

## Mon., August 7: Sacagawea Joins the Corps

The dawn view out my window, of construction trucks and semis circling the roundabout, was obscured by heavy Canadian smoke. The sun was a blurry orange misshapen disk well above the horizon. My lungs were fine, but my eyes demanded two rounds of Visine.

Tending the breakfast bar was a pot-bellied white man whose suspenders barely held up his pants, as opposed to an often-minority, usually uniformed, always female at every other hotel this trip. I mention this not as criticism, but under the heading of “don’t judge a book by its cover.” The bar’s offerings, if limited in variety, were sufficiently stocked, he was polite if reserved, and he read my mind when I looked around for hot water for my oatmeal.

In days past I made a point of picking up the local newspaper on my travels, intrigued by the differences in design and layout and learning a little something of local culture. The demise of newspapers in size and number have made this harder and less rewarding. But a few-days-old copy of *The Dickinson Press* lay unclaimed on a side table, so I gave it some love. Dickinson is 32 miles directly down ND 22 from a right at the roundabout. The front-page stories above the fold covered a methamphetamine lab bust (“Police seize 30 firearms, a pound of meth and substantial variety of drugs”) and, under a larger headline, a feature piece about a “Christian nondenominational organization” trying to support self-esteem in junior-high girls through “mentoring with physical activity.” Yes, “junior high” (grades 7-8),<sup>1</sup> not “middle school.” Below the fold was a story about a new mounted unit of four Dunn County deputies, intended for search-and-rescue operations where four-wheelers fear to roam. These “modern-day lawmen take to horseback, embodying the indomitable spirit of their historical counterparts as they bravely venture into the rugged Badlands, vast prairies and the untamed wilderness around Lake Sakakawea...” The front page of the sports section featured an above-average performance in the National High School Final Rodeo by a local girl; the naming of a female track-and-field star at Dickinson State University as NAIA<sup>2</sup> National Scholar-Athlete of the Year; and induction of an area boys basketball coach into the National High School Athletic Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

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1 Here’s how my journalism-geek brain works: I was taught to use an “en-dash”—a dash the width of the letter “n” in whatever typeface you are using, as opposed to the “em-dashes” on either side of this clause—within a range like 7–8. I still do. I noticed the Dickinson paper just used a normal hyphen, as I did in the quotation. Notice the difference in size.

2 The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics is the equivalent of the NCAA for small colleges.

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Well-rested and sufficiently fed by the Dakota Inn, I half-rounded the roundabout a last time to continue east on 200. Some ways through the freshly harvested hay fields I spotted a couple of friendly faces:



An hour's drive brought me to a little brown sign guiding me to the last major gap in my 35-year chase of Lewis and Clark. On their way west, the expedition passed through the site of today's capital city of Bismark on the Missouri and continued upriver about 50 miles, where they arrived at several villages of the Hidatsa and Mandan nations. With winter coming, these hospitable folks offered to put them up till spring. Here the commanders gained vital information about the journey ahead, including the obstacle of the Great Falls. Here, too, they gained Sacagawea and her husband.

The principle town sites are now preserved by the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, the name coming from their location on both sides of that stream just before it empties into the Missouri. The site's little VC had more to show me about Native American life. Before the arrival of EAs and their iron tools for trade, Natives used hoes made of bison shoulder blades and rakes of antler horns, attached to forked handles with leather straps.



Have you enjoyed the game of hacky-sack, trying to keep a small ball aloft with your feet, passing it to other players in a circle? So did the Hidatsa and Mandan. The VC had four balls gorgeously decorated with dyed porcupine quills, the primary material used before European beads became widespread. Our friend Prince Maximilian of Wied described them being used in the 1830s exactly as I explained hacky sack. Only, the NA version was harder: These sacks are connected into pairs with leather strings. By the way, the next time you decide you need a new water bottle, I suggest a time-proven alternative on display in a case: a buffalo bladder.

The exhibits raised a question, which I asked the two female rangers, one young and the other in her 50s. The panels noted that the people living here shifted twice a year between temporary camps near the river and the more permanent village sites here on the plateau. Why? To be closer to the water and out of the winds during the winter, the elder answered, and to follow the game animals that moved down as well. So why not live closer to the water all the time? Spring floods. Plus, her quiet companion added, they kept gardens on the plateau.

Out back was a revelation, a re-created earth lodge, its architecture impressive, solidly built and comfortable, belying the stereotype of all Plains nations as nomads in tipis. An exterior ring of sturdy logs supported the lathe-wall interior covered in insulating sod. An actual buffalo hide



hung in the doorway, surprisingly heavy: Some of my apartment doors provided less weather-proofing. The women built the lodges, only requiring the dudes for the heavy lifting. The Mandan also build separate ceremonial lodges.

The interior, a sign explained, had certain rules of placement and purpose. No one was to pass between the fire pit and nearest post. A hole above allowed smoke out and air in, an overturned bull-hide boat keeping out the rain. Bunks were around the edge. A log with notches in it served as a ladder for dropping into an underground storage pit. The place just felt... *cozy*.



A trail from there led past an example garden, where a sign pointed out that in addition to the Three Sisters raised by many Native Americans across the continent (corn, beans, and squash), the locals grew sunflowers as well. North Dakota is the top exporter of sunflower seeds in the U.S. today; I passed several extensive fields. Just beyond the garden was an example of a “drying stage,” one of which stood by each earth lodge, an arbor-like platform used to dry veggies for long-term use.

A half-mile later I came to a fork in the trail by an open field full of grass-covered circular humps. Those mark the few-dozen earth lodges of Awatixi Xi’e, in which Sacagawea lived when Lewis and Clark showed up in October 1804. I stood for a while taking this in, wondering what this extraordinary woman felt as she and her husband agreed to go with them from this beautiful spot.



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More so, what must her emotions have been, and those of those who loved her, when she returned the better part of two years later from one of the most extraordinary adventures of the era. She had suffered the same as the other members, made the portage around the Great Falls, re-met family members after years of separation, seen the Pacific Ocean, and returned—all while caring for an infant, by then a toddler.

The trail formerly looped, but the Knife River took exception and attacked the bank that supported it. The route is still visible, tempting me to clamber down and visit the orphaned history panel visible in the distance on the riverbank. But I guess they're afraid the ground has been undermined, and don't want a tourist taking an unplanned swim. I reluctantly walked back to the fork and along the far side to an adjacent but separate village.



*The Knife River; the white dot above the clump of dark-green bushes at upper right is the abandoned history marker*

A number of small birds had been poking around the trail and nearby bushes as I walked out, scattering as I approached. On the way back a robin was especially determined to hold the trail, flying ahead along it four or five times when I neared, before finally veering off. A plethora of small white butterflies hovered about as well—and one small yellow one.

When I returned to a visitor's center devoid of visitors, the younger ranger was sitting on a sunny interior bench and reading. The scene was relaxing. I repeated my thanks, said my goodbyes, and headed back to the Sage. Looking, as I write this, at the pamphlet from the site, I realized I then made a huge mistake. I could have driven to the Big Hidatsa Village to the north specifically mentioned by Clark on the return trip. Oh, well. I must radically accept again, helped by the presumption it is another field of bowl-shaped depressions today.

Instead I headed south again, more than a little disturbed by the utter carnage I was causing among those white butterflies ubiquitous to the region. I avoided as many as I could, driving a back road slowly for that reason. But I wantonly destroyed far more. The Purple Sage was already beige in front from bug DNA, and along the lower sides from dried mud. I had pulled up to a car wash in Killdeer, but saw it was touchless and didn't bother. This mess required a scrubbing.

Shortly after picking up Alt 200 to follow the Missouri's tree-lined former channel east, I turned a short distance north to check out the site of Fort Clark Trading Post. American Fur Company built this a couple years before Fort Union, and the *Yellow Stone* stopped here with Maximilian *en route* to the latter. Five years later another steamboat brought visitors less friendly to the nearby NAs: smallpox viruses. It nearly wiped out the nearest Mandan village. As nothing is visible above ground, and I'd done plenty of trading forts, I decided against walking the trail and moved on to another Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center just short of our rejoining US 83.

A bundle of energy about my age gave me the what-to-do-here, and in response to my question, he confirmed bad news I suspected: No one knows for sure where Fort Mandan was, the Corps of Discovery's home on the east bank of the Knife across from the Big Hidatsa Village. There is a monument in the area, its location based on an island Lewis mentions that is still there. But the exact site may well have been eaten by the river. I was deeply disappointed.

Most of the exhibits were repetitive to others we've seen. Maximilian and his artist were sketched, but another exhibit really caught my eye. It's why I waited until now to introduce another artist whose path we have crossed a number of times, George Catlin. A Pennsylvanian, he had given up a law practice to become a painter in the 1820s, and gained some acclaim. After seeing Native Americans in Philadelphia, headed for D.C., he became obsessed with the indigenous peoples of the Western frontier. A couple years later, he traveled to St. Louis to get first-hand travel advice from none other than William Clark. Two years later he repeated by steamboat the trip up the Missouri that

Clark had taken in far more primitive style. Catlin painted hundreds of scenes of the West, emphasizing Native life. He not only exhibited in the U.S., but took them across the Atlantic for a European tour.

The L&C Center has done something quite clever. They own an 1844 set of prints of Catlin's collection, and exhibit the ones described in a catalog he wrote for his London showing. A stand in the room offered free reproductions of the catalog. Here's an approximation of the title page:

**Catlin's North American**

**Indian Portfolio.**

Hunting Scenes and Amusements

of the

Rocky Mountains and Prairies of America

From Drawings and Notes of the Author

Made During Eight Years' Travel Amongst

Forty-Eight of the Wildest and Most Remote Tribes of Savages in North America

Inside, in the original typeface, are his descriptions of twenty-five paintings. I'd seen several over the years, but one had bound my attention on previous viewings, and now I know more of the story from the man himself. He says buffalo in a herd, aware of their size advantage, have no fear of wolves and let them wander in. NAs too poor to own horses "have been driven to the stratagem represented in this plate... by placing himself under the skin of a white wolf, with his weapons in hand, in which plight he often creeps over the level prairies (where there is no object to conceal him) to close company with the unsuspecting herd..." He





calls the land-form as he presents it a “just representation of the level prairies which often occur for many miles together...”

Catlin wrote books about his travels in the West, Europe, and the Andes of South America as well. After his death in the 1870s, his collection of art and artifacts landed at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington. I lingered over the prints for some time before rejoining the Sage.

A reconstruction of Fort Mandan was a short drive from the center, built by the county historical society in 1972 “using the same dimensions and primary materials as the original,” per the trail guide. The journals have only a crude sketch of the original, so that is an interesting claim. Now the fort is a state historical site, so I was greeted by a couple of polite state employees inside the Visitor Center. One said a guided tour was starting in 10 minutes, but I was welcome to go the self-guided route, which I politely chose. Making a quick spin through the few exhibits in the VC, I overheard a woman who came in with her family say they were from Twin Falls.

The fort didn't take long, the most interesting thing to me being the V-shape of the main structure's series of rooms, enclosed into a triangle by a wall across the legs. As at the other re-created forts, rooms have been decorated to represent various functions.



My tour was quick enough that the guided tour was already heading out as I got back to the VC door. In passing I told the woman that I'd been in Twin Falls two weeks earlier. Inside I asked the remaining ranger about the fort monument site I mentioned earlier. She eventually produced a map showing it was 27.5 miles away by gravel road without an outlet. “I'm not going to put my compact through that,” I said in a tone of commiseration. “I've already taking it places it shouldn't have gone, which you would see if you could step out and look at it.” Had I gone to Big Hidatsa, I could have looked across the river and seen the valley.

I settled for a view of a lazy and peaceful Missouri from the end of the driveway:



Though not hungry, I decided to go ahead and eat my lunch of cold leftover Killdeer pizza. The car was in shade, the setting was pleasant—and there are trash cans, I told myself.

US 83 South led me into Bismark, where I spotted something lacking in the many small towns I'd traversed in the last 1,000 miles: an oil-change shop. Now, I had sworn never to go to one of these again. One of the painful trip-prep stories I said I would leave out at the start of this missive involved yet another auto shop putting too much oil in my car. I presume at this point that the computer system(s) they rely on for that information are wrong about my old car. The oil changer at the pre-trip place sorta confirmed this when he claimed, upon my return to have some poured off, that it takes four quarts, which it does not. Per the Users Guide I still have, it takes 3.5. All I know is, all too often I have checked the level after letting the car sit overnight and found it high. After the most-recent event, I decided I was going back to changing my own damn oil.<sup>3</sup> The investment in the equipment needed would pay for itself in a few changes.

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<sup>3</sup> A reference to the most cogent bumper sticker I've seen featuring the Confederate flag of the Southern states during the Civil War. I looked at it expecting to find the usual historically inaccurate blather, but this one said: "We should have picked our own damn cotton." Still makes me laugh.

But... I had hit my usual interval by Bismark, with at least 1,000 miles yet to go in the trip. A Valvoline place presented itself to the right, so I pulled in. I told the worker standing by the computer that I just wanted an oil change, and also specified I only wanted 3.5 quarts, spinning my tale of woe on this point. Then began a weird call-and-response where the person under the hood would confirm something had been checked and get an affirmation from computer guy, each step of the way. I presume this is meant to justify the ridiculous fee they charge for something that takes me 10 minutes to do. So I said out the window: "Is all this really necessary? I really just want an oil change." I was assured they could do that, and the weirdness halted.

Except for the fact that they didn't have whatever flavor of overpriced oil their system was recommending for my little purple car. (I think the purple was the problem.) They contacted the manager for advice, who responded with the common-sense question, "Well, what does the customer want?" Plain old 10W-40 was my summer preference, but 10W-30 was fine. Underhood guy had to go to a storage area to find a box of basic 30.

While waiting on the guy below to finish draining, I got to talking with underhood guy about the car and the major repairs I'd done or had done. I passed along my usual factoid that including the original cost and repairs, minus routine maintenance, I'd spent an average of \$100 a month on this car. Over the past five years it has crept up a bit, but nowhere near the monthly payment of a late-model used, not to mention new, car. He appreciated my approach, and said he drove a pickup truck of roughly the same vintage. It needed a brake job, an issue he brought to vivid life with his story of more than once thinking he was going to run into someone ahead of him. I inserted into the conversation three times that this job could not wait. I've changed brake pads; for him it wouldn't be hard, I reassured him. He claimed agreement. Here's hoping he and the pickup are still with us.

The charge was more absurd than I feared: \$67. Incentive enough if I ever hesitate to do the change myself on a cold day.

The highway took me right to the North Dakota State Capitol in Bismark, which I only identified by checking pictures online after pulling into the parking lot. It turns out to be an Art Deco office tower from the 1930s, with legislative chambers in a low wing to the left. I couldn't even tell if the side I'd parked on was the front, though guessing it was



by the wide steps sticking out beyond the tower as I approached from the side (from the right in the photo). The entrance I took was below those, with a security checkpoint and what seemed an excessive four officers, especially after my breeze-in a state over in Helena. They were friendly, though. I told one incorrectly that this was capitol #43 for me (I was one high). From the utilitarian ground floor I took stairs to the main one, only then realizing the outdoor steps were blocked off for construction. They lead to a two-story glass front with chandeliers representing wheat stalks, and two revolving doors surrounded by gleaming bronze. I think another shorter wing on the right of the photo was original, housing the Supreme Court, but a judicial annex was added in the 1980s that looked like any number of suburban office buildings.

Overall the impression is that efficiency was the architect's primary goal. The single-sheet self-guided tour confirmed that impression, noting that the budget was limited, without pointing out the Great Depression was under way.

A dedicated elevator whisked me to the 18<sup>th</sup> and top floor, with outer wall hallways lined by windows and historical photographs. Pictures of Old Bismark and a petrified log moved to the capitol grounds made me pause. I forgot to ask on leaving where the log was, and having been to the Petrified Forest in Arizona, didn't expend the time to find it. Having visited a number of territorial capitals whose towns did not get the state capitols, I was intrigued to learn this one stands on the site of the 1883 territorial building, which became the state capitol with statehood. Photos of its 1930 burning were spectacular and terrifying.

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On the main floor I'd been stymied from seeing the legislative chambers by construction tape on two stairways and a blocked-off hallway leading to the elevators. Back on the ground floor, I made

a loop and realized the construction tape had been torn loose on one side there. So up I went, trailing a construction worker at a distance, making my way to the galleries. After hitting the bathroom back downstairs I came



across a bright red sign saying, "Legislative Hall Closed," for mechanical upgrades. No one who knows me is surprised I got this photo of the state senate I wasn't supposed to.

For reasons unrecalled, I decided against the nearby history museum, which I realize as I write this was probably closed given the lack of activity around it and the fact it was a Monday. I also gave short shrift to the idea of driving into downtown for a look-see, a decision I regret as I type this. I don't know why I was in such a rush to get outta town.

Yet I did, taking Interstate 94 pretty much straight east through the plains, which in places reveal as much "big sky" as does Montana. Seeking a pee break after 75 miles, I ventured into Jamestown. Along the lines of Leavenworth's transformation into an Alpine village, this even smaller burgh has changed what amounts to its downtown into a narrow, Old West streetscape. Forget Mount Rushmore: What American should really be proud of is possessing the World's Largest Buffalo, at the end of that road. Built in 1959, this one you can walk under.



Another 90 miles later, I returned to Fargo. Toward the end of my time in Albuquerque, the only one of the 48 contiguous states I had not seen was North Dakota. I wanted it bad. As many other many-state-ers have attested, N.D. is hard because it isn't on the way to anywhere, unless you were doing what I was doing this day. People driving cross-country to or from anywhere east of the Great Lakes are forced below those, which takes them through South Dakota. And there's no reason for those south of the lakes to drive this far north unless they have a personal or business connection. I had a friend at the University of Indiana, so we hatched a plan. I flew to Minneapolis, Minn.; he drove up; and after a brief exploration of the Twin Cities, we continued to Fargo just to say we'd been there. He snapped a great pic of me after stopping short of the state border so I could *walk* into a new state for the first and only time.

For the second time this trip, I walked into a hotel to find a desk clerk unhappy about being there. This one at the Expressway Suites was more stressed than the lady with the fractured leg. I went into coaching mode and got him calmed down a bit. He ran through his standard litany of things to do in the area, adding that a wood chipper was at the town visitor center, though he wasn't sure if it was the original. He meant the one used in the 1996 dark comedy *Fargo*, a cultural phenomenon at the time.

Dinner was next door at Lucky 13 Diner, which reminded me of the regional Carolina Ale House chain in N.C. The umami noodles with veggies in teriyaki and house-made

lemonade were... not bad, we'll say. The high-top table made journal updating easy, anyway.

On re-entering the hotel, the clerk greeted me with, "Rock Star, how are you doing?" Or something like that. I was brain-dead at this point. Better after dinner, I said, and asked how he was, leaning up against the desk to listen if he needed me to.

He said a woman had just told him he needed training on customer service, because he told her he could not open the fancy pool with a water slide visible through windows on the back wall. The county had closed it down. I didn't interrupt to ask why, but presumably it was a water-quality issue. "Like you could snap your fingers and make it better," I said sympathetically. This launched him into an imaginary monologue directed at her about how he couldn't allow anyone but specific employees in there, listing their roles, and even if he could make it perfect, he still couldn't open it until a county inspector approved. "I managed two pools in New York City," I said, "so I do understand."

He said over the top of me, "so you really do understand."

"Keep breathing, brother, you'll make it," I exhorted as I headed for the elevator.

"That's the plan—just two more hours."

I was gone—to sleep—long before that.