

“The Dakotas – Heart of the Northern Plains”

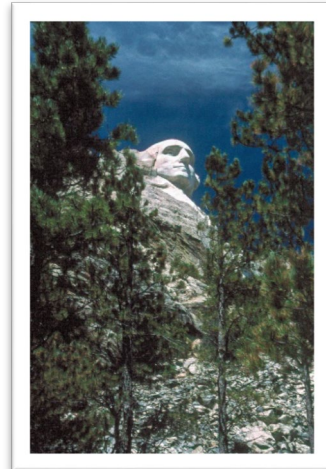
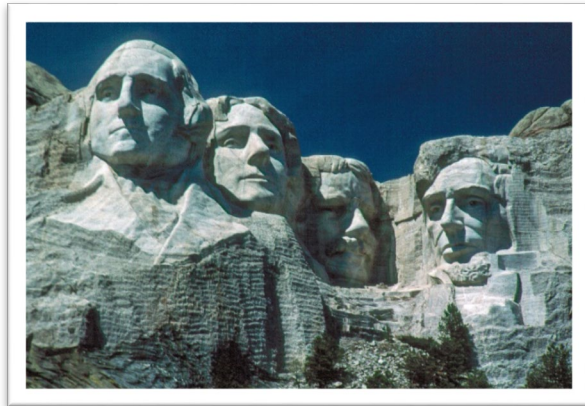
(Part 3 – The Black Hills, back to North Dakota and return home)

I awoke early the next morning and had a hearty breakfast at the lodge in the restaurant, where a number of slot machines were active within earshot, even at 7:00am! Then I drove to the historic towns of Lead and Deadwood where a great many old buildings were in the process of restoration. As I explored Deadwood, I came across the remnants of the Deadwood Central Railroad that once served many mines in the Black Hills. One of the oldest and most historic buildings in Lead was the old Franklin Hotel, still in operation after more than 100 years. As I walked into the historic lobby, even it was now filled with slot machines!

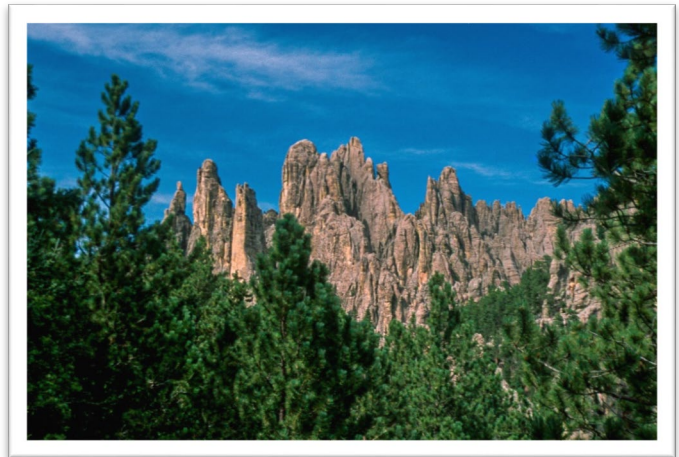


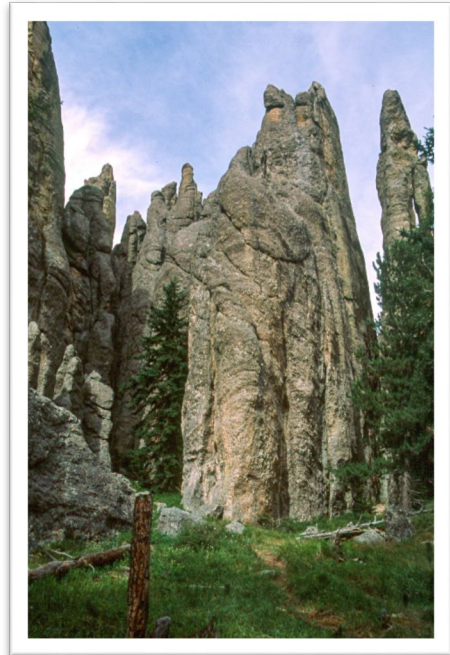
Leaving the old town of Lead, I took the fast route to Mt Rushmore National Monument via Interstate 90 through Rapid City. Arriving at Mt Rushmore under clear blue skies, I was entranced by the spectacular view. I managed to take some beautiful photos of the incredible stone monument before heavy clouds began to drift in from the west.



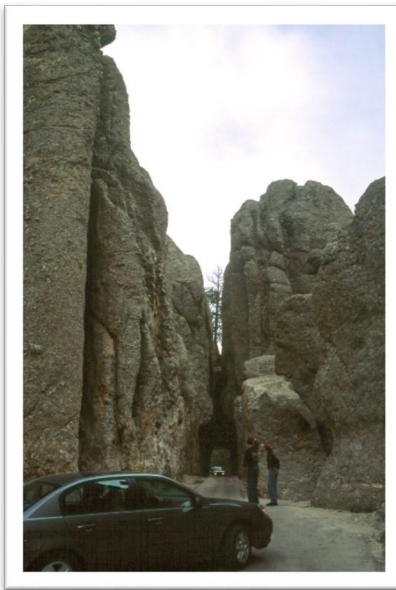


As I left the national monument, I encountered a slow, but beautiful drive through the dense forests of the Black Hills National Forest to the “Cathedral Spires” in Custer State Park. Within the park, the road passed over a unique “pigtail bridge” (a spiral shaped bridge that loops over itself to gain elevation in steep terrain) and through several very narrow tunnels that could only accommodate one vehicle at a time! Once I arrived at the Cathedral Spires, I hiked up a steep one-mile trail to the base of the rocky pillars. Staring up at the 500 foot-high rocky outcrops was spectacular – well worth the strenuous hike.





By the time I returned to the parking lot, the late afternoon was beginning to fade rapidly, so I headed back to the Spearfish Lodge by way of state highway 16A, the most direct route. At one point, I encountered the narrowest “one-lane” road I had ever seen! Alongside the road, a crowd of cars and Harleys waited patiently on the far side of the short tunnel to take photos of the cars and motorcycles as they passed through.



Back at the lodge, I saw a group of young Chinese students being hosted by the University of South Dakota. They all appeared excited and in awe of the mountainous landscape surrounding the lodge. It was fun to watch them as they surveyed their environment. I took a seat at a table on the deck overlooking the river and ordered a buffalo sirloin steak, a signature dish of the lodge. The steak was delicious and accompanied by tarragon roasted potatoes and steamed broccoli – an excellent dinner! Later in the evening, as I retired to the lobby bar, a strong westerly wind suddenly came up the narrow

canyon, foretelling a significant change in the weather. I enjoyed a local “Rough Rider Pale Ale” at the bar as my laundry churned away down the hall.

The next morning, I awoke to see heavy clouds and light rain showers. But later in the morning, the sun was shining as I explored the historic old mining town of Lead. On the edge of town was a monstrous open pit mine, the property of the Homestake Mining Company – historically one of the first gold mines in the Black Hills, opened in the late 1800’s and still operating today. As I walked around the old town, I was overwhelmed by the region’s gold mining history.



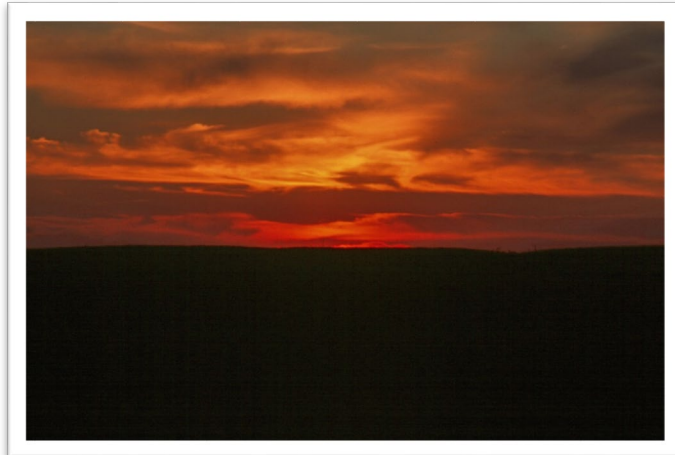
From Lead, I headed south on some narrow country roads, following the abandoned route of the old Deadwood Central Railroad to the old mining towns of Rochford and Mystic, both practically “ghost towns” now. Despite the grey overcast skies, the dense deep green Ponderosa Pine forest was beautiful. Further south, near the town of Custer, I came to a most unusual and unique site – an enormous sculpture of the famous Lakota Sioux chief “Crazy Horse”. The massive monument was literally being carved out of the mountain and was taller than either the Great Pyramid of Egypt or the Washington Monument! In fact, the entire Mt Rushmore monument would fit inside just the head of Crazy Horse! The monument to honor Crazy Horse was commissioned in 1931 by Chief Black Elk and four other Lakota Sioux chiefs, the last survivors of the Battle of Little Big Horn. Polish born sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski was given the task of carving the giant monument. Although he died in 1982, his children continued his work, even to this day. It is a most impressive sight and includes a small visitor center, museum, educational facility and research center for the study of Native American history and culture.



My plan was to continue south to Hot Springs and then east through the “badlands” of South Dakota. But before I knew it, I was crossing the border into Wyoming again – directly opposite to where I had planned. After a brief stop in Newcastle, WY to grab a hamburger and coffee, I headed back east and on the route to the badlands. Not long after, I came to some serious road construction on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. While I waited for the “pilot car”, I checked my highway map, only to discover that once again I was headed in the wrong direction – south instead of north! But being late afternoon, it was too late to turn around, so I continued on to the small town of Oglala on the Pine Ridge Reservation.



Seeing no accommodations in the small town, I continued driving east, knowing that if all else failed, I could find a motel somewhere along Interstate 90, about two hours north. The sun was setting as I pulled into the little town of Martin, “Home of the Trumpeter Swan”, and fortunately I soon found the “Crossroads Inn”, the one and only motel in town – thus avoiding two more hours of driving late into the night! I had just enough time to take a couple of photos of the gorgeous sunset beyond the wheat fields on the edge of town. (Later there was a lovely “moonrise” as well!) The kindly old lady at the front desk highly recommended the “Dakota Restaurant” at the local country club for dinner – and she was right on! The huge ribeye steak grilled rare was absolutely one of the best I’ve ever had! And the homemade pecan pie was delicious – a perfect way to finish the evening.

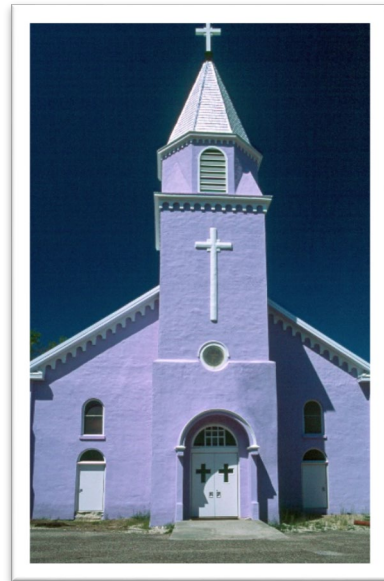


The next morning, it was a beautiful day of clear blue skies with a light wind blowing across the great expanse of wheat fields. I picked up a large coffee at the corner store before heading south on state highway 73 to the “LaCreek National Wildlife Refuge”, home to the rarely seen and endangered Trumpeter Swan. (Another home to the birds is the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Montana) For the next two hours, I drove along unpaved roads to the refuge headquarters located beside a string of small lakes surrounded by huge expanses of native “short grass prairie”. Although I didn’t spot any swans, I did see several large bald eagles, hawks, Canada geese, several species of songbirds, as well as a couple of beautiful Blue Herons. For the entire time I drove around the refuge, I saw not another soul!



From the refuge, I continued east on US highway 18 to the Rosebud Indian Reservation and the tiny village of St Francis. Here I discovered the “Museum of the Lakota Sioux Nation” which, although small, had some fascinating displays of rare old artifacts from the 1800’s, as well as some modern native arts and crafts, among them beautiful quilts and intricate beadwork! I managed to support the local economy with the purchase of a small buckskin leather pouch covered with beautiful blue beadwork. When I went to the cash register to pay, the old man in charge said he didn’t usually handle sales, but the woman who did was sick that day. He was a very nice guy, but he had absolutely no idea of how to calculate the tax, so he said, “let’s forget it”! Nor did he know anything about running the cash register, let alone the credit card machine! So, I spared him the task of dealing with it by handing him cash. But since he couldn’t figure out how to operate the cash register, he couldn’t give me change! So, I said, “let’s just call it an even \$72.00”, to which he quickly agreed. On my way out, I thought to myself,

“heaven help him if someone comes into the gift shop and insists on paying with a credit card”! As I was walking out the door of the gift shop, a local man named Joseph approached me and proceeded to welcome me to the reservation. Then he told me that he managed the AA program on the reservation and about the role of the Catholic church which operated the schools, churches, and played a strong role in all social life on the reservation. Apparently, the church had recently turned over most its responsibilities to the tribe. Of special note was the color of the newly painted old church – a very bright lilac color! (It seems that the color was chosen by the kids in the reservation’s school) Then he led me to a place near the church where his AA group had just finished building a “sweat lodge”, and by the way he described it to me, it was clear he was very proud of it, especially since many of the young men of the tribe were becoming interested in the traditional culture, heritage, and spiritual values of the Lakota Sioux Nation. Although I spent only a limited amount of time on the reservation, our conversation gave me the feeling the local people were proud of their heritage, despite the significant economic and social problems they continued to face. Finally, it came time to bid Joseph and the Rosebud Indian Reservation farewell. As I left the reservation, I felt fortunate to have met a few people who welcomed me and gave me a brief glimpse into their life and culture.



Leaving the village of St Francis behind, I took the scenic route, BIA 5 (Bureau of Indian Affairs highway 5) to the small town of Mission, home of Sinte Gleska University, a Native American school of higher

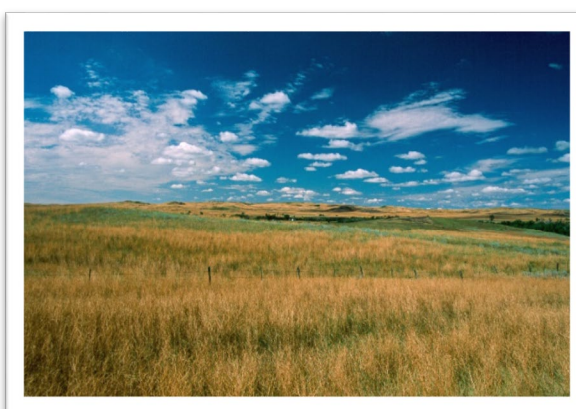
education and a user of Esri GIS software. As I travelled east on US Highway 18 past the small farming town of Winner, I encountered a long stretch where the pavement was completely torn up for no apparent reason. I had to follow a pilot car for several miles, constantly dodging high berms of dirt and gravel, and trying to avoid a collision with monstrous earthmoving equipment! A couple of hours later, I finally reached the Missouri River again, now “Lake Francis Rae”. From there, I followed US route 50 north along the top of the bluffs above the river (lake). I had gorgeous views of the tall grass prairie that had turned a bright gold color under the hot summer sun. Route 50 took me all the way along the river to the city of Pierre, capitol of South Dakota. The highway was designated as the “Native American Scenic Byway” as it crossed the Lower Brule and Crow Creek Indian Reservations – a lovely drive with virtually no traffic! At one point along the route, I spotted a farmer standing beside the road holding a huge bale of hay high above his head. But, as I got closer, I could see the “man” was actually a giant “scarecrow” dressed as a farmer – so unique! Continuing north toward Pierre, the view of the golden hills of wheat against the huge puffy white clouds building up to be thunderstorms later in the evening was gorgeous.

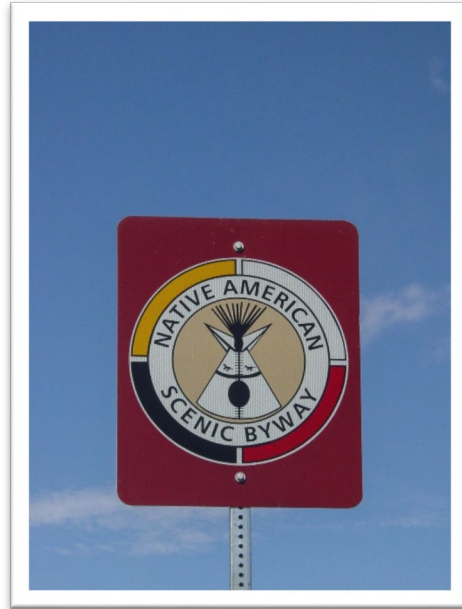


At last, as the sun was slowly setting, I reached Pierre, a small town of just 13,000 people, even though it's the state capitol! (with only 13,000 people, it would barely be a small town on the map of California!) Fortunately, the Best Western Ramoka Inn on the Missouri River shore caught my eye immediately. After checking into a nice two room suite, I went downstairs to the restaurant and enjoyed a fantastic dinner of herb-crusted pan-fried local Missouri River Walleye – it was nothing short of superb, served with wild rice, grilled vegetables, and a huge salad! The best part of dinner was when I was given the check, a total of \$12.00! Later that evening, I watched “Star Wars Episode III” on TV, a flashback to the story of how Luke Skywalker’s father became Darth Vader – fascinating movie history. The next day began under clear skies as I crossed the river to the small town of Fort Pierre, and back into the Mountain time zone. (It was weird that two sides of the river were connected by a bridge yet separated in time!) As I was looking for the site of historic Fort Pierre of legendary fur trade fame, I discovered the story of two French brothers from the “Le Vendreyere” family who placed a small metal plaque on the bluff above the Missouri River in 1743 to claim the land for the king of France. Although I failed to find any evidence of the old Fort Pierre, I did find a slowly rotating statue in the center of town honoring a local son of great rodeo fame. And appropriately, he was seated on a bucking horse! It most certainly deserved a photo, as did the old 1902 jail alongside the main street.



From Fort Pierre, I headed north on state highway 1804, following the western shore of the river until I came to one of the world's largest earthen dams that formed the massive Lake Oahe. The lake is so enormous that it stretches from Pierre, South Dakota north to Bismarck, North Dakota, a distance of more than 200 miles! At the site of the dam, I explored some fascinating exhibits in the Corps of Engineers Visitor Center, which also included some very interesting information about the Lewis and Clark expedition. From the Visitor Center there were beautiful views of the huge lake, surrounded on both sides by brilliant golden hills. From there, I crossed over the massive dam to the western side of the lake (river) and followed state highway 212 to the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. All along the way I had gorgeous views of the steep bluffs above the lake and vast expanses of golden grasslands beyond. Soon the road turned north, still following the river, always within view of the huge lake. The highway was another "Native American Scenic Byway" designated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.





As I drove up and down the hills, it was a delightful trip with hardly another vehicle on the road. Meanwhile, huge puffy white clouds floated lazily above me in the deep blue sky. Later, I crossed over the lake again at the tiny town of Mobridge and headed northeast to the small town of Rugby, North Dakota – famous as the “Geographical Center of North America”! And of course, being a geographer, I had to take a photo of the monument in the center of town – but was it the “exact” spot?

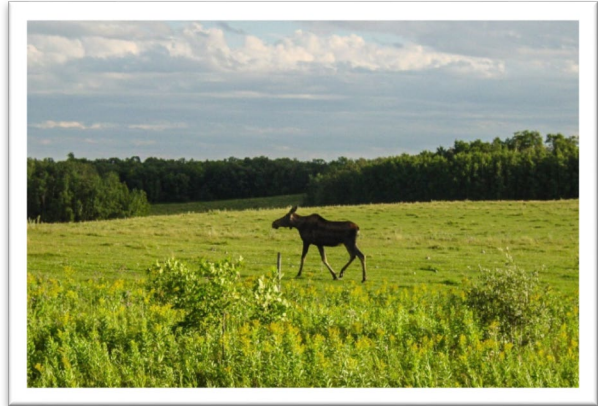


Leaving Rugby, I continued north to the “International Peace Garden” on the border with the Canadian Province of Manitoba. The “garden” is actually a large beautiful park that “straddles” the US – Canada border. Included in the park are several small lakes, part of a region known as the “Turtle Mountains” which were formed during the last North American Ice Age – a long range of forested hills rising several hundred feet above the vast expanse of surrounding prairie. There were many lush meadows amid the deciduous forest – a beautiful landscape not often associated with the great plains of North Dakota. In

the very center of the park stands a 100 foot-high monument of four enormous concrete towers arranged in “pairs” – one pair on the Canadian side and the other on the American side. The official border lies in the middle of the four towers and stretches to the east and west for over 2000 miles! The four concrete pillars represent the four directions of the wind, which blows constantly in this part of the world.

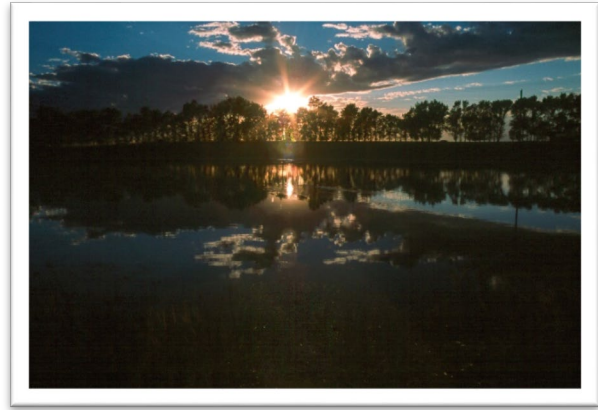
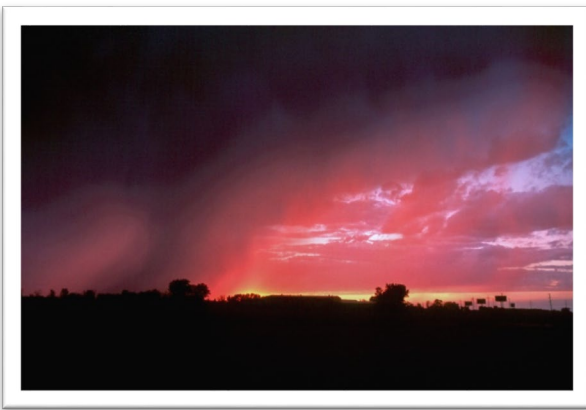


As I left the park, I had to pass through US Customs and Immigration, informing them about who I was, why I had come to North Dakota, and where I was going, which happened to be Devil’s Lake later that night. From the International Peace Garden, I drove east through the Turtle Mountains Chippewa Indian Reservation. All of a sudden, as I came over a hill, I spotted a young moose grazing alongside the road. She allowed me a couple of photos before slowly walking back into the forest.



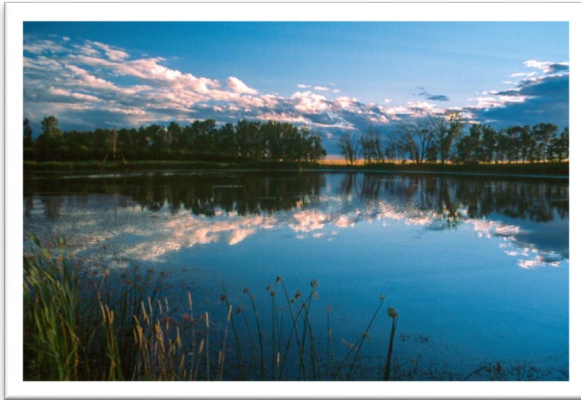
As I continued driving toward Devil’s Lake, thunderstorms loomed in the distance. With the sun setting behind me, the sky turned very dark as massive clouds loomed on the western horizon. An enormous thunderstorm quickly developed into a mass of towering clouds, ironically with a lovely veil of pink and orange sunshine streaming down, striking the ground as falling rain! The whole scene lasted only a brief few minutes, but it was one of the most beautiful moments I experienced in the northern plains! My destination for the night was the “Spirit Lake Resort and Casino”, managed by the tribe on the Devil’s Lake Indian Reservation. As I drove into the parking lot it was already full – not a good sign. However,

when I enquired at the front desk, they did have a few rooms available, but only “Honeymoon Suites” – so, I took one! It was a very nice suite with two rooms overlooking a huge indoor pool and waterpark, which I’m sure must be very popular in mid-winter.



That evening I had a very nice dinner in the resort’s fine dining restaurant – scallops au gratin and a superb bowl of lobster bisque that was crammed full of assorted seafood. (a nice surprise since the reservation is more than 1500 miles from the ocean!) A chilled glass of Chardonnay would have gone very well with dinner, but the reservation was “dry”, so I made do with a chilled bottle of Italian sparkling water instead. Back in my room, I opened a cold bottle of Leinenkugel’s beer that I had bought earlier in the day, while I watched a movie on TV.

The next day, I drove to “Sully’s Hill National Wildlife Refuge”, which encompasses the highest point in the Devil’s Lake basin. The refuge was named in honor of Corporal Sully, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition. As I hiked one of the trails in the refuge, I spotted several whitetail deer, including a doe with a young fawn.



Leaving the refuge, I drove northeast to “Fort Totten State Historical Site”, where there were many well preserved buildings. The fort was an important military post from 1867 to 1890, when it was decommissioned and transferred to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The bureau established a large boarding school for the Native American tribes in the Dakota Territory from 1890 until 1939 when it was closed permanently. I spent a couple of hours exploring the historic site, especially the Native American cultural museum, which recounted in great detail the tragic story of “converting” Indian children to accept “white” culture and values! The children were forcibly forbidden to speak their native language, wear native clothing, or engage in any activities of their native culture – they even had their long hair chopped off! (It was a social experiment that failed miserably)



Not far away was a most surprising and unique feature on the incredibly flat landscape – North America’s tallest single standing structure, an enormous TV broadcasting tower 2060 feet high! A few miles down the road was the tiny town of McHenry, where there was a very interesting exhibit about the old Northern Pacific Railroad which had built a unique “turn around track”. It was used to reverse the direction of trains at the terminus in McHenry. About an hour east of McHenry was another small wheat farming town, named Pollock. On the edge of the town was the old “Soo Line” (Minneapolis, St Paul and Sault Ste Marie Railroad) station – converted into a B&B named “End of the Line”. By this time, it was necessary to head to Fargo to catch my return flight to Los Angeles.



Once I was back in Fargo, I turned in the Hertz rental car at the airport and proceeded to the Northwest Airlines counter to check in for the flight. To my great surprise and dismay, I was informed that my flight to Minneapolis had been cancelled a couple of days earlier! So, the airline had rebooked me on a flight departing the next morning. (Northwest Airlines had sent me a message, but I hadn’t checked my email for several days) Luckily, Hertz let me have the rental car back at no extra charge and I checked into the Fairfield Airport Inn for the night. As I picked up the rental car again, it looked like it had hit every grasshopper in North Dakota! That evening, I drove downtown and had a superb steak dinner at the old “Broadway Bar and Grill”, across the street from the historic Great Northern Railway Station.

I was up at 5:00 am the next morning to catch the flight to Minneapolis departing at 7:00 am. It was an on-time departure and a nice smooth flight. However, in Minneapolis the connecting flight to Los Angeles was delayed by a maintenance problem. (ironically, the Northwest Airlines mechanics had gone on strike the day before!) So, I spent the next two hours in the Northwest Airlines World Club awaiting further information. The time gave me a chance to finish my travel notes and reflect upon my journey across the plains of North and South Dakota – a journey I thoroughly enjoyed, and one that will make the map of America seem more “complete” now!

I hope you enjoyed the trip to the Northern Plains as much as I did!

