

Editor's note: The writer graduated from UN-L in 1974 and was a Fulbright scholar to New Zealand from January 1975 through March 1976. He received his masters degree in history at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and is now a Ph.D. candidate in the history department at UN-L. Two years after returning to the United States he has recorded some thoughts about America and the American way of life.

By Jim Gump

Two years ago a restless, enthusiastic Fulbrighter departed from the shores of New Zealand, touched down briefly in Melbourne and Cape Town, and made a glorious landing in New York City. Now unaccustomed to a hectic lifestyle, the American social aberrations became instantaneously evident to him: the incredible emphasis on efficiency, a quickened pace of life, and an unsightly fleet of oversized automobiles.

letter

But, he thought, what a refreshing change! Finally, access to a New York Times, Walter Cronkite and the "CBS News" and a MacDonald's Big Mac. He could again use quarters, dimes, nickels and pennies, browse through any shopping center to purchase anything and everything, and drive on the proper side of the road. It would now be possible to directly experience the excitement of a presidential election year. Thoughts of at least

conquering the poverty of the ghettos ran amuck.

Once he landed in the prairies the immersion into relative tranquility was too much for a restless spirit to bear. He could almost feel the roots of his soul struggling against transplantation—emotions reached vicariously for the Antipodes. The New Zealanders are a vigorous people, an active people, a people who cherish the outdoors, the home and the holidays.

Referred to by one observer as the "half-gallon, quarter-acre, pavlova paradise," New Zealand is an exotic mixture of Norwegian fiords, Swiss Alps, Hawaiian beaches and Wisconsin dairy farms. The foreign observer may not feel as smugly assured as the New Zealander that these two islands the size of Colorado are "God's Own Country," but one cannot help but be impressed. The Maori, the indigenous Polynesian population of this former British colony, expressively refer to an inhabitant's sense of place as *turangawaewae*.

It would be good to return, he thought, but there was still so much to see and do in America. Searching for that great American dream of unabandoned material and personal gratification, he trekked to Boston, New York, Detroit and Chicago.

Screaming subways, chaotic crowds and wretched ghettos suddenly replaced the idyllic images conjured up by a romantic graduate student. The dream became more and more elusive, even sour. Exchanging backwoods' New England for the urban wilderness, he worked several months amongst the remote villages of eastern Maine, still searching. Next it was an

even longer stint in the sleepy hills of mid-Missouri. How could some of these folks be so poor, he thought—now, here in America? Discouraged by a dissolving dream, he began to wonder why he ever came back.

His sojourn has temporarily paused in Nebraska, a region where it once seemed easier to shun materialism and affluence, to turn one's back on a social ethos that worships the automobile, the dollar and mass consumption. The Norden Dam and the Northeast Radial serve to potentially subvert that earlier enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, a bit of reflection suggests some basis for optimism. Travelling about this vast continent confirms for anyone the utter diversity and complexity of the United States. It holds some of the best and some of worst; some of the grandest and some of the most decadent. Intellectual achievement abounds; moral depravity is evident in its most despicable forms.

In a nation that is now over two hundred years old, Americans still cling to the myth of regeneration, renewal, youth and innocence. A people who take great pride in their scientific problem-solving technologies also have a certain propensity for avoiding major problems rather than confronting them.

One is reminded of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself:

Do I contradict myself?
So I contradict myself.

I am large, I contain multitudes.

In looking at the United States from distant shores, one is overwhelmed by the extraordinary freedoms that Americans enjoy. Perhaps the key to a sane future in this country lies in the management of those freedoms: freedom to enjoy unlimited material pleasure or freedom to responsibly care for our precious natural and human resources.

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All letters must be signed.

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