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Backstage

Ron Hull

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RON HULL

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BACKSTAGE

Stories from My Life in Public Television

University of Nebraska Press / Lincoln and London

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Set in Sabon by Bob Reitz
Designed by A. Shahan.

To Naomi, who has been with me all the way

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1

Where the West Begins in the Middle of . . .

The plane, shakily lurching through the sky, was obviously landing. But where? The forbidding snow-covered mountains and frozen ground could only mean a crash landing in this unknown place. Riveted with fear, I clutched my mother's arm as I edged closer to her seat in the State Theatre of Rapid City, South Dakota, and witnessed the power of movie storytelling.

I was seven years old, and this, the first movie I can remember, was the 1937 Columbia Pictures film *Lost Horizon*, starring Ronald Coleman and Jane Wyatt. This motion picture magically opened the door to my imagination. Though some of the scenes reputedly were filmed in an ice-making plant in Los Angeles, I believed every detail of that story about the Valley of the Blue Moon somewhere in the mountains of Tibet, and I've been searching for Shangri-la ever since.

I was close in May 2006 when I boarded the Trans-Mongolian Railway in Beijing, China, and headed northwest past miles of the Great Wall, topping the mountains like the spikes on a dragon's back, on north through the Gobi desert to Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, the first stop on the way to Moscow, Russia.

Vast expanses of blowing sands, herds of wild horses running zigzag through the dunes and valleys, sheep, deer, and camels wandering aimlessly not far from the compartment window, and scattered bones of animals that had not seen the trains during the night: all of it provided a continuing, fascinating show.

But this was not the best part of the trip. The best part was the people on the train. There is a short-lived, but nevertheless real, culture that begins to form as the train leaves the station. We were people of every size, shape, color, nationality, and ethnicity—a microcosm of the world—each with a fascinating life story we were eager to share over wine in the dining car with its elaborate wood-carved decorations .

This Trans-Mongolian train also afforded time to think, to read, to recall. The gentle swaying of the train, the low hum of the wheels smoothly skimming the rails, lulled me into a welcome, contented state of mind. Triggered by the fascinating world unfolding just outside my window, this, like Shangri-la, afforded a mental journey and a time for looking back.

I closed my eyes and the Trans-Missouri country came in view.

From the wide Missouri to the foothills of the Rockies there is a beautiful stretch of land called Nebraska. Willa Cather accurately described it: “To the east a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west a corral that reached to sunset.” Or as another writer put it, “Nebraska is the land where the west begins in the middle of.” And it does. The farmers are to the east, the ranchers and cowboys to the west.

This land has nurtured a hardy, resourceful, independent people. The first flood of immigrants came in the 1870s as homesteaders, farmers, ranchers, cattlemen, Czechs, Germans, Jews, French, Poles, Swedes, and African Americans. Land was the magnet they came for—land of their own.

Over the years, and out of these ranks, came some highly individual people: Roscoe Pound, dean of the Harvard Law School,

George Norris, father of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Willa Cather, Marlon Brando, Fred Astaire, Sandy Dennis, Dick Cavett, Johnny Carson, Loren Eiseley, John Neihardt, William Jennings Bryan, and Mari Sandoz. These scientists, politicians, actors, comedians, and writers, each fiercely independent, creative people, brought the Midwest ethic of honesty and hard work to their careers.

Nebraska has always had a bad press. It started back in the nineteenth century when early explorers, military people, and even a Russian grand duke who came to hunt buffalo proclaimed that this land would never support agriculture. About that time, spread across the maps of the region, were the words “the great American desert.” Hollywood used to portray Nebraskans as “hicks,” and even today many Americans, particularly along the northeastern seaboard, still ask if we are afraid of the Indians. It takes a long time to change perceptions of a place. I was reminded of this when President Jimmy Carter appointed me to the “President’s Advisory Committee on the Arts for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.” Every president uses this presidential commission to create an advisory committee to the Kennedy Center.

One piece of correspondence concerning this appointment that reached my desk was, I feel sure, a clerical mistake from the White House. Accompanying the appointment letter was a second piece of paper and on it were listed four of the new members of the commission. We all understand that racial and ethnic considerations are important, but this added a new dimension to political correctness. The paper listed four names (for obvious reasons the first three names are fictitious):

Ms. Marvel Washington (Black)

Mr. Jose Guitierrez (Hispanic)

Ms. Kathleen Wu (Asian)

Mr. Ron Hull (Nebraska)

Apparently we Nebraskans are an ethnic group all our own.

We call ourselves Cornhuskers, and you will find us loyal to the state's history and culture passed down to us by the explorers, adventurers, Native Americans, pioneers, cowboys, and all the others who came here and made this a unique and special place. The people make it so; they have a sense of honesty and fair play that they learned the hard way. To survive in Nebraska, neighbors had to help each other through blizzards, drought, prairie fires, rattlesnakes, heat, cold, and wind—the harsh and sometimes cruel forces of nature. Nebraskans know how to work, expect to, and teach this to their children.

Nebraska and stories of its people are central to many of the pages that follow, and though I consider myself a Cornhusker, this is my adopted home. Life for me began in the much less sophisticated territory north of Nebraska, in the Black Hills of South Dakota.