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On the road again: Photo students search for the "real" Nebraska

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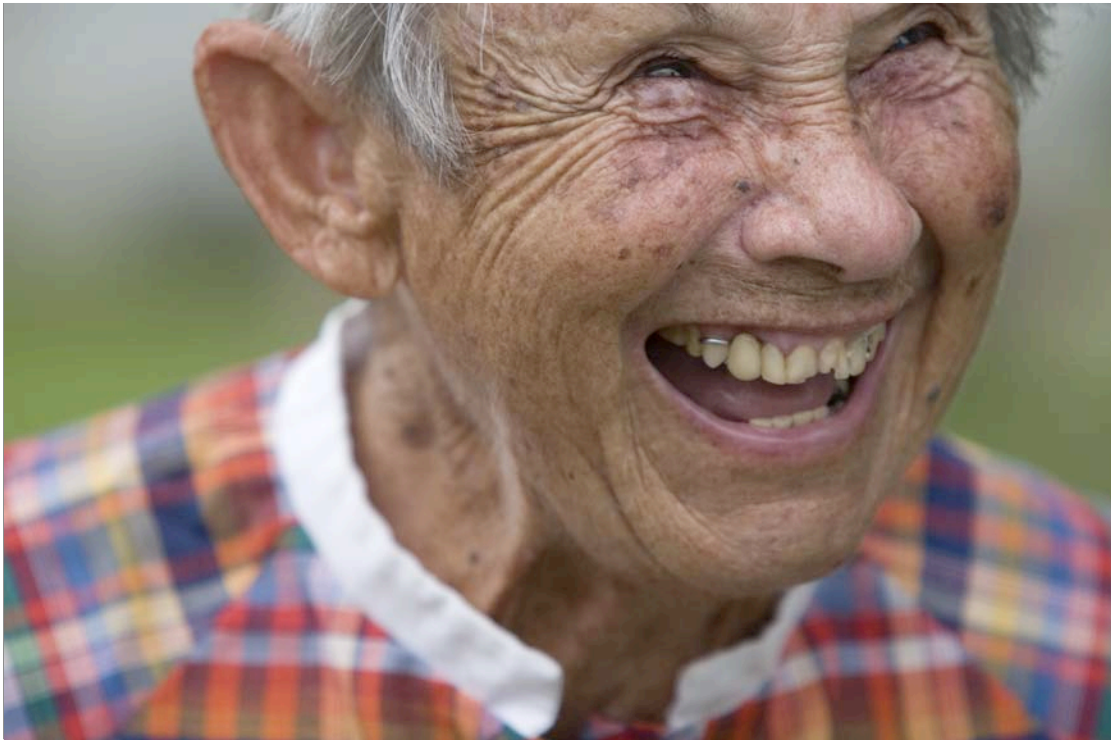
THREE WEEKS IN TEHRAN

PHOTOJOURNALIST RAMIN TALAIE'S FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT

"LIVES NOT LOST IN VAIN" | ON THE ROAD AGAIN | PHOTOGRAPHING POWER

On The Road Again

Photo Students Search For The “Real” Nebraska



THREE COLLEGE PHOTOJOURNALISM STUDENTS AND THEIR PROFESSOR, ARMED WITH CAMERAS, LAPTOPS, AND A CAMPING TRAILER, SET OFF THIS SUMMER TO TRAVEL BACK ROADS TO DOCUMENT THE PEOPLE OF THEIR STATE, THEIR LIVES AND FACES AT WORK AND PLAY IN TOWNS BIG AND SMALL, AND TO SEE JUST WHAT THE GREAT RECESSION IS DOING TO THEM. >>>

Arlene Miller, 84 (above), has lived in Fargo, NE, since she was three. Photograph by Clay Lomneth



The UNL photojournalism team and their trailer stopped in front of Mary Bruggeman's store, Howard's Grocery in Barada, NE, which she's owned for 43 years. From left, Kyle Bruggeman, Clay Lomneth, Bruce Thorson, and Patrick Breen.
Photograph by Bruce Thorson & Larry Kinkade

Two Months On The Road Documenting Life In A Recession

By Bruce Thorson

DORCHESTER, NE
I GRABBED ROY STRYKER'S BOOK, *In this Proud Land*, photographs from the Great Depression during the 1930s and early 1940s, from my office desk. Stryker put together a team of depression-era photographers and produced one of the greatest collections of documentary photography. I walked briskly on a cool but sunny afternoon several blocks down the street to the Center for Great Plains Studies here at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Its mission is to document the people, the environment, the traditions, and the culture in the Great Plains.

As I approached the office of James Stubbendieck, the center's director, I peered around the door jam and saw him, his strikingly well-manicured gray hair in perfect place, seated and working on his computer. I tapped lightly on the door and he responded with a, "Well Bruce, come on in."

I pitched to him a photographic documentary project about Nebraska – the lives and faces and work and play and worship and small towns and ethanol and car dealers and housing; just about every facet about people between birth and death and, of course, the economy's effects on them – because our nation is in the midst of what some are calling the Great Recession, the worst economic time since the Depression.

"Bruce," he said firmly – I was expecting "Thanks, but no thanks" to follow – "I like your idea." Through the center, he provided



TIGHT QUARTERS. A 23-foot-long camping trailer isn't a lot of room for three college students – Patrick Breen (at left), Kyle Bruggeman, and Clay Lomneth – and their professor, Bruce Thorson, to work in, plus eat, groom, and sleep together. Photograph by Bruce Thorson



LAZY RIVER. *Some days Cindy Kuhlmann (left, with beer) and husband Rick (middle) just drive their boat upstream on the Missouri River and let the current carry them down until they feel like stopping, and sometimes they invite friends to go along on their boat with them. Photograph by Clay Lomneth*

some funding for the project, as did the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, which is where I am employed as an associate professor teaching photojournalism. I've been here about three and half years. Prior to teaching, I was in newspapers for about 25 years as a photographer, photography editor, and director of photography, mostly in Oregon and Minnesota.

Now several months later, our travel trailer is perched on a slab of cracked and broken concrete in the back alley of the local bar in Dorchester, NE. The owner has allowed us to park here and given us the use of his electricity for the trailer.

I'm sitting outside, working on my computer writing this missive, surrounded by 1920s aged, settled, and cracked brick buildings; weathered wood and peeling paint; old car parts; a stack of metal locker doors, maybe from a now non-existent school; a listing, rusted washing machine, not the "Maytag" type but the type with the rollers on top that people used by hand to run the wet clothes through to squeeze out the excess water.

Three photojournalism students – Kyle

Bruggeman, 25; Patrick Breen, 19; and Clay Lomneth, 21 – and I (okay, I'm 57) have been on the road for about 12 days as of June 15. We're documenting Nebraskans' life, small towns, and what effect – if any – this Great Recession is having on its citizens.

Our project is to spend two months on the road, living in and working out of the travel trailer, using this recession's window of opportunity to document life. We plan to cover as much of Nebraska as possible.

We are blogging (<http://unlphotojournalism.blogspot.com/>) as we go. We have created a Web site (<http://unl.edu/photojournalism>) to host the content, audio slideshows, and video. The plains center will host an exhibition of the project's photographs in early 2010, and we hope to produce a book.

Nebraska's landscape is vast and flat. Some people refer to it not as landscape but as skyscape. The sky dominates here. Out in rural, small town Nebraska, the Internet does not.

To get us connected, I purchased Verizon's latest gizmo, MiFi. It's a broadband router and we can create a wireless hotspot wherever we go, even in the trailer, as long as the gadget can find a signal, which it has so far. With this

device, each of our computers can be connected to the Internet at the same time. That way, each student can download, edit, caption, and upload his pictures to the Web. It eliminates me working as the central dispatcher and uploading all the images through my computer. It also eliminates having to find a wireless café, which doesn't exist in rural Nebraska.

Our home – the travel trailer now nicknamed "The Stryker" in honor of Roy – is 23 feet long. I chose it because at each end of the trailer is a fold-out double bed. Having that option gives us more floor space inside when we're working. I figured we'd need it given the duration of the trip and how close we'll be working with each other. So far, we still get along.

Student Bruggeman returned to college after working for several years as fulltime graphic designer. Lomneth, a veteran of two other documentary projects (Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and Kosovo), has shot for the college's newspaper, the *Daily Nebraskan*, and has interned at the *Reno (NV) Gazette-Journal*. Breen was Nebraska's high school journalist of the year when he graduated and is starting his sophomore year at UNL. All of



HOURS OF EIGHT BALL. *"There's not much to do in this town" Jordan Inderlied said about Dorchester, NE. "But we find ways of entertaining ourselves," including shooting pool in Joe's Bar to kill time before heading into Lincoln to dance at the Plamor Ballroom. Photograph by Kyle Bruggeman*

them are journalism majors with an emphasis in photojournalism.

Bruggeman had this to say about his learning: "Thus far the project has taught me to be more aware of my surroundings and how to approach people in the best manner to get them to open up. For me this project is a great opportunity to develop multiple skill sets from the interview to the photograph."

I deliberately chose only three students. In past trips to Kosovo and South Africa, I took seven and 10 students respectively. I did not want us tripping over each other. For the international trips, I was able to spread out the students and the work. That wasn't an option for this trip.

These three students are hardworking and dedicated to photojournalism. And, fortunately, they are all skill and talent, and no egos or attitudes. They treat each other like best friends, teammates, brothers (including the ribbing), and working professionals.

I told them I didn't expect them to work 24/7, given that we'd be on the road for two months. When I asked them about taking some time off, Lomneth responded, "Okay, we'll stop for maybe an hour."

We left Lincoln late on the warm, sunny afternoon on June 3 and headed for Omaha. I had little knowledge about how much camping experience each one had. I have tent-camped all my life and have had some RV experience. I chose an RV park in Omaha so that in the event of any disasters – the propane running out, leaks from the rain, flat tires, or any acts of God – I'd be in a position to fix it, replace it, or get someone else to help. The students were all "greenhorns" about setting up the trailer and making it camp-worthy. We can now pull in anywhere, anytime, and they will have the trailer unhitched and set up in working fashion in a matter of minutes.

I also knew that eating, sleeping, and personal grooming – normal routines in our respective homes – would need some adjusting for life in a trailer. I wanted the first couple of days camping to be a time to establish new routines. The photographing would come later and would be easier.

"Living in the RV is very interesting," Breen commented. "On one hand, being able to pick up and move on at the drop of a hat is great, and allows us the freedom to find an intriguing subject and stay with them as long

as we need. On the other hand, University dorms aren't even this cramped."

From Omaha, we traveled south through Nebraska City, Auburn, Falls City, and Rulo and went through many other villages in between those points.

BARADA, population 25, is a village about 15 miles north of Falls City. The "downtown" consists of one building:

There sits Mary Howard, 83, and she owns and runs Howard's Grocery, that one building. She had a stroke two years ago, lost the use of her left arm and leg. She still does all the work in running the store while in a wheelchair.

I walked in to Howard's grocery and Mary, with short gray hair and glasses, was seated in her wheelchair at an old kitchen table, the kind with chrome legs and a faded, worn tabletop from too many cups of coffee and conversation, the kind of table I remember from growing up in the 1950s and 60s. In the middle of the dimly lit store is one bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the kind of light you would find in a basement. Surrounded by old, painted,

simple wood plank shelves, stocked with bread, soup, candy and other household goods, I introduced myself and gave her a short summary of the project.

I asked her if she remembered me. She looked real hard at me, eyes scanning me like a barcode, trying to raise any recollection of our meeting before now. She replied slowly, “No, I don’t remember you.” I responded by saying that was good because we had never met. Mary let out a big, room-filling laugh; throwing her head so far back she was looking at the ceiling behind her.

She is self-described as being ornery and cantankerous.

We hit it off right there. She has a sense of humor and so do I.

Mary recalls the depression era as a time when people were worried about whether or not they had food to eat. She describes today’s recession as a time when people are worried if they’ll have enough money to survive. She’s less worried for herself but more worried for her grand kids and great grand kids; she has 14 all together.

NEBRASKA CITY, population 7,228, has a real main street, several blocks long:

Because of Nebraska’s new smoking ban, Randy Powell, 76, sat on a chair smoking a cigarette outside a bar. About today’s recession, “I’m more scared today because I don’t know now how it will turn out,” he said, his cheeks pulled in, as he sucked down another drag from his smoke. “The kids today have it too easy. They already have too much money,” he said with a slight hint of disgust in his voice. Powell believes most folks have gotten themselves into trouble by borrowing more than they should.

FALLS CITY, population 4,671, has a main street that doubles as the highway through town:

Gary Cummings is out of a job. Cummings, 62, was laid off several months ago from his job of 10 years working for Wasp, a manufacturer of luggage carts and dollies used at airports. He said he hopes economic times will improve and he’ll be able to return to his job. He currently calls his car home. Both he and his car have fallen on hard times. It’s a Chrysler.

He spends time sitting in his car reading the paper, mostly the classifieds, at

Stanton Lake Park in Falls City. He said he gets most of his meals at Runza (a local fast food restaurant). He hopes the economy will turn around and he’ll be called back to work at Wasp.

Lomneth summarized his experience: “This entire trip I’ve been trying to place my finger on something that didn’t make sense. As we meet all these people, I keep getting the sense that we’re not actually in Nebraska, the place I’ve called home for the last 15 years. The Nebraskans I’ve known before, the ones I work and go to school with, are the ones from the bigger cities, from Omaha or Lincoln. I’ve always equated Nebraskans with those loud, obnoxious guys at Husker games, the ones who paint their chest and argue every call and do the wave when a Kansas player is injured.

Those aren’t Nebraskans. We’re meeting the real Nebraskans. Nebraskans are the people who let you camp out in the back of their bar for three days because you need a place to park the trailer. Nebraskans are the people who invite you to their church because you’re from out of town and you want to meet more Nebraskans. Nebraskans are the people who offer to buy you a beer when you introduce yourself, despite having to refuse most times because you’re working. Nebraskans are the people who take time out of their day to talk to a working journalist, and trust me when I say talk, they will talk.”

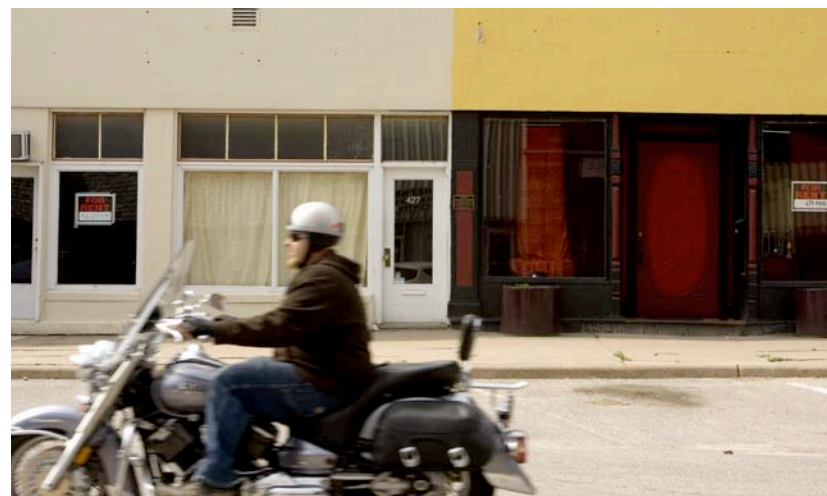
Life on the road is good. We’ve survived a week and a half, including four nights in a row of severe thundering, lightning, and heavy rains, and even a couple of tornado warnings. Small towns aren’t far apart and that makes the driving time short. We’ve always (knock on wood) been able to find spot for the trailer with electricity, although we do have an alternative plan in case we have to work off of the trailer’s battery. We’ve put together our eating, sleeping, and grooming routines so now we can concentrate on doing photography. At times the “camping dad” begins to come out in me: “Pick up your stuff,” “Don’t use so much water,” and “Who the hell made this mess!” But I just tell myself, “Shut-up.”

We have a month and a half of travel and photography ahead of us. We’re finding out how Nebraskans think and feel about the economy and we’re finding that most are okay and are real nice people. ■

See the student’s entire journey online at <http://unl.edu/photojournalism>



NEW USED STORE. “Everyone’s broke, but it doesn’t mean we don’t need things,” Mike Pagnano said, leaning back to try out a second-hand recliner at the newly-opened A to Z store. Photograph by Patrick Breen



DOWNTOWN. Vacant buildings line Plattsmouth’s Main Street. Photograph by Kyle Bruggeman



SMALL TOWN. Lomneth and Arlene Miller, 84, in Fargo, NE (population 3). Photograph by Bruce Thorson