

Tumbleweed missing from half of Fitzgerald's 'ghost towns'

From ST. PAUL on Page 4

floods. Aren't you going to miss your friends and family? I asked.

Ed was beginning to tire of this. He was polite of course, but I stopped expecting an invitation to Sunday dinner.

"Listen," he said, "St. Paul's got a new bank, a new library, a new post office, a new country club, and we're tryin' to get a \$2 million dollar rest home — now it's got retarded kids in it — but we've got a construction company, employs 300 people and has a \$200,000 office downtown..."

Now hold on there Ed. Ed told me to call his wife next door and gave me the number.

"She knows all the details, even wrote a poem about Mr. Fitzgerald for the Kansas City Star."

Thanks Ed. I began to think how demoralizing it would be to be called a ghost town before your time. If the criterion was that you had to be a thriving rural Kansas town not to be a ghost town, I wondered if there were any rural towns — in these precarious times for agriculture — that had been left off Mr. Fitzgerald's list. And what about the tourists who would think "ghost town" meant, well, um, ghost town, and would just come walking in your home to see how people lived back then when, in fact, people were living there right then.

"Yeah, me and the wife tooted on up to St. Paul in the Winnebago last summer and Charley, lemme tell ya, that guy in the living room may have been a ghost but that shotgun was as real as me 'n' you."

If 700 men, women and children still resided in St. Paul — going to the library to check out 'Ghost Towns of Kansas,' putting around the golf course and withdrawing from and depositing into their bank accounts — and if, to most any historian, the term "ghost town" means an abandoned town, then it was time to call up Daniel Fitzgerald, an archivist at the Center in Topeka.

Of the 99 towns listed in your book, Mr. Fitzgerald, I asked, how many of them actually have people in them?

Fitzgerald admitted that almost half of the towns in his book were populated.

"I tried to look at the importance of the towns," Fitzgerald said. "St. Paul at one time lost 62% of its population, went from 1800 residents down to 700. It used to be a major trading center of southeast Kansas, but now it's just a country town and just serves its residents."

So apparently Mr. Fitzgerald looked at where towns stood in the big universal scheme of things. If they didn't build ships to sail the world's seas or export fine wines to some of the world's finest restaurants, they were ghost towns. What Fitzgerald isn't anticipating here, is the consummate disappointment of any tourist who goes looking for ghost towns and finds that half of the towns in the Kansas ghost town guide have healthy, rejuvenated main streets, new banks and libraries and that the ghosts there still bang around in the attics of private homes where they belong.

I reached Betty Brogan next door, told her Ed had given me the number.

Betty has become sort of the self-proclaimed head apparition of St. Paul. Anything Ed may have over-

looked in the city's favor, Betty had memorized.

"We're in the feasibility stage for getting a \$2 million adult care facility, and it's not exactly good press to be called a ghost town now," Betty said. "Mr. Fitzgerald says he's been here, but he hasn't and if he would have come we would have taken him to St. Paul's two saw mills, three construction companies, four beauty shops, the tavern that serves half pound hamburgers so huge one person can't eat them, the two restaurants — one with fried chicken and the other with Mexican food every Thursday night — and the Mission Day celebration we have here each May."

"He's trying to sell a book, but we're trying to sell a town," Betty was getting a bit winded.

"We have pecans, a state wildlife refuge, two beautiful islands on the Neosho River, trees and greenery..."

And then Betty read me her poem, "An Ode to Mr. Daniel Fitzgerald." A few lines stuck out in the "moon, June, spoon" rhyme scheme: "We are busy, busy indeed..." and the clencher, "When a dance is happening at our town hall/come, and you and the ghosts will have a ball..."

And then she read me a letter her niece had written to Bruce Buchanan, editor of the the nearest newspaper, The Parsons Sun, that mentioned

more of St. Paul's thriving businesses. By this time, St. Paul was sounding better to me than Lincoln.

The economic crunch on these small communities has certainly brought with it an abundance of bad press. A play called "Nebraska" by John Logan recently opened in Chicago, and paints rural life as a breeding ground for psychopathic right-wing hate groups who skin children and read scripture between shoot-outs with the State Patrol. Now, for the sake of tourism and book sales, small communities who make their living off small family farms and the folks who operate them are being written off as ghost towns.

Betty reaffirmed that I could indeed come to Sunday dinner when I saw fit, and I even heard Ed say goodbye to me in the background, despite my having referred to him in the posthumous tense.

Just because I said I would, I called Jim Potter at the Nebraska State Historical Society.

"I know Dan, and I don't doubt his credentials," Potter said. "There's not really any historian's definition of a ghost town, it's just mostly common sense. It's a place where virtually nobody lives and tumbleweed blow down the streets."

Lieurance is a senior English major and Daily Nebraskan Editorial page editor.

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