

Noticing in North Dakota

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Alice, ND is not a major destination city. In fact, I guess it's not a *major* anything, except perhaps to the folks who live thereabouts. To them, it's the world. If you Google the place, most of the information you'll see involves census figures. Forty residents as of the 2010 census.

John Steinbeck mentioned Alice in *Travels With Charley*, and I guess that's why my eye was caught when I passed the sign for Buffalo and Alice as I motored along I-94 / US 52 on my way to my appointment with Delta Airlines in Fargo. I'd really enjoyed that book many years ago and had always wondered about Alice.

And here it was.

This is a tiny crossroads town, unnoticed even by most of those who pass within three miles of the town center as they cruise by on the interstate. Other than Steinbeck, the biggest celebrity known to have come within a country mile of Alice – and they're all 'country' miles out here – is Alice Cooper, who was given the key to Alice during the 'Alice Cooper in Alice' celebration in May, 2006.

Eleven miles north of Alice on the other side of the interstate, Buffalo provides local area residents with much more in the way of infrastructure. At 200 souls, Buffalo boasts a library, a licensed day care center among "several business to make life pleasant," according to the town website. The motto "Shuffle off to Buffalo" banners a site that is clearly meant to encourage immigration.

Driving through this corner of one of our least populous states made me feel good. There is something to see in each and every mile between Valley City, where I spent the week teaching, and Hector International Airport in Fargo. Even the trucks on the highway provide a show, hauling machinery and goods not to be seen on the roads around Seattle.

Folks, this is a drop dead gorgeous part of the country. Especially with so many of the crops at or near harvest. Miles of green and a true horizon view. In spite of the tininess of some of the farm towns, this part of the country is an incredible and fascinating economic engine, its agricultural output forming the bedrock upon which much of our national economy is based.

I know it's popular in some circles to poke fun at the rural parts of our country. Even when an Academy Award-winning movie was set in and around Fargo, rather than celebrating the lushness of the farmland and the honest hard work of the people who live hereabouts, we all sort of chuckled at the characterization of the area as, shall we say, quaint. Shame on us.

One of the truly glorious things about my job is that it takes me to places where I'm reminded of how this country really works. I wish all of you could have shared the experiences of my last week. I'll probably share more with you in the next few days.