

Nebraskanness can be beautiful

On a pet-store visit, writer finds cowtown piece of the pie

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Although he heard Lincoln was a regular "sin city Nebraskawise" the nightlife disappointed him. He almost got trapped each night at 6 when the sidewalks closed up around him.

In other words, he wouldn't want to live here, but said it was a nice place to visit.

Many Nebraskans say the same about New York City. But Nebraskan travelers take a lot more crap than New Yorkers.

Outside the Midwest, Nebraskans are a novelty. Nebraskans almost hear carnie yelling as they walk down the streets of New York City, California, Florida, Texas or (substitute any other "hip" place): "Hurry, hurry, hurry and see amazing corn-eater, a thing that survives with only the culture in yogurts."

Most Nebraskans, for survival, learn to be great apologists. They develop good senses of humor.

Kevin Rippe and Chris Dickey, two members of the Lincoln band Too Many Daves, wrote a song about their city.

Rippe, a Lincoln native, contributed the chorus of "This is the only town that I know":

*"Welcome to my town,
It's a shitty town,
But it's the only town that I know,
Welcome to my town,
I should leave but I know I'll
never go."*

Rippe graduated from UNL in December and stayed to become a social studies teacher. Dickey's a senior at UNL, lived in California until his parents moved in 1983 and dragged him along.

Others battle their Nebraskanness by saving up little facts:

Lincoln is the home of the National Rollerskating Museum.

The Capitol is an architectural wonder.

It's a great place to raise kids. The streets, the air and water are clean.

It's not as boring as North Dakota, they tell visitors.

Most people outside of Nebraska, who've never visited here, know about three things about the state: it has a football team, the governor dated Debra Winger, and cowboys and Indians abound.

For a long time my cousins in Missouri thought that Nebraska and Alaska were identical — except that Nebraska didn't have any scenery of Eskimos.

It's no surprise that most of the students at UNL want to leave the state when they graduate. It's not because of a lack of job opportunities, it's because they're tired of apologizing. They're tired of dealing with all the quips of hip-state dwellers. They want to (discover) something better than "The Good Life."

So the senior year becomes a year of planning the escape. A resume is transformed into a plea for a pardon. A reference acts as a defense attorney. An interview becomes appearance before the parole board.

But it's not Nebraska that's the prison. It's the mindset. The acceptance of the idea that boredom is an inevitable condition of life. For the person who has accepted that idea, there's no escape, no matter where you go.

On one of those whirlwind "I'll see the world and experience life before I get a job" trips, one UNL graduate met a woman in London who'd lived there all her life. Great, he thought, she'll know all the nontouristy, really cool things to do.

So he asked. And she seriously replied, "There's nothing to do in London."

Other Nebraskans have found disillusionment away from home.

One UNL student returned from a spring-break trip to Washington, D.C., wearing a bar T-shirt and raving about the night life. But then he described the hundreds of homeless people standing and sleeping around all the monuments, dedicated to the ideals of our country: "Liberty and Justice (but not enough food) for all."

Another, all oiled up and decked

out, was ready for Redondo Beach when he nearly stepped on a man sleeping with a metal detector in the sand.

On a trip to Texas, I learned two lessons about the curse of Nebraskanness.

One came from Craig, a Baylor Law student from the North Texas flatlands, an area that, in Texas terms, is almost as bad as Nebraska.

Craig said his law-school buddies love "unspoiled" North Texas women.

"The best thing about North Texas girls, is that they said you can take them anywhere and they'll think it's wonderful — compared to back home," he said.

It can be an advantage living in a boring place because you develop a high tolerance for boredom and an easy appreciation for things you don't have: mountains, oceans, Broadway plays. You learn to be creative to avoid boredom. That's a skill you can use anywhere.

The second lesson I learned reading the Dallas Morning News, every story on the front page except for a short article about the misadventures of evangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker, was about Texas. So were all the articles in the regional, state and local pages. The rest of the world was missing.

I suddenly realized that it can be dangerous to live in a place that's too exciting because it's easy to forget that you're only a small part of a large whole. You can become impressed with your own importance in exploring new places or new ideas.

And that is the most mind-numbingly boring state of all: the state of content and ignorance.

Olsen is a senior news-editorial major and plans to leave the state in May.

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