



Julia Mikolajcik/DN

the decency of small town life," he said. "Well, people laugh at it, sort of, but there's also an enormous envy of it. People who in New York and L.A. who used to laugh at the Plains and rural America are now having twinges of envy.

"I get the letters from Sunday Morning constantly — is the sky really that color, is the water really like that out there in the river, is the town really like that where two pickup trucks can stop and talk to each other with their engines turned off?"

People don't laugh at this kind of life anymore, he said.

Welsch compared the popular TV show "Northern Exposure" to the old show "Green Acres" as an example of the changing attitudes on the coasts.

"Northern Exposure, even though it's looking at a small town, like Green Acres did, it's not the same kind of show. Green Acres made fun of farm life, small town life. Northern Exposure is not at all," he said. "There you see profound philosophers, and people who are thinkers, people who are much more serious than people in the cities. I'm not saying that's the way it is, but I'm saying this is that new romanticism in action.

"I realize I'm not on Sunday Morning because I'm a fancy dresser, because of my rugged good looks," he said. "It's because there's a new interest in what's going on out here."

Welsch predicted that there would be a similar explosion of folklore interest in the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe.

"They want to be very different from everybody around them — we've got our own country now, we'll have our own

flag, our own national anthem, and here's our folklore. We'll have national dances, and all of this stuff that's going call attention to fact that they're a distinct people with a proud heritage," he said.

The FWP effort was the basis for Welsch's most comprehensive book about Nebraska folklore, "A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore." A professor at Nebraska Wesleyan University at the time, he published the book in 1966, using what he believed to be the "diamonds" of the FWP collection along with some material from Pound and other sources.

Welsch said that in the days of Pound and the FWP, those interested in folklore thought of their jobs as archeology. They would go out "into the field," spending the summer visiting different sites and asking for stories. Welsch said that was not how he went about the job.

"Now, the thing to do is to live in your laboratory, which is why I left the university and came out here," he said. Welsch had been a professor at UNL for 15 years before moving to the small farming village of Dannebrog, about a half-hour's drive northwest of Grand Island.

"I think it's a very unnatural situation just to come out here and sit at the tavern and say 'know any stories?'"

He said a person heard a completely different sort of material if he or she was around the source everyday, and called his move the "best thing I ever did."

Welsch said he collected his folklore now by "sitting with my cronies up at Harriet's," a local cafe, and talking with area residents. He said he was able to dig up all sorts of stories.

"There is no such thing as a group without its folklore," he said. "Students

have their folklore, farmers have theirs, factory workers have theirs, lawyers have theirs."


Welsch said modern technology had not faded folklore. He can still find all the stories he wants.

"A story which 100 years ago would've had to go to from hat maker to butcher to housewife to farmer — maybe moving 50 miles a year at most — now a guy will call up his buddy on the watts line in LA from New York and say 'God, did you hear the story about Pee Wee Herman?' and boom, there it is," he said. "Folklore is very, very strong. It never fades away."

Welsch said he had always been the most interested in the folk humor and tall tales he heard because they were so integral with the Midwest.

"It's very distinct part of Plains life, because the Plains are a tall tale to begin with, with the weather extremes and all that," he said. "The reason that people out here, especially, tell tall tales is because in years of drought, you get dry weather stories, in years of flood, you get wet weather stories and they're laughing at precisely those kinds of things that threaten them. We always do that."

Tall tales are also useful to demonstrate to people how folklore works, Welsch said. He said he was always amazed at teachers who told their students to write tall tales.

"You don't make up tall tales, that's not the way folklore works," he said. "It's like a stone in a stream, a story rolls around in the stream long enough that it's polished, and it comes out as a folk tale that has no real author. It's just there, and it's been told for years and years and years and enjoyed." 

Known as "Captain Nebraska," Roger Welsch is the state's premier folklorist. From his home in Dannebrog, he shares his collection of "plains lies" with the rest of the country through books, magazines and television.