

eled...347 miles without sleeping. Each rider galloped 10 miles from one station to the next where he could stay only two minutes to fling the mail pouch over the back of a fresh horse. After his 12-hour shift was up he would sleep at a "home" station. The record was 7 days 17 hours carrying Lincoln's inaugural address the 1,996 miles from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California. It cost \$5 to send a half-ounce letter by Pony Express...a fortune in those days, as were the handsome wages. But the Pony Express lost money hand over fist and was discontinued in 1861 after only 18 months, replaced by the telegraph and the railway.

### Thomas Graves

We roll for home, back across the prairie, through the arch at St. Louis, over the stratified limestone beds that provided the foundations for so many important buildings, The World Trade Center and the Pentagon being just two.

of Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt and Lincoln peer down at us through gaps in the trees. At the sculptor's studio, a tall, rail-thin blonde park ranger wraps up her presentation to polite applause.

We learn a few things from her: that sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, first made a plaster model of his vision here in the studio: one inch here equaled one foot on the granite mountain. Borglum was able to transmit dimensions to assistant sculptors and local laid-off miners swinging in boson chairs. Primarily they used dynamite... with such precision they could get within a few inches of the correct depth. Jackhammers and "bump tools" finished the job off. It took 14 years, six and a half if you don't count the time off for winters and bad weather.

There were several injuries and close calls, but miraculously no one died on this project... except Borglum himself who succumbed following surgery while on his way to Washington to raise more money. World War II interrupted, the sculptor had died, and the project was never really finished.

Why these four Presidents? Good question: Washington, because he represents the birth of the



nation; Jefferson because he represents the expansion of the nation with the Louisiana Purchase; Roosevelt because he represents the development of the nation with the construction of the Panama canal; and Lincoln because he represents the preservation of the nation by leading the country through the Civil War. It is interesting to note that Lincoln's head is the least finished of the four...incomplete, like his presidency.

### Pony Express

The ad said, "Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred. Wages \$25 per week." Buffalo Bill started out in the pony express at the age of 13! And he set and held the record for the most distance trav-

We stay at a campground next to the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington and walk around and photograph the Champagne Run Horse Trials. As we saunter back to the campground, I spy two historical markers in front of a small cemetery. I assume it is the final resting place of some famous racehorse. It is the Thomas Graves family graveyard instead. One plaque tells of Mr. Graves' personal account of chasing Indians out of his yard in this very spot. The other plaque reveals that Thomas Graves was born circa 1721 in Spotsylvania County, fought in the Revolutionary War, was a personal friend of the Marquis de Lafayette, and before moving west to this 700-acre tract in Kentucky in 1781, served as Constable for Orange County...Virginia!

# PostCards from



# America's HeartLAND

Last year, we took a trip through Ohio, all around Michigan and down through Indiana in search of the true American heartland. On the way, we tried to visit as many communities named Orange as we could find. We found three.

This year, armed with a smaller and more maneuverable RV, we decided to continue the search west. On the way, we found an Orange County, Indiana that compares quite closely to us, with one notable exception (See next Insider). We also witnessed firsthand that quintessential American agricultural enterprise, the wheat harvest, with a local connection (also see the next Insider).

We traveled through Illinois and Iowa, where we saw how the Indians and settlers survived, up Lewis and Clark's route along the Missouri to South Dakota. We turned west almost to the Wyoming line where it's so dry, you have to dig 2,500 feet down to strike water, where one cow/calf unit needs 30 acres to survive (compared to just two acres here), where the annual rainfall is only 15 inches. We gazed in open-mouthed amazement at the moonscape that is the Badlands of South Dakota and the menacing bull bison in the 1,500-strong buffalo herd in the Black Hills.

It turned blessedly greener when we headed south and east through Nebraska along the vestiges of the Oregon Trail, where in some places you can see the ruts made by the Conestoga wagons. Further south and east, we went through the last remaining tall-grass prairie in Kansas, across Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, and finally home sweet home Virginia...4,095 miles all told. What follows are some random observations from the trip... postcards we sent home.

Postcard photos by Phil and Susie Audibert

## Flyover America

The term Flyover America, as best as we can determine, gained a foothold in the American lexicon after the last Presidential election; it's that vast territory of red states that we fly from the blue states of New England to the bluer state of California. Thirty thousand feet below us lies this largely neglected heartland.

A good way to take a community's pulse is to read its local newspapers and tune in to its local TV station. In South Dakota, where reporters referred to their area as "Sioux Land," the current price of wheat, corn and soybeans came just after the weather and before the Wall Street closing prices.

Road signs and bumper stickers, are another good barometer. How about this one we spied on a state park employee's personal vehicle: "You cannot be Catholic and pro-abortion at the same time." Another sign read, "Smile, your Mom chose life." Anti-abortion sentiment runs high in heavily-Catholic South Dakota.

Then on a 244-mile Interstate stretch between Kansas City and St. Louis we saw no fewer than six adult "Superstores" selling everything from pornography videos to sex toys. These stores popped up in our windshield more frequently than rest stops! Anyway, the point of all of this is to note that both extremes of the sex spectrum are in plain view in the Midwest...from procreation to recreation.

People are big out here, big as in obese. Whenever we ate at truck stops, or Mom and Pops, or a chain restaurant like the Machine Shed in Des Moines, we saw droves of fat families waddling down the aisles on their return trips to the buffet, or tucking into mountainous platters of a la carte food. Why do we eat so much? And why are the portions so big...especially here? I think it has something to do with the threat of starvation in the distant past...that and a fierce pride that these are the best farmers in the world.

At a turn-of-the-last-century, authentic working farm in Iowa, we saw living history participants settle down to a mighty noon feast of pot roast, boiled potatoes, carrots, cabbage, fresh baked rolls and apple pie from the woodstove. No ponderous bellies, flabby thighs or arm wattles here because they work those calories off scything wheat or plowing with a draft horse team. They say the men who provided the muscle for the Lewis and Clark expedition would eat as much as six pounds of meat a day. But those guys were rowing up the Missouri River, not snoozing in a Lay-Z-Boy in front of a wide screen.

Sure, food is abundant; that's the American way. Just eat less and exercise more. But you already knew that.

Anyway, speaking of food...it all boils down to grass.

## Prairie Grass

One of the reasons we took this trip was to see the tall-grass prairie. There's not much left. Today, the last undisturbed tall-grass prairie is in a National Park in mid-Kansas. It was only spared the plow because its shallow soil gave way to solid limestone, making it impossible to cultivate, but ideal to graze.

When the first French trappers came through Iowa in the mid-1600s, they found the loway Indians cultivating corn, which is ironic because corn is a grass. And that's where it all started...small plots of corn among this withers-high, complex eco-system of dozens of species of grass: Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian grass, Buffalo grass; the list goes on and on. Buffalo herds simply converted it into meat and hide.

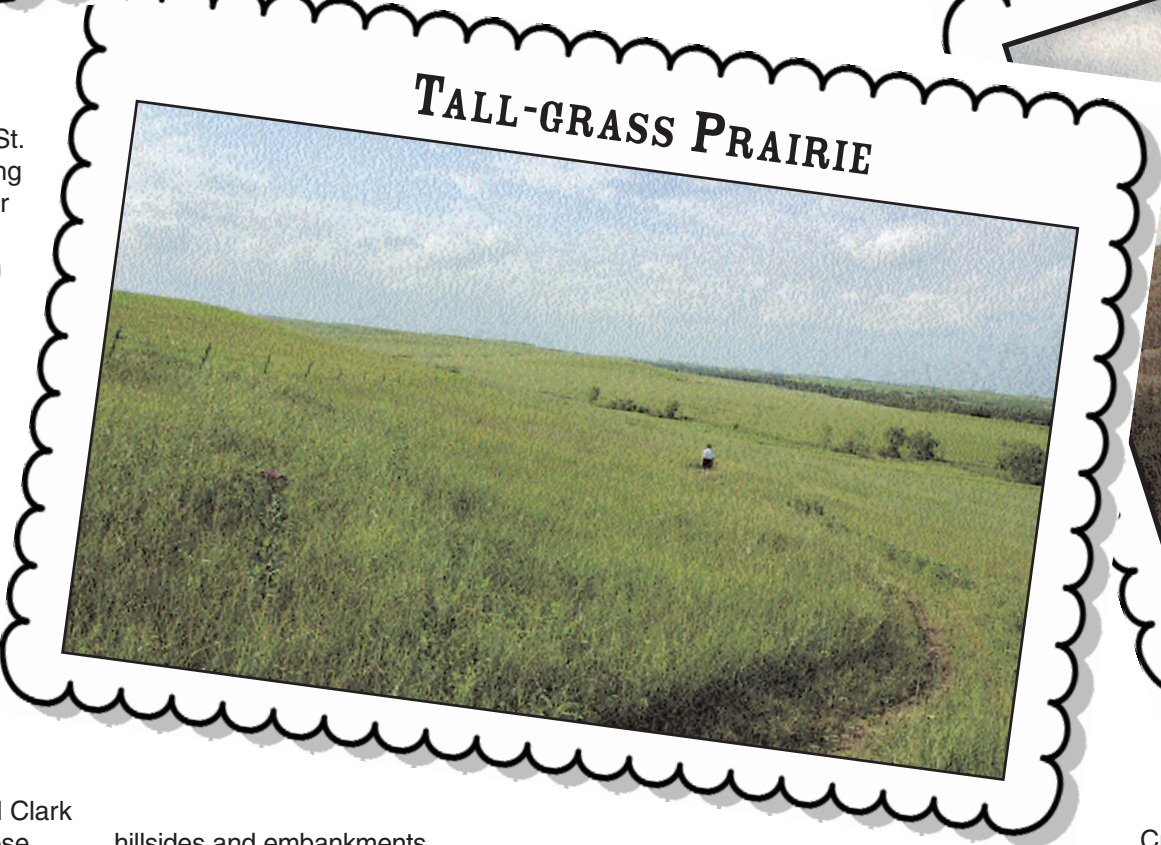
Then the pioneers arrived and introduced the moldboard plow to this sweeping ocean. They say the noise of the "sod busters" ripping through the deep root system of the grasses sounded like pistol shots. They built their houses out of it, burrowing into

fenced animals out-not in-and let their cattle graze free-range on the prairie where the buffalo used to be. In those days, a man with a scythe could cut an acre and a half of wheat per day.

Fast-forward to the present. During this trip, we ran into a contract wheat harvester who combined 1,500 acres in one day. That is 1,000 times the rate of the late 1800s homesteader.

I can also say with a certain degree of assurance that there is no shortage of corn in the state of Iowa...or Nebraska...or South Dakota...or Kansas, or Indiana, or Illinois. A plaque at an agricultural exhibit in Des Moines claims that Iowa is the corn leader of the world. I do not doubt that. The plaque says if you loaded the 1998 grain harvest into bumper-to-bumper trailers, five abreast, they would stretch from New York to Los Angeles!

And to think it all started with a few Indians cultivating a grass called maize.



hillsides and embankments and covering the roof with sod. The Homestead Act of 1862 "sold" 160-acre tracts for \$18 apiece as long as the settler established a residence for at least five years and put at least 10 acres to the plow.

The settlers went on to cultivate their own grasses: wheat and corn. They



## The Doublecross

Custer City, South Dakota, the Black Hills—speaking of Indians, this territory used to be the stomping ground of the Lakota...the Sioux nation. In 1868 in Laramie, Wyoming, representatives of the U.S. government negotiated a treaty with the leaders of the various Sioux tribes. Essentially, the treaty gave the Indians all the land between the North Platte River (in what is now Nebraska) and the Missouri River (all



the way up near Bismark, North Dakota)...ceded all that land between the two rivers all the way to the Rocky Mountains. Whites could travel through, but they could not stay.

In 1874, General George Armstrong Custer embarked on a reconnaissance trip of this territory starting in North Dakota at Mandan, where Lewis and Clark spent their first winter. Custer embarked with 1,000 men, complete with a wagon train and a brass band! He also took along "prospectors," and one of these guys found gold in French Creek.

All hell broke loose. Newspapers back east printed wild exaggerations and the second gold rush was off and running. "There's gold in them thar hills," they cried and there was no holding the tide of illegal settlers back. The US government was helpless to enforce its own treaty...probably didn't try all that hard. The Indians stood by and watched; they had no interest in this glittering metal. Eighteen months later and 300 miles west, Custer, on a mission to round up any Indians who refused to go to the reservations, found himself surrounded at Little Big Horn...the beginning of the end.

Oddly enough, not much gold ever came out of the Black Hills of South Dakota. The town of Custer, built near the site of that gold "discovery," now caters to hordes of motorcyclists on their annual pilgrimage to Sturgis and tourists on their way to see Mount Rushmore.

## Mount Rushmore

Everyone told us, "you HAVE to see Mount Rushmore."

Okay, okay, we'll go see Mount Rushmore.

Strolling up the Avenue of Flags, one can only wonder, what is it about this place? It's jammed with all manner of tourists: locals, foreigners, easterners, westerners, bikers, truckers, rednecks, yuppies, whiners, codgers, and porkers. Why are so many people making this pilgrimage to see four stony faces on a mountainside? Even Monticello doesn't draw this many people, and Monticello or Montpelier, for that matter, are so much more interesting and relevant.

I admit I am cranky. I have experienced the worst hamburger I have ever eaten, and it was incongruously served in the airy and renovated restaurant featured in the classic Hitchcock film, *North by Northwest*, starring Cary Grant, James Mason and Eva Marie Saint. I am NOT impressed with this place, until...

We take the stone path down to the sculptor's studio, which means we lose 90 percent of the crowds because they are too lazy to walk. The Ponderosa pines sigh faintly in the bone-dry Black Hills breeze. The faces