

In plain view: Vacation in North Dakota

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

In a predictably condescending article on North Dakota in a recent *New Yorker* (February 18-25), Mark Singer quoted Doug Burgum of Microsoft Great Plains: “We have this deep-seated Scandinavian, Teutonic outlook—a combination of dark Lutheranism and German Catholicism, which adds up to a primal sense that somehow we’re not worthy.” Dakotans are losers?

I’m a Plains son, though not a Dakotan, more Helvetii-Celtic than Teutonic (not dolichocephalic enough to be the latter), and friendly to “bright Lutheranism and German Catholicism.” My purpose here is to discuss beauty’s location in the eye of the beholder rather than to respond to the *New Yorker*.

Singer was making fun of North Dakotans, who are trying to change their state’s name to Dakota in order to promote tourism. He tells us that “North Dakota ranks forty-ninth in tourism revenues (ahead of Delaware).” The Marty family years ago set out to camp in all the conterminous states and missed only Delaware. We pitched our tent in both Dakotas.

The population of North Dakota, victim of changes in agriculture production, is steadily declining. It’s now down to 642,000—40,000 less than in 1930. Singer is kind enough to say that most of the remaining population is made up of “congenitally earnest, hardworking and sincere” people.

He found few tourist-luring sites. Let me tell a story about how to find them almost anywhere. In the mid-’70s, a handful of leaders of North Dakota’s 178,582 non-Missouri Synod Lutherans, 174,046 Catholics and tens of thousands of mainline Protestants wanted to start a Jewish-Christian dialogue. They asked me to produce a Jewish theologian with whom to begin the conversation. North Dakota then had only 208 Jewish residents, all gathered in one congregation served by a commuting rabbi. So I asked my friend Rabbi Samuel Sandmel to be my dialogue partner.

Sam had probably never been northwest of Chicago. As we flew to Minnesota, I saw his knuckles turn white. Then to Bismarck. Whiter. Then as we were driven 80 miles into the country, whitest. Our meeting was held at Richardton Abbey, a Benedictine “cathedral of the plains” plus monastery, which Robert F. Karolevitz describes as “the belated fulfillment of Martin Marty’s [no relation] dream that Benedictine monasteries should rise above the plains to perpetuate the Rule and the tradition of *ora et labora* he brought to the region” (Bishop Martin Marty: “The Black Robe Lean Chief”).

We prayed and labored with the monks and the convened clergy. Sam charmed them the first afternoon. When he wondered what there was to do in Richardton after dinner, I proposed sitting on the patio outside the refectory and observing the northern landscape. Was I crazy? Where were the trees? What’s to see?

The Benedictines provided a fine bottle of red wine as we settled down. I reminded the rabbi that we’d watched seascapes together, where there was less for the eye to notice. Here we could see for miles. Only a couple of lights were visible. Livestock soon blended into the landscape of mini-buttes. “Now it’s orange-turning-to-purple. Now purple-turning-to-gray-to-black. Think of what Monet would have done with this sight!” Sam exclaimed.

The Benedictines provided a second bottle of wine for our second evening on the porch, at Sam’s request. That evening it was he who was pointing out the subtle beauties before us. We flew back. Sam’s knuckles looked normal. A week later his wife, Frances, phoned: “Marty, what did you do to Sam? He wants us to spend our next vacation in North Dakota!”