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Review of "Forty Acres and a Fool: How to Live in the Country and Still Keep Your Sanity." By Roger Welsch

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Forty Acres and a Fool: How to Live in the Country and Still Keep Your Sanity. By Roger Welsch. St. Paul, MN: Voyageur Press, 2006. 316 pp. \$21.95.

My Nebraska: The Good, the Bad, and the Husker. By Roger Welsch. Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2006. 244 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95.

These recent books by longtime Nebraska author, folklorist, and humorist Roger Welsch examine life in the Great Plains from two quite different perspectives. *Forty Acres and a Fool*, ostensibly a how-to book on moving to the country, is written in a personal, conversational style from the start. In the introduction Welsch relates the story of his own physical (and mental) relocation to Dannebrog, a village of 352 in central Nebraska. Although the book offers practical advice on everything from moving buildings to fitting in with the social life of one's chosen rural community, it feels essentially like sitting down at the local coffee shop and listening to Welsch relate his personal experiences and his philosophical take on rural life. As such, it's a delight. The reader gains an insight into Welsch's character along with a greater understanding of how things

tend to work in rural America. As he states in the first chapter, "My experience may not be your experience, but then again it will help you avoid some pitfalls I walked right into. As I have insisted all along with my books about tractor restoration for this same publisher, this is not a manual on how to do things; it's an exemplar of how things have been done. And that's pretty much what all history is, after all."

Although *Forty Acres and a Fool* does fulfill its stated purpose of informing prospective country dwellers "what not to do" in their quests for a different life, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun for the rest of us if that's all it did. Instead, in vintage Welsch style, it's filled with jokes, stories, and local characters. Most of the stories and jokes are ones that Welsch tells on himself as the new greenhorn in town or, as he refers to himself more than once, "the tourist." In one of the most memorable vignettes, he describes working with "the legendary" Butch Williams, a locally renowned house mover from Hastings, Nebraska, to relocate a two-story, hundred-year-old farmhouse onto his land. They discover the house is twice as heavy as originally estimated because all the outside walls were filled in with soft bricks during construction to serve as a kind of old-style Danish insulation. No problem. Butch just moves it as scheduled with a lot of screaming gears and whining engines. But just before they're ready to slide the house onto its new foundation, Welsch makes another discovery: "I waited for what was sure to be untold fury when I ran up to Butch and broke the news: 'Uh, Butch, it's backwards. We, er, need to, uh, like, well, uh, turn the house around.' His response was pretty much the same as it had been when we found the house walls full of bricks. Okay, it's full of bricks. Get out of the way. Big deal. It's now backwards. Stand back and we'll just spin her around."

The reader meets other rural characters and character types in chapter 8, "The Social Life: Fitting In, Staying Out, Understanding and Surviving." Although we may disagree with where Welsch places some of these types in

his categories of “Good Guys” (includes both “cook” and the town drunk), “Could Go Either Way” (“preacher” and “loose lady”) and “Bad News in Town” (“thief” and “prig/missionary”), it’s clear he’s speaking from years of personal experience when he discusses the social dynamics of small communities.

All in all, this book should be both useful and enjoyable for anyone contemplating a move to the countryside, especially anyone with a preference for rural culture in the Great Plains. It’s a great read for those of us who just enjoy hearing Welsch tell a good story or two as well.

My Nebraska, on the other hand, is a return to what some think Welsch does best: a book of mini essays and anecdotes illustrating and explaining to the uninitiated or uninformed the real, but often-overlooked virtues of the Great Plains in general and Nebraska in particular. Appropriately, Welsch himself is featured on the cover, smiling and squinting into the sun, wearing his signature overalls and work shirt and leaning against his car with its license plate proclaiming him “CAPT NEB” (Captain Nebraska).

Welsch’s tongue-in-cheek drawings of “Nebraska Scenic Sites” are strewn throughout the book. Reminiscent of the recently popular “(anywhere) at night” postcards, these sparse line drawings showcase such awe-inspiring views as “Highway 92 near Arthur” as well as more well-known sites like Chimney Rock near Bridgeport, Nebraska. The “Universal Nebraska Weather Map” that begins the book is especially clever.

In this volume Welsch starts by debunking some of the ignorant or downright dishonest boosterism he’s seen over the years and articulating what he feels are the real, down-to-earth assets of both the Great Plains region and Nebraska. “So don’t expect a book of boosterism here,” says Welsch. “Yes I love Nebraska, but I love her for what she is, not what she should be, or would be, or what others might prefer.”

In talking about the virtues of the Great Plains, he reminds us that this region not only

offered European immigrants the promise of owning their own land after “proving up” on a homestead, but also presented them with a level, treeless expanse that seemed ready-made for the plow. As Welsch notes, it was amazing to a new settler from a forested, mountainous country to think of “[n]ever stopping once in his horizon-bound ripping of the ground for a root or a rock, marching ahead on dead-level ground, taking strides that would have been impossible in the Old Country. . . .”

Welsch finds plenty of positives to talk about in the rest of the book, concentrating first on the natural wonders of Nebraska, such as its seasons, awesome weather, rivers, and flora and fauna. Then he covers Nebraska culture, including the folklife of Native Americans and both older and newer immigrants, communities, history, arts, economics, agriculture, and scenic byways. These are where the real treasures of Nebraska, and other Great Plains states like it, lie, says Welsch.

The strength of both books lies primarily in Welsch’s considerable abilities to tell a story, turn a phrase, and apply the perspective of a folklorist/anthropologist/historian to the everyday stuff of rural life in the Plains. Mission accomplished, Captain!

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