

Californian's dream: Find out what makes Nebraskans tick

Mitch Gelman had a dream. And he wangled grant money to pay for it.

His mission: to find out what makes Midwesterners tick.

His patron: the University of

For instance, about farmers. When Gelman crossed the Colorado-Nebraska border, he decided to get the low-down on agriculture in a couple of hours.

"They wanted to keep me there for weeks," Gelman said. "It was the first new human being they'd seen since the man brought their TV set."

Gelman also discovered that Nebraska was not a wasteland, dustbowl or grassland.

"But if my car would have broken down in the Sandhills, I would have been in a mess of trouble," he said.

And he discovered Nebraska is not a cultural wasteland. He came to Lincoln. He went to O'Rourke's.

"They have free popcorn," he said.

And he talked to the great minds of Lincoln: Gov. Bob Kerrey, Sen. Ernie Chambers, Dick Herman at the Lincoln Journal

and myself.

"They gave free popcorn," he said.

Mitch Gelman did learn a lot about Midwesterners. He learned about openness, honesty, generosity, trust.

"I came to depend on the kindness of strangers," he said. "And people took me in, just like that. California accent and all."

Including the Alpha Tau Omega house. Guys, I know he told you he was in your house back home, but... that's OK, isn't it?

So Mitch Gelman has the answers to the Great American Question: What makes Midwesterners tick?

"They give free popcorn." As you read this, Mitch is driving his trusty yellow Toyota eastward exploring Iowa.

Just when he had all the answers...

Mona Koppelman

California at Berkeley.

Gelman, a 22-year-old humanities student, toured Nebraska last week, interviewing local newspaper editors and community leaders.

He asked them about American values and what's important to Midwesterners — where we fit in the "Big Picture," and what America's role should be in international relations.

An admirable topic for a thesis. But Gelman admits that his "Great Midwestern Adventure" is going to be more fun than observing the mating customs of spiders or describing the implications of overcrowding in ant farms.

"People here walk with their feet on the ground and drink with their feet in the air," Gelman said. "They know how to show you a good time."

Gelman is a "bi-coastal" kind of guy. He grew up in New York City's Greenwich Village, and moved with his family to Los Angeles when he was 14.

Gelman thought his city savvy would give him a hard-edged perspective on Midwestern life.

"When I left L.A. two weeks ago, I was a man with a mission," he said. "One day in Nebraska blew it to smithereens."

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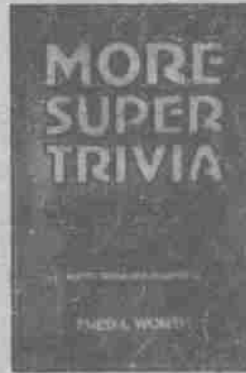
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