserved in the mind of a toddler. We lived in Broadview, Montana, for one year. My father taught school, and when the year ended we fled to Missoula and did not return.

Years passed before I again began to venture onto the plains. The thing which captured me—captures me still—was the intoxicating space of them. To stand on a bluff with the Missouri wide and smooth below, a Pronghorn antelope or two in the green bowl ahead, and the Bear's Paw brushed with snow in the sky is to be drunk on space. There are other things, sun and hot wind on parched land, sudden and violent storms, wind, biting insects, wind. But in the low rays of evening, in the green of a good summer, the grass looks good enough to eat. The morning cottonwoods are thick with birdsong, and two-lane highways are empty to the horizon.

It is easy to see why people love the Northern Plains, and easy to see why they leave. It is a beautiful area, and one raised there may be doomed to claustrophobia anywhere else. It is also a hard and desolate region, sparsely settled for a reason. At the mouth of Bullwhacker Creek stands a weather-cracked assortment of buildings, the remains of a homestead. The logs are gray, and bits of sod roof are still alive. Beside the main house a corroded can protrudes from the ground, and I watched a large rattlesnake slide past the rust, presumably after the young rabbits which foolishly

hopped about. In the days of the bison this was among the most productive temperate ecosystems on earth. Now it is the only region of the continent losing population, a slow loss going back to the days of the Bullwhacker Creek homestead.

What has gone wrong? As the eroded homesteads attest, the neat patchwork of farms envisioned by the government was not to be for most settlers. West of the 100th meridian, the plains are too dry for the traditional homesteading pattern to work in the long term. Some settlers which were most resourceful, stubborn, or lucky survived and survive still. Many of the small towns still cling to existence, though brick buildings along main roads may be mostly empty and signs are weathered beyond legibility.

Aside from climate, reasons for decline are many. Prices for agricultural commodities have not increased with inflation. The farmer's share of profits from the finished product sold in stores has been in decline for decades. Processing of goods takes place outside of the region of production. The mechanization necessary to compete in modern farming has saddled many farms with debt and contributed to losses of small farms. Simply put, the Northern Plains are as agriculturally productive as ever (Montana's top wheat year was 1993) but receive less in return, in terms of the numbers of people supported by the region.

What is to be done? Some suggestions: process as much as possible close to the source. Grains should be milled, malted and baked near where they are grown. Less of the farmer's profit will be lost in long-distance transportation, and local jobs will be created in processing. As a result, more of the economic benefits remain in the region of production. The same concept can be applied to beef by creating regional feedlots and meat-packing facilities. These value-added concepts can allow the Northern Plains to reap more jobs and profits from the same amount of

production. Niche markets exist for organic and locally produced foods, and these can be a way for producers to survive difficult economic times. Through ingenuity and a concerted effort to localize, I believe agriculture can do a great deal to revitalize the livelihood and culture of the Northern Plains.

Fossil fuels and wind power are often discussed as economic ventures in the Northern Plains. These certainly have potential in many instances, but must be approached cautiously. When new gas- and coal-fired power plants are proposed, it is worth noting that Montana already produces far more electricity than it consumes, and the new power produced will follow most of our current output out of the region. Such projects provide a few jobs locally, but most of the real economic benefits follow the electricity, leaving the region with dirtier skies and humming power lines.

Wind power has tremendous potential for the Plains. Care should be taken to maximize the regional economic boost of these ventures, and I think some careful thought in the citing of wind farms will be appreciated by future generations.

The extraction of fossil fuels is controversial due to the environmental consequences involved. Decisions to extract fossil fuels should be made cautiously, by those who live in the place and love it. Large corporations and individuals out for maximum short-term gains will invariably choose to extract, with little thought to the long-term consequences. People who inhabit the land in question, and plan to continue to inhabit the region for better or worse and whose children may do the same, are far more likely to make the best possible decision. Unlike land, money and energy booms are fleeting. Careful and long-term thinking is needed.

The rich past of the Northern Plains may have something to offer the future. The animal

and plant life was vast and diverse, but a single being defined life on the plains like no other. To me they are implicit in every bit of distant dust or sudden gust down a coulee. While respectful of current landholders and uses, I believe it will be a lasting deprivation if bison do not one day roam wild on a chunk of the Northern Plains sufficiently large to invoke something of what Lewis and Clark encountered. The idea of a “buffalo commons” is controversial; restoring bison to a very sizeable area necessitates reorganization of land ownership and use. Such a thing can and should only happen with strong local support. This likely will not occur in the immediate future, but given current trends, the day may come. And if the day does come, we will all owe a debt of gratitude to the place brave enough to try it.

The Northern Plains are a rare place. They have been host to a remarkable pageant of geology, weather, and life. It is my hope we will soon fairly value the livelihoods and contributions of the current human residents of the Plains, and discover a modern tribute to the ecological past of the region. I write only as an admirer and frequent visitor, but as each spring becomes summer I am incomplete without turning my cluttered mind loose in the Missouri River country. It is a need to see sunsets and open space, to wake to birds and drive miles of gravel road past wheat and pasture. A need as real as friendship. Even a visitor knows that kind of power is no accident.