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Review of *Back in Time: Echoes of a Vanished America in the Heart of France* By Kent Cowgill

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Back in Time: Echoes of a Vanished America in the Heart of France. By Kent Cowgill. Paris, France: Ibis Press, 2007. 186 pp. Illustrations. \$16.00 paper.

Who would have thought Nebraska and France share so many similarities? Kent Cowgill's title gives out an important clue. In the winter of 2005, Cowgill travels to France for a dual purpose: to discover the French people's "real" views towards America, after Bush's reelection, and also to find out if rural France still brings back memories from past days in America's heartland.

Cowgill's original plan was to revisit six areas: first Normandy at Arranches, then the southwest region, the Languedoc province, and finally Burgundy. He actually ends up exploring tinier communities than originally planned. His various encounters and discussions with the inhabitants reveal their struggles to keep their rural life alive against the "Walmarting" of their territory.

The author's peregrinations conflate very quickly into a deep and personal journey back to his Nebraska childhood at Silver Creek (population 450) where he was born on his parents' kitchen table. The French countryside conjures up memories of the now forgotten small town's life in the vast Plains of Nebraska. Nowadays, the small to medium-size farms have disappeared to be replaced by methamphetamine labs, "the only growth industry," and factory farming. The abandonment of rural areas is confirmed by Nebraska's last census, which shows that currently 52% of its population resides in three urban counties.

The author bemoans the loss of America's heart and soul, with the vanishing of its rural roots and way of life. He takes heart witnessing the struggles and the fragile survival of French vintners against globalization. He lauds also their valiant fight for the preservation of their country roots and culture. Cowgill writes convincingly and lovingly of a similar life, which once thrived in Nebraskan small rural towns, kept alive by railroad stops and small highways,

but which became almost extinct with the construction of the I-80 interstate. He advocates a revitalization of rural life with the help of organic farming and the creation of nature centers and bike trails.

Cowgill's various dealings with French country people remind him of the close-knit rural communities of his youth. He recalls exciting trips to the town grocery and drugstores. He writes of a prairie culture with its "gritty and hard working people" who were strong, silent, and independent. He recalls the simple pleasures of trout fishing in the Republican River, or road hunting pheasants with his family from their car.

This travel narrative successfully weaves two threads: the author's rediscovery of France's rural life and culture and, most importantly, a journey back to rural Nebraska in the 50s. This book could not have come out at a better time. It reflects the current mood, advocating a return to the basic and fundamental values, so well espoused in rural communities.

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