

Under the Endless Sky

Images of the Drift Prairie and the Red River Valley



Rick Tonder

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Introduction by Clay Jenkinson

Gray Squirrel Photographic - Grand Forks - 2007

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Foreword

A book's purpose is to convey a message or information to the reader, regardless of its content either as a book of words, fallen leaves, drops of paint, or photographs. With that consideration it is entirely possible that the message might be lost or misunderstood, as each individual learns to interpret the contents of a book based upon their own skills, desires, and point of view. I am not an expert of language, or of images, but I believe we misinterpret the content of photographs more readily than the content of words. It is for this reason that a book of photographs begs an introduction.

Under the Endless Sky is a compilation of black and white photographs taken over a period of more than twenty years. Each image seeks to describe an event, suggest an idea, evaluate for beauty, or level a judgment upon the subject. The subject of each photograph may not be what is seen at face value, but instead exists as a deeper and more complex matter than what is suggested by the physical presence within the borders of the image. As an example, a photograph of a tired and abandoned grain truck might suggest hard work, despair, desolation, a value system that abhors waste, or a lifestyle that is simple yet rich in content. This wide range of possibilities is created by the diverse nature of the viewers, each using a different set of prejudices and beliefs when evaluating the photograph.

Each image, when displayed separately on a gallery wall or within a home, stands on its own merits and suggests a subject that is unique to itself. When combined together on adjacent pages of a book, the images begin to work together in forming a series of messages that have a specific tone or mood. The photographer assembles the images much as a cook prepares a stew: The ingredients are added in a particular order, with specific amounts, as a means to flavor the pot. When served up there will be any number of diners finding it too salty, too bland, or just right.

It would be possible to create a menu for each photograph that provides a background and possible story for what is inside the image. Although informative, it would lend a bias to the viewer that might cheat the image of its real worth. Instead, I have asked a fellow North Dakotan, Clay Jenkinson, to introduce this volume of photographs to the viewer by providing his own interpretation and viewpoint. Although his analysis may prove contrary to my intentions, it demonstrates how images are powerful forms of communication, affecting each of us in ways the photographer may not anticipate.

Although I hesitate to reveal any intent, I will confess a pride in being a North Dakotan. Each of us understands and endures the hardships that make us aware of our own mortality, and thankful that we are self sufficient as a result. Mr. Jenkinson has suggested that North Dakota is the most *Jeffersonian* of the states. I agree, but add it is also the most *Emersonian* as well: "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." With that thought, please view the images and consider what they might hold, with my hope that each image is a mirror reflecting the viewer's own self confidence and a desire to live under the endless sky.

Rick Tonder, 2007

Rick Tonder and the Aesthetics of Loss

Clay S. Jenkinson

Rick Tonder's fine and haunting photographs suggest that North Dakota is dying. He's right. And he's wrong. But in one crucial respect, he's right.

If there is a spirit of North Dakota, it resides in the farms, the rural villages, the county fairs, 4H; in the garden, preserving, and craft culture, and the lingering old world ethnicity of the people. It may be ok, as it certainly is inevitable, that the agrarian heritage of North Dakota is passing away. But something really close to the bone—of who we are and why we are different and distinctive—will be lost when we join, once and for all, the dominant paradigm of American life.

That which is most remarkable in North Dakota is dying. That which is being born looks far too much like Maple Grove or St. Louis Park, Minnesota to exemplify what North Dakota has meant as a northern prairie and plains state, and that which has shaped the North Dakota character. What is coming, to the handful of cities, at the direct expense of the countryside, is the clean homogenous consumer splay of American suburbia, box stores and bread boutiques, detached from the earth and plunked down here and there across the continent without the slightest respect for spirit of place. Plunking, in fact, is the point, and that is why Best Buy and Old Chicago Pizza and Bed, Bath & Beyond are so wildly successful. They remove us from what we are and where we live and insert us temporarily into a sterile fluorescent anywhere-and-nowhere world that makes us all one people much more completely than does the Constitution of the United States or *Huckleberry Finn*. What is coming can already be found in San Diego and the prosperous suburbs of Chicago and Tampa and Dallas and Richmond. You can see it now, in its larval stage, on the south ends of Grand Forks and on both ends of Fargo. It will never come to Mott. It will never come to New Rockford. It will never come to Crosby. It will never come to La Moure. Those struggling villages might conceivably get a Starbucks, and when they do they will be thrilled. But how deeply can you diffuse Starbucks into the outback before you cheapen the franchise?

The people of Regent and Rhame, Cavalier and Carrington, will never get a Bed, Bath & Beyond, but almost all of them will make the journey to the nearest city where such stores exist, and in doing so they play their part in killing the home towns they love and say they wish to revitalize. They

know they are killing their villages by way of their consumer habits but they cannot help it. The local men's clothing store and grocery inevitably close their doors once people start to buy their clothes and groceries at Wal-mart. Then the townsfolk say they'd love to buy locally, but they cannot because the hometown stores closed. When there is nothing to buy in a small town except a haircut and the kind of food that cannot wait for the journey to the superstore; gasoline, and whatever can be jammed into a convenience store; beer, and the crafty stuff—mason jars with colorful cloth tops, wheat weavings, old crocks painted with rural scenes, cute signs about the virtues of home, hearth, and grace—then the town ceases to be a community and becomes a clustering of houses with an enormously long set of commutes. This makes a perverse kind of sense while gas prices are negligible. Given the coming worldwide energy shortage, mobility may well become a burden again—as it was back when those towns flourished for the local amenities and services they could provide—but it is not very probable that town life will revive. People are addicted now to the large gleaming emporia patrolled by squads of uniformed minimum wage earners. Diminished mobility probably will not revive rural commerce. It is more likely that people will journey in even greater numbers, but less often, to the cities where they already do their shopping.

North Dakota has never really been comfortable being an odd, basic, rooted, a little clunky, tributary province of the United States, the hole in the donut, the blank spot at the center of the continent, the butt of isolation jokes. It has always yearned to be closer to the main stream of American life. Super Target and Olive Garden mean one thing in greater Kansas City, but for some reason they have meant much more to Fargo or Bismarck or Grand Forks. In the exurbs of Denver such emporia are a consumer convenience. In North Dakota they represent *arrival*, membership in the club, emancipation from our historic otherness, our historic backwardness.

The best coffee house in Bismarck, locally owned, lovingly managed, built in earnestness according to the best values of the community, has a steady trickle of customers, while the Starbucks a mile away fights to keep up with lines four, five, ten people long all day long every day. Assuming the quality of the coffee is a wash, this spells the death of North Dakota. The lure of bland, rootless homogeneity is so great that

people are willing to destroy their own hard-won region and local culture to get at it. It's one of the most remarkable phenomena of late capitalism.

It is not and it cannot come to good.

Rick Tonder's photographs depict a North Dakota entirely alien to the Starbucks phenomenon. The paradox is that the barista at Starbucks might well have grown up on just the kind of landscape Tonder seeks out with his cameras, and this book is just the sort of product that Starbucks customers nationwide might plunk down their credit cards to purchase and pore over while they sip a four-dollar-fifty cup of coffee.

The rural countryside of North Dakota is dying. The cities (the emerging city states Fargo, Grand Forks, Minot, and Bismarck) are thriving, at least for now. North Dakota, once the most rural of states, is becoming an urban state. People don't want to live out in the middle of nowhere anymore. They want access to the fruits of life, which they define largely as consumer fruits. Cities have amenities, including hospitals, but they don't produce food. They consume it. Once William Jennings Bryan got traction with his declaration that "the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country." Now we merely smile.

North Dakota is now the third least-populated state, with approximately 642,000 people in 2007. That's 9.3 people per square mile. Only Wyoming and Vermont have fewer people, and both are growing faster than North Dakota, which registered the least growth of any state between 1990 and 2000. Only the American Indian population in North Dakota is really growing. The Indian population is, in fact, growing rapidly, which represents an interesting variation on the Buffalo Commons theme. If non-Indians continue to flee the isolation they feel in North Dakota, the bitter winter weather, and the perceived sense of living in a backwater, the state may revert to a kind of territorial, *Indian Country*, status. From a global environmental point of view, or from the perspective of justice towards the American Indians (and the buffalo, elk, grizzly bears, mountain lions, and black footed ferrets) whose land this once was, that's not the worst thing imaginable, but needless to say, it is not one of the preferred futures among the European-American people who have chosen to make their destiny in the "Peace Garden State."

Meanwhile, North Dakotans are in denial. These are relatively prosperous times on the northern plains. The energy boom (mostly oil

extraction) in western North Dakota has filled the state treasury with surpluses, and everyone knows that intensive energy development is going to be one of the great themes of the 21st century. Unemployment is miniscule. In rural counties there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of jobs that cannot be filled for lack of warm willing bodies. The great cities—Fargo, Bismarck, Minot, Grand Forks, Mandan, and West Fargo—are thriving, growing at a rate that is disquieting to those who have grown to depend upon their modesty of scale. The midrange cities—Dickinson, Williston, Jamestown, Valley City, Wahpeton, Devils Lake—are holding their own. For most North Dakotans life has literally never been so good. There is less heavy lifting in North Dakota today than at any previous moment in our history. Tolerance is up, bigotry down. North Dakota has never been so cosmopolitan as it is at this moment.

In other words, the vast majority of North Dakotans live where life is good. We all see mostly what is close at hand, and we all extrapolate the conditions of our own lives to that of the larger communities we inhabit. That which is beyond the last strip mall barely registers in our consciousness. Almost every North Dakotan from time to time laments the collapse of rural life, but the lamentations sound increasingly thin and pro forma, and most Dakotans now race from one city state to the next, stopping in the outback only to pee and fuel up. Most North Dakotans now travel exclusively on four lane roads except when there is some unavoidable necessity to venture onto William Least Heat Moon's blue highways.

Meanwhile, the villages, especially west of the hundredth meridian, except in the energy crescent, all have a raw and beleaguered look, because they know that half of them at least will have to shrivel up and die in order for the other half to have a chance at survival. Rural depopulation comes in waves. Another wave is coming, and this one will bring enormous anguish to the ninety-five percent of the North Dakota landscape that is not urban. The cities, where the rural refugees will relocate and where the majority of the population lives, will experience not anguish but growing pains: a strained infrastructure to support even more amenities, even better restaurants, an even livelier cultural community. North Dakota has an aging population. The unfolding national health care crisis is particularly acute in rural America. As the rural hospitals close or curtail services, older North Dakotans find themselves migrating to the cities, *if only* for the health care they can obtain there. This rational migration (as opposed to the Sam's Club effect) has the effect of lowering the number of rural health care consumers to the point that further cuts and closures become inevitable. At some point the rural health care system simply collapses—even with massive federal subsidies—and the trickle of migration becomes a tidal wave. It

used to be thought that the local school was the glue that held small towns together. Among an aging population, the rural clinic is the final adhesive.

242,294 of North Dakota's 642,000 people live in the six counties that lean towards Minnesota. That's 38% of the North Dakota population. It would be interesting to know precisely what percentage of the North Dakota population lives east of I-29, the Interstate Highway that passes through Fargo and Grand Forks. This population is large and it is growing.

Of the remaining four hundred thousand people (399,706), another 152,517 live in the cities of Bismarck, Mandan, Jamestown, Minot, Dickinson, and Williston. That leaves just 247,189 people for the rest of North Dakota, the nineteenth largest state. The land south and west of the Missouri River is already North Dakota's empty quarter, and the outmigration will inevitably continue. Only 85,096 people live in the fourteen southwestern counties, and that includes the 47,921 people of Mandan and Dickinson.

If by "city" we mean population over 10,000, fully 49% of North Dakotans live in cities. There are eight North Dakota counties with a population of 2000 or fewer: Slope (713), Billings (829), Sheridan (1408), Golden Valley (1691), Oliver (1868), Burke (1942), Steele (1943), and Logan (1999). There are ten more counties with a population under 3000: Divide, Bowman, Adams, Hettinger, Renville, Kidder, McIntosh, Griggs, Eddy, and Grant. The eighteen least populated counties have a combined population of 37,752.

The mean population center of North Dakota is now located near Carrington. In my lifetime it will shift eastward to Cooperstown. The state is leaning towards Minnesota. Grand Forks and, to a lesser extent, Fargo already regard themselves as greater Minnesota. As the population center moves east, power, political representation, wealth, and even water are sure to follow. Aside from Bismarck and Minot, western North Dakota (west, that is, of Casselton) will be regarded as the outback.

It would be simple enough to shrug all of this off as something larger than legislation, public policy, or even anxiety, given its apparent global inevitability. North Dakota is changing. The population is holding, more or less, and it may even grow some as Americans wake up to the increasing quality of life in North Dakota's city states, coupled with the North Dakota work ethic, and the favorable business climate here. The majority of those who live here will have good lives. We can lament the decline of rural North Dakota without losing any sleep over it. There is, as the severest skeptics say, no guarantee of success in rural life. For most North Dakotans, this

set of dynamics just is what it is and there isn't a darn thing we can do about it. The sooner we all stop wringing our hands over it the better.

Unfortunately, it is not that simple. The problem, in a nutshell, is that North Dakotans have been engaged in a gamble that they want to, but cannot actually, win. They want all of the fruits of life, but none of the problems attendant on an unlimited smorgasbord of consumer possibilities. They do not understand that to have every chain restaurant, clothing store, electronics warehouse, box bookstore, exotic car dealership, recreation and hardware superstore, plus a lovely panoply of boutique specialty shops and restaurants, from designer bread or cheese shops to Thai cuisine in the strip mall, requires a population density that brings with it crime, congestion, social indifference, pronounced class divisions, including by neighborhood, and a population diversity that would challenge the tolerance of a traditionally homogenous community like North Dakota. North Dakotans want to retain their late-agrarian rootedness, or perhaps only the fumes of their former rootedness, and yet be assured that they are emancipated from the stuckness and provinciality and dependency that is the dark side of the pastoral world they still in part admire.

From a certain point of view, the history of North Dakota is the history of departure. More people came than could stick. In the twentieth century, particularly when mobility became a norm in American life, a very large percentage of young people have grown up and departed. Most of them are very glad they grew up in North Dakota. Many of them feel a pang of loss and guilt that they have abandoned their natal land. Some harbor a subterranean notion that under the right circumstances they might return to North Dakota. Most don't. They come for weddings, graduations, and funerals, and some of the major holidays, but they live their lives elsewhere. They may or may not prosper elsewhere, but almost all of them regard their lives elsewhere as culturally richer and more comfortable than prolonged life in North Dakota would have turned out.

The exodus has tended to come in waves.

The number of family farms in North Dakota peaked in 1936 at 86,000, but the number has declined every year since. Today there are approximately 29,000 farms in North Dakota. The decline is bound to continue. Where it will stop nobody really knows, but, if we can assume that every arable acre will be tilled, there is probably some baseline number of farms that can be managed efficiently (how far from the barn can you take equipment and still make a living?), beyond which the farm economy would collapse. We are probably at or very near that number now. I'd guess

that the minimal number of viable family farms cannot drop below 25,000.

Historians understand that the Homestead Act (1862) was a Procrustean bed that was in some ways a social disaster on the Great Plains. 160 acres is an arbitrary number—a quarter of a section of land (640 acres, which is also an arbitrary number)—and that number of acres was never calibrated for the actual conditions of the land beyond the Midwestern farm belt. For every farm that now exists in North Dakota, eight are gone forever. The Jeffersonian water genius John Wesley Powell (1834-1902) addressed the North Dakota Constitutional Convention in 1889. He warned the founding fathers of North Dakota that the institutions of wetland agriculture begin to break down at the 100th Meridian (which passes through Dunseith, Rugby, Harvey, Tuttle, and Steele), that west of that imaginary line, 160 acres could not possibly support a farm family. He urged the Dakota founders to replace the Jeffersonian rectangular survey grid system with a more sensuous system that pivoted on the scarce water courses of the Dakota plains. Rather than impose on the land a uniform grid that worked only when abundant rains fell more or less evenly across the settlement checkerboard, Powell reasoned, why not tie every homestead to an actual water source by way of the French long lot survey system, or Hopi agricultural protocols? This reformed homesteading system, he said, would make it much less likely that innocent immigrants would fail through no fault of their own. The North Dakota constitution makers listened politely, and then made the fatal decision to maintain the linear orderliness of the cadastral survey system all the way to the Montana line. In doing so they effectively doomed almost every west-river homestead to, at best, a strained survival that had to be eked out against the insufficient resource base that the Homestead Act provided. The modifications on the Homestead Act (such as the Desert Lands Act (1877) and the Timber Culture Act (1873)) helped a little, but the profundity of aridity west of the 100th Meridian has flummoxed social planners from Jefferson to the engineers of the current federal farm program.

Meanwhile, the intensive capitalization of agribusiness, coupled with the mechanization of agriculture (1880-1970), followed by the hyper-mechanization of agriculture (1970-), has made it possible for fewer and fewer farmers to till all the arable land of North Dakota. We are now at, or at least approaching, the acreage limits of what one family, even a loosely-defined, incorporated family with tenants, can manage. As the novelist John Steinbeck rightly understood in the late 1930s, intense mechanization would have as much to do with the pell mell decline of rural America as drought, dust, bad stewardship, or the Depression.

What all this means, and what Rick Tonder clearly understands, is that we are now living through the death throes of the Jeffersonian agrarian dream in America and particularly in North Dakota. Jefferson's notion that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God" has been the effective motto of North Dakota life from the 1870s until the 21st century. It is almost impossible not to be inspired, moved, and now increasingly distressed by the pastoral lyricism of Jefferson's famous pronouncement, in his 1784 *Notes on the State of Virginia*. But it seems unmistakable that our new de facto motto is, "sure, but the price of being God's chosen ones was just too high. We'd rather be his connected, prosperous, mobile people."

For all of this, I do not believe that Rick Tonder is a chronicler of the death of Jefferson's Dakota. After all, the drift prairie and the Red River Valley (the landscape of these photographs) are the most densely populated region of North Dakota and the most agriculturally prosperous. If any place in North Dakota has the chance to thrive in the 21st century on an agricultural foundation, it is the countryside of these photographs. The viewer of these excellent, brooding photographs could rationally conclude that Tonder prefers the aesthetics of loss; that he prefers human constructions to human beings; that texture, grain, solitude, and discarded things excite his artistic imagination; that he leaves the busy city to seek solace among the empty countryside, but that landscape per se does not provide him what he needs, though one can imagine that he would be an outstanding landscape photographer.

I think what he loves is the interface of essentially flat prairie and human constructs. The temporariness of human-made objects draws his attention, but the stubbornness of those constructs, their unwillingness to just crumble or blow away, intrigues him. The humans who did all this gave up and moved on, but the things they built have a greater, though shabby, perseverance. Tonder appears to be exploring the way the prairie seems to try to swallow up what humans have with so much earnestness and gumption erected. Notice the photographs on pages 19, 25, 27, 39, and 91

Nebraska novelist Willa Cather describes the impermanence on the first page of her 1913 novel, *O Pioneers!*: "The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them." That paragraph could serve as the epigraph for this book.

It's not quite clear to me what Tonder is really trying to express with

this suite of photographs. Because he is so able an artist, the photographs are pleasing to look at: for his mastery of light and shadow, for the textures of buildings, for the finesse of his composition. But they do unmistakably tell the story of loss and abandonment. They suggest that all the people of North Dakota have departed and not cleaned up after themselves as they fled away.

I notice only one human being in a hundred pages (p. 67). Just what this lone bearded man sees from the top of a grain elevator is uncertain, but he looks pensive. Nothing about him suggests exaltation. Somehow one person is harder to bear in this book than none at all. The bearded man deepens the loneliness of *Under the Endless Sky*. The absence of people in these photographs cannot be accidental, but just what their absence signifies is unclear.

Someone appears to be driving an SUV in the lovely “lonely road” photograph on page 17. Who? Why? Where to? Probably a number of older men still make their way to American Legion Post 251, on page 18. The white plastic chair outside the Corner Bar on page 20 is a recently added amenity—otherwise it would have been stolen, blown away by a windstorm or its fabric shattered by the winter cold. Somebody tends the New Luther Valley Cemetery (page 32), but he or she is not shown in Tonder’s photograph. The pickups on page 83 must have owners, even drivers, given the N.D. Pioneer license plates they sport. Where are those drivers?

Someone has recently tilled the field on page 84, with care and even beauty. The grain truck on page 48 is too new to have been abandoned, and the augur next to it suggests that the photograph was taken during the harvest. Still, we see no farmer, no hired man, no human activity. Surely children from the Red River Valley or Drift Prairie play on the recreational equipment of page 106. *Ubi sunt?* Where have they gone?

And where is pastor Jeri Bergquist of the Stjordalen Lutheran Church (page 49)? Why is she not standing proud before the remarkable building, with its still more remarkable sign, where she earns her few thousand dollars per year? What is Tonder saying by showing us the shell of North Dakota, but not the humans who inhabit that shell?

And what explains his (and our) fascination with grain storage structures? They are, after all, only grain storage structures. Nobody takes photographs of North Dakota garages or North Dakota linen closets or North Dakota fuel tanks. So why grain elevators? I have for many years been enamored of the art of Jackie McElroy, whose series of paintings of “grain elevators in the sky” capture something fundamental about the Great Plains.

She saw that in an essentially flat countryside grain elevators seem to float above the horizon. She understood that grain elevators are often the only structures that break up the vast circle of land and sky that is North Dakota. Grain elevators are North Dakota’s skyscrapers. They do not house people and files and desks like the skyscrapers of American cities. They house grain, mostly wheat, which has been the main purpose of North Dakota. We export grain, and cattle, and our children. The North Dakota state capital might be seen as a modified art deco grain elevator. In recent years, banks and restaurants have adapted the grain elevator design as homage to the state’s foundational industry. Tonder has chosen to fill his book with grain elevator photographs: wooden elevators, concrete elevators, gleaming steel elevators, weathered wood-grained elevators, sagging elevators, elevators covered with ice and snow. Given the milieu of dilapidation and decay, abandonment and loss, the viewer of this book will assume that almost all of the grain storage facilities he photographed are empty? Are they?

The book ends with a beautiful photograph of a single high-tech wind power generator. The tower is tall, elegant, and starkly alone on the platform of the plains. It’s not clear whether this is meant to be a symbol of hope, of a progressive future (enough people will remain, at least, to tend the wind towers), or the final indignity to the Jeffersonian dream: thanks, but we’ll just gather up the wind, if you don’t very much mind.

I have no idea whether I understand Rick Tonder’s photographs, but I know they leave me in deep melancholia. Only the beauty of his art compels me to keep turning the pages. I’ve spent my whole life in the lap of post World War II comfort, even luxury, and I have not lifted more than 250 bales of hay in my five decades of life. It seems clear to me that I have not earned the right to romanticize the agrarian paradigm, but it is equally certain that I have a stake in the future of North Dakota and the northern Great Plains.

My father-in-law, a Kansas farmer and irrigator, had a resourcefulness that I have never seen in a city (except among rural transplants). He built his own house from the basement up. He could dose a sheep, pull a calf, dehorn and castrate a kid goat, rebuild a v-8 engine, fashion or clean out a drain field, weld a grain cart, wire the church basement, pull a stranded car out of the borrow ditch, run the school board meeting according to strict parliamentary procedure, judge a 4H livestock show, or organize the state Masonic Lodge convention. He was precisely the kind of citizen farmer Jefferson had in mind, and he was a better man than I am precisely because of his mastery of the rural arts.

Now my thirteen year old daughter lives in small town in western Kansas:

726 people. The town may be dying but the people are rather enterprising. The children belong to 4H and they are, as they prepare for the county fair, learning something that Harvard and West L.A. can never provide them. I know my daughter will not spend her life in a small farm village in Kansas. It would not be the worst thing in the world if she stayed, but it is unlikely. I am growing her for bigger things. If she stayed out there in Godforsakia, I'd be disappointed. But I can see already that she has gained something invaluable, incalculably precious, from her sojourn there during the character-forging years. I would not prefer her to have access to a great ballet teacher or instruction in classical Greek, in trade for what she is learning by living in the country.

Perhaps it is not so terrible that we raise our children for export and count on their becoming those specially nice and decent, community-minded, craft-loving citizens of the more sophisticated places they migrate to, the ones that bring the meal to the neighbors who have had a death in the family and do their best to start a suburban (or exurban) 4H club against the odds. It would be great if they stayed (better yet, left and returned) to save North Dakota and reinvigorate our existence in this isolated, sub-Arctic place, but if they take what they have learned here and help to ground the nation and keep it somehow tethered to the earth and its fecundity, perhaps we have not failed altogether.

Our duty is to honor those who have the gumption to choose small town life in the face of so many powerful temptations, to honor especially those who came before us and proved the place up and paid the price—but not with overmuch romanticism. We should cherish what Jeffersonian North Dakota was, but not cling to it when it needs to be allowed to die. I do firmly believe that most of us who live better and expect more from life also think less well of ourselves for our complacency and easy comfort. How we wish we could purchase (in a box or boutique) the essence of that which we do not finally wish to earn with our own lives.

In that sense we are a tragic, or at least a bittersweet people. Unlike the people of New York or Massachusetts, we are too close to the heroic age to rest easy—they were, as O.E. Rolvaag rightly understood, giants in the earth in those days. Our grandparents lived in an era when the American dream was a goal not an expectation.

Here's the paradox. As the twenty-first century begins, we have prosperity, mobility, access, and global integration, but the dynamics that have uprooted us from the soil have uprooted us from that which is best in us, too. But if the best in us came at too high a price and it has left our young people longing to be somewhere where life delivers more and better fruits

at a much lower toll, if they insist upon living closer to where the action is, then what good is that “best in us”? Maybe the new North Dakotans will not be quite so full of decency, civility, generosity, and heroic perseverance as our farm grandparents, but they will still be good and decent folks, if only because our Jeffersonian nostalgia runs pretty deep, and whoever's left out in the villages will remind us that the least we can do in our softer, more cornucopian lives, is restrain the worst excesses of our ravaging consumerism.

In 1893 the historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote one of the most important essays in American history, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. He argued, in a nutshell, that the continual renewal of social institutions and habits on the western-receding frontier, the “meeting place of savagery and civilization,” was the defining characteristic of American history, the defining dynamics of the American character. In his conclusion, Turner wrote, “And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”

It may safely be said that with the blinking out of the Jeffersonian agrarian paradigm in the early 21st century, a moment characterized by the GPS-driven mega-combine with a cab featuring satellite TV, a refrigerator, and a Bose stereo, and nuanced climate control, as well as by the Sam's Club conquest of our consumer life, the first great phase of North Dakota history is now over.

There is a strange, quiet dearth of leadership in North Dakota as the 21st century begins. Nobody is saying much about what the future holds, beyond opportunity, prosperity, connectivity, and a flat world of opportunities and challenges. The leaders we have are rushing about to make sure that North Dakota gets its share of the flat-world opportunities that can be made to gravitate to so inhospitable and historically unimaginative a place. With few exceptions, our leaders are not asking the hard questions about the probable trajectory of the character of North Dakota and its people, our relationship to the landscapes that swallow us up, and the quality of our souls in the post-Jeffersonian era.

I'm not sure that Rick Tonder is explicitly asking those questions, either, but his photographs are one of the best invitations we have to step back and think about where we are tending and why.

Clay Straus Jenkinson







