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*Dakotafire* is sparking a revival in rural communities of the Dakotas and beyond by encouraging conversations that help rural residents rethink what's happening and what's possible.

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ON THE COVER: In the off-season from farming and his wife's art shows, Josh Heitzman heads for snow. Nicole Heitzman captured this image of her husband last winter, north of Trailhead in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The Parkston, S.D., couple frequents snowmobile trails much of January through March each year.



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# The folks who are winter happy



by HEIDI MARTTILA-LOSURE

📍 Editor Heidi Marttila-Losure can be reached at [heidi@dakotafire.net](mailto:heidi@dakotafire.net). She considered posing for a photo in her long underwear but thought better of it.

There are people who don't mind Dakota winters. And then there are those who become snowbirds—either actually or mentally—at the first hint of flurries.

After years of observation, I think I've found the key difference between them: long underwear.

It's not that wearing long underwear magically changes a person's disposition. I think, instead, that wearing long underwear is a sign of an attitude that makes winter less of a burden.

First of all, wearers of long underwear (hereafter referred to by the fun acronym WOLUs) **have faced the reality of the situation.** Yes, it gets cold here. The wind blows. Pretending it doesn't, or shouldn't, makes you pretty well constantly grumpy and uncomfortable, and feeling cheated that you aren't settled somewhere else.

But this land of infinite variety provides many realities. Sometimes pleasant sweatshirt weather arrives mid-winter—the balm for the soul that is a January thaw. The key to happiness (weather-wise, at least) is being OK with what is and adapting to it.

Second, WOLUs **are not so worried about "keeping up appearances."** Yes, that skinny jeans look is "in" now. But shivering won't make it look any more attractive. WOLUs understand that a key part of attractiveness is confidence, and a key part of confidence is being comfortable—both in what you're wearing and in your own skin.

Authenticity matters more than polished appearances.

Finally, WOLUs **are not stymied by memories of the way things used to be.** Put off by memories of itchy woolen long johns? The technology has improved considerably over the years! Some long underwear are thin enough to work well under dress pants. And they aren't, by themselves, itchy. (Though you may get itchier when long underwear season hits because the air—and hence your skin—gets drier. Applying lotion regularly solves this problem.)

The WOLUs whom I know personally seem to be a little more prepared, a little more ready to face whatever life throws at them.

And if you've started thinking that there might be a lesson here beyond undergarments—well, I was thinking the same thing. Maybe the more that we community members understand the realities we face, embrace authenticity, and keep the past from dominating decisions of the present, the more luck we are going to have with whatever we try.

And we'll be more comfy all winter to boot. \*



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A photograph of a winter sunset in a forest. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm glow through the bare branches of trees. The ground is covered in snow, and there are tracks from a snowmobile or sled cutting through it. The overall scene is serene and quiet.

# The potential in DAKOTA WINTERS

by JOE TLUSTOS & HEIDI MARTTILA-LOSURE

Snowmobile tracks cut through the shadows cast by barren aspen and birch trunks in the winter sunset at Trailshead in the northern Black Hills of South Dakota last February.  
*Photo by Nicole Heitzman*

Tourism is big business in the Dakotas, and access to outdoor recreation is among the top reasons people come to visit—and, in many cases, to stay.

Visitors flock to state and national parks for activities such as fishing, hiking, climbing and biking during prime tourism season—generally considered Memorial Day to Labor Day—with considerable, yet smaller, numbers of tourists coming during the month-or-so “shoulder season” on either side of those times.

And, the rest of the year? Well, it tends to have a bad reputation. Think the window-scraping scene in the movie *Fargo*.

**But what if there is untapped potential in our Dakota winters? Could we change weather from being a deterrent to a plus when we’re recruiting top talent to move to the Dakotas?**

**If we considered the Dakota outdoors a year-round recreational wonderland, then how would that change how we tell the stories of rural Dakota communities, where we have easy access to the outdoors?**

### Outdoors: An asset in recruitment

“The outdoors really sells this area,” said Julie M. Johnson, who served as executive director of Absolutely Aberdeen, a workforce and economic growth initiative, for eight years.

She and her assistant regularly fielded questions from prospective new residents. “Almost every time, the final deal-making or deal-breaking question had to do with the availability of outdoor amenities,” she said.

Biking trails, fishing options and the Dakotas’ famous Chinese Ringneck season were among the more sought-after draws, but the Dakotas offer a plethora of winter-time draws, too, such as snowmobiling, snow skiing and boarding, and ice fishing.

The land of infinite variety “gives us a competitive advantage,” Johnson said, “but in an understated way. We use it, but I think we could use it better.”

### Is winter weather here really that bad?

That depends on what you consider “cold” and where in the Dakotas you are.

The National Weather Service defines winter as January through

degrees Fahrenheit). The coldest is Fargo (high 19 and low 1). Bismarck and Aberdeen are equal (high 24, low 4). Sioux Falls (high 27, low 7) is somewhere in the middle.

For the person wanting to enjoy winter in the outdoors, the temperatures on most days, combined with use of today’s modern winter clothing, are safe and comfortable.

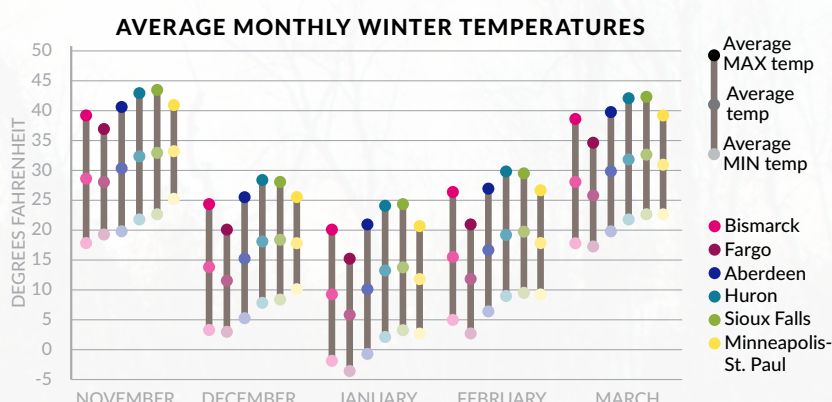
### Winter recreation doesn’t get much promotion

Wanda Goodman, deputy secretary of the South Dakota Department of Tourism, said South Dakota’s resources are focused on the peak season.

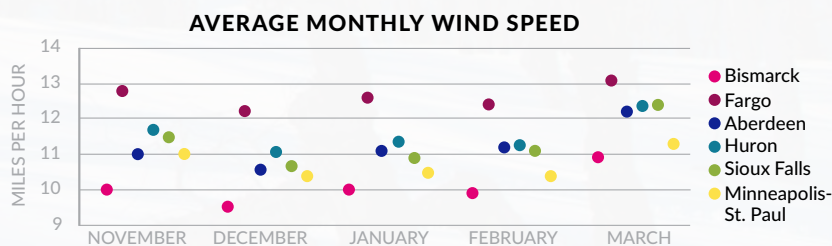
“The majority of our budget is spent from early May through late September,” Goodman said. “The first forays outside of peak season were activities in the ‘shoulder

*Continued on page 4*

March. According to their statistics, the “warmest” Dakota city on average is Rapid City (average high 37 degrees Fahrenheit and low 12



Yes, it does get cold in the Dakotas in the winter months. But with the exception of Fargo in January, the average high temperature in many communities in the eastern Dakotas is above 20 degrees Fahrenheit all winter. That means that during some part of most winter days, it’s plenty warm enough to get outside with proper winter attire. Minneapolis-St. Paul is included as a point of comparison because some of the Dakotas’ outmigration ends up in the Twin Cities area. As this chart shows, its winter weather isn’t noticeably better or worse, though it’s slightly less extreme (less difference between the average high and average low).



Wind is often part of the equation in the Dakotas, and there isn’t much difference in the windiness among the cities listed. (This chart spreads out the dots, but they all average between 9 and 14 mph.) If it’s windy, wearing a wind-resistant outer layer and staying out of the wind as much as possible can increase your comfort level considerably.

Graphic by Dakotafire Media ([dakotafire.net](http://dakotafire.net)) / Source: [Climate-zone.com](http://Climate-zone.com)

Continued from page 3

seasons' immediately adjacent, such as pheasant hunting and the popular Buffalo Roundup at Custer State Park. The winter spending we do now is 'co-op' matching funds for Deadwood and Sioux Falls."

Goodman says there are some co-op ad dollars available for rural community winter events. She also added that South Dakota doesn't break out promotional costs for winter activities nor revenue from specific winter activities except for snowmobiling and skiing.

North Dakota Tourism's promotional/advertising plan resembles an economic development model.

"The bulk of our visitors come from Minnesota and Wisconsin. We have several different co-op advertising opportunities, many targeted at more rural communities," according to Mike Jensen, outdoor promotion manager for North Dakota Tourism. "We do sports shows throughout the Upper Midwest," Jensen said. "One thing we do is provide opportunity for smaller communities and 'mom and pop' guide services to 'buy in' to our booth and come on the road with us."

Jensen says the co-op dollars also extend to sharing print advertising space in lifestyle magazines such as *Midwest Living* or in Twin Cities newspapers.

Jensen points to Harvey, N.D., a small town about an hour north of Bismarck, which looked at resources they had at hand and realized they were home to a large, healthy wildlife production area full of pheasants. They "bought in" with the tourism



Participants go all out in building outhouses for the big race at the Nemo 500. Contributed photo

department and traveled to a sports show in Minneapolis. A southern Minnesota newspaper picked up their story, which was then shared with other newspaper readers in that region. Harvey saw a significant bump in tourism the following fall.

### Winter events show promise

Both Goodman and Jensen said event marketing can help rural communities boost their winter tourism revenue.

Don't discount what you have to work with right in your own backyard, Goodman advised.

An example is in Nemo, South Dakota, a small community in the

northeastern Black Hills. The Nemo 500 is a race on snow between outhouses mounted on skis. The event has become a quirky destination that now raises over \$10,000 a year for charity.

"Another example is the 28 Below Fat Bike Race in Spearfish Canyon coming in March 2017, which challenges riders of the currently trendy 'fat tire' bicycles to ride up and down the canyon using established snowmobile trails," Goodman said.

She added that the S.D. Department of Tourism recognizes the need for more hands-on assistance from her department to individual rural communities, and she hinted plans for that are in the works.



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# 2016-17 winter may be a little snowier, colder than average

What kind of winter can we expect this year?

Apparently, that all depends on whether La Niña shows up as predicted.

La Niña is a weather pattern that happens due to cooler-than-average sea surface temperatures. For the Dakotas, this means our weather will tend to come from the northwest along a polar jet stream.

And the word "polar" should give you a clue as to what's expected if our weather is riding that jet stream: frigid temps and heavy snowfall.

La Niña was expected to show up

after an El Niño pattern ended this summer. That didn't happen then, and meteorologists were starting to think it might not happen at all.

But now sea surface temperatures are becoming cooler than average after all. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration now says there is a 70 percent chance that La Niña will arrive for the winter.

It's not likely to be a very strong La Niña, however, which could mean fewer extremes of cold or snow than a typical La Niña.

—Derek Keeling and Heidi Marttila-Losure

## A FEW WORDS OF WEATHER WISDOM

### Don't put your faith in the Old Farmer's Almanac.

Dennis Todey, director for the Midwest Hub of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, refutes the validity of predictions by references such as the 225-year-old Old Farmer's Almanac, which mostly rely on history and ambiguity to predict future weather events.

"Many almanacs claim great skill, but do not report how they make their outlooks," Todey noted. "They are written so generally in their descriptions that they can be interpreted as correct no matter what happens."

### Pattern prediction: Climate change means warmer winters overall.

Climate change will be a big factor in future winter weather.

"Our winters are warming," Todey said. "The frost-free season is getting longer. We still get storms and blizzards, but the overall trend is warmer winters."

Last winter was one of the warmest ever in South Dakota, in 121 years of record-keeping.

Warmer winters have benefits in terms of human comfort, and can also mean longer growing seasons for farmers. But more pests may survive in warmer winters, and more precipitation may delay planting in the spring.

## Wildlife recreation: Part of Dakota life and an economic booster

- In the United States, **about 38 percent of people participate in recreation that's associated with wildlife**, according to a 2012 survey. That figure is higher in South Dakota, where 54 percent of the population takes part in such recreation.
- Retail sales for hunting in South Dakota were estimated at **\$723 million** in 2011.
- Retail sales for fishing in South Dakota were estimated at **\$314 million** in 2011.
- About **384,000 South Dakotans watched wildlife** around their homes, according to a 2011 survey. An estimated 221,000 said they watched wildlife away from their home.
- In North Dakota, **116,000** residents participated in fishing and **219,000** participated in hunting in 2013, according to North Dakota Game and Fish license sales.
- Nonresident deer hunters who came to North Dakota **spent an average of \$226 daily**, according to a North Dakota State University Agribusiness and Applied Economics Report. Nonresident fishermen and women spent an average of \$127 per day.
- Total direct expenditures for hunting and fishing in North Dakota in 2013 were **\$642.9 million**.

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## Despite chill in the air, winter sun warms the soul

by ALISON DURHEIM

For generations, mothers have said the key to good health is “a bit of fresh air.” Recent medical research gives some support to that claim.

“Vitamin D plays a vital role in bone health, and researchers are now discovering that vitamin D may play a role in many other areas of health also,” according to the Vitamin D Council.

While vitamin D pills are widely available, they are intended as supplements, not replacements.

“The most natural way to get vitamin D is by exposing your bare skin to sunlight,” according to the Vitamin D Council. “You don’t need to tan or burn your skin. ... You only need to expose your skin for around half the time it takes for your skin to turn pink and begin to burn.”

Mary Wuebben, a physician’s assistant specializing in nutrition therapy in Sioux Falls, says the basic health benefits of being outside, such as the availability of Vitamin D and getting active, cause a rise in serotonin—most commonly known as the

“happy” hormone.

“If you are exercising it will help your serotonin levels, but you still won’t be getting the benefit of the sunlight,” she said.

An article published in the *Canadian Journal of Neurological Sciences* in July 2014 suggested that decreased vitamin D exposure due to being cooped up in the winter months leads to decreased motivation and discontented moods. Known as seasonal affective disorder, this can manifest as physical ailments.

“Depression leads to loss of motivation, body aching, fatigue and lack of energy,” Wuebben said. “Vitamin D affects the immune system, and that can lead to attaining other illnesses.”

Vitamin D supplements can help combat seasonal affective disorder with specific dosing determined by a medical provider.

Pill-form “vitamin D intake should be doubled when we fall back in the fall and cut in half again when we spring forward into the warmer weather,” to accommodate for spending less time in the Dakota sun during winter months, according to Wuebben. \*

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Snowmobiling and other winter activities have become a family tradition for the Juhnke family of Parkston, S.D.—parents Nicole and Jason, and children Cadence, 12, and Rory, 9. *Courtesy photo*



# Reveling in winter

These South Dakotans don't let winter keep them from enjoying the great outdoors

by KATHERINE CLAYTON

Though many dread the long, cold winter months in the Dakotas, the thrill of adventure lights a fire for others. "Winter comes and people tend to hibernate. That's sad. It really is. There (are) so many fun things you can do outside," winter-lover Nicole Juhnke of Parkston, S.D., said. "If you dress properly, and prepare for your day, you can have more fun in the winter than you can in the summer."

## For the love of cold and snowy places

Juhnke loves the winter season, and she is using it to create lasting memories with her two daughters.

"I'd like to think it's grounding my kids a little bit, as far as giving them something that isn't material," Juhnke said. "I want them to appreciate the people around them instead of the stuff around them."

Juhnke has always loved being outdoors, but her love for snowmobiling and camping grew along with her love for her husband, Jason. The couple fosters an appreciation for those activities, as well as ice skating, snow play and outdoor sports, in their

daughters, Cadence, 12, and Rory, 9.

"Now I would have a really hard time giving any of that stuff up, and I think my kids would too, actually," the Burke, S.D., native said. "I love when it snows at night and you're the first ones out on the trail, because everything is so untouched."

In order to keep her family safe and warm, Juhnke invests in quality snowmobile gear.

"It's expensive to buy snowmobile gear and heavy duty winter gear for everybody, but if you're cold, then you're miserable, and you're not having fun out there," she said.

Jason Juhnke, vice president of the Dakota Ditch Rippers snowmobile

club in Parkston, and family also offer snowmobile rides to their daughters' friends and other community members. In addition to spreading the love of snowmobiling, the family likes to bond with other avid snowmobilers, both East River and in the Black Hills.

And, as much as they love Dakota winters, the Juhnkes yearn for a place even colder. Juhnke discovered her passion for Alaska while searching for a college internship in 1998. Since her first visit, she has returned several times and plans to take her daughters next year. "It is unbelievably beautiful," she said. "My eyes hurt half way through the day, because there is so much to see."

# Fat tires help couple tred on tundra

Though she's been known to bike tens—or even hundreds—of miles in a single ride, Marci O'Connell is not setting out to make any two-wheeled distance records.

"I just try to stay young. I've been blessed with my health and I've just tried to keep it that way," the Letcher, S.D., woman said. "Bicycling really offers me that avenue."

O'Connell and husband, John, regularly ride 18-20 miles, but sometimes that's just their warmup. The runway for their crop-dusting business doubles as a casual biking course, and has been known to be the

place where the couple introduces friends to the sport.

"You can get places," said O'Connell, who transitioned from running to biking due to a knee injury more than 30 years ago. "You feel a sense of accomplishment when you do long distances."

Now, biking has become an integral part of her life.

**"It can be really cold riding in the wintertime, she said, "but it's beautiful in the evening, with the moon shining and if there is snow on the ground."**

The couple has specialty bikes for various conditions, including "fat tire" bikes specifically meant for riding in snow and other difficult terrain.

"In the fall and winter months ... we ride the gravel roads, overtop of the snow and through the roads that even aren't open normally" on those bikes, O'Connell said.

But on cold, winter nights, shorter rides are advisable.

"You have to be careful and layer for the weather," she said. "Protect yourself of course from frostbite."

O'Connell admits she may look silly riding bike in snow boots, ski gear, ski goggles and a ski helmet, but she also is warm.

John and Marci O'Connell of Letcher, S.D., don't let winter weather put a freeze on their favorite pastime. With a variety of bikes and other weather-appropriate gear, the couple continues to ride long distances, even in heavy snow.

*Courtesy photo*



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Annikki Marttila walks along the gravel road near her Frederick, S.D., home nearly every day. Here, she walks as her grandson skis in the ditch to the right. Photos by Heidi Marttila-Losure

## Walking in any weather

**“Weather doesn’t scare me.”**

Annikki Marttila, who has made the Frederick, S.D., area her home for the past 40 years, doesn’t allow the variable Dakota weather to prevent her from getting a two-mile walk in every day.

“Since I grew up (in Finland), my attitude toward winter is say ‘yes,’” said Marttila, who turns 80 in December. “Every day of the year, I go outside, but sometimes Dakota weather is so bad that it’s impossible” to walk a considerable distance.

As of Oct. 17, Marttila had logged 723 miles so far this year, which should make it her personal best—she’s just seven miles short of her 2015 total with 2.5 months to go in 2016.

“Winter is coming, and I am looking to keep up with my walking every day until snow comes,” she said.

Marttila also enjoys skiing. She logged 295 cross-country miles one winter, which can be difficult to do in the Dakotas, where good skiing snow is rare, due to frequent winds.

On the days when walking outdoors is too dangerous, Marttila achieves her

two-mile goal inside, using the FitBit she purchased in March to track her steps. Prior to her FitBit she would keep track of her miles for the year in a notebook.

Marttila’s “walking gear” includes dressing in layers, sometimes putting several sweatshirts under the wind-resistant anorak she made for herself years ago. She also wears a homemade wool hat and hand-knit mittens.

The final pieces of gear are her Nordic walking sticks. They are very popular in Finland; studies suggest they increase the calories burned while walking, and they provide some stability for those with balance concerns.

There is a Finnish saying that Marttila says is commonly accepted among the people of her native country: “Every weather is outdoor weather.”

“I am very much believing of that,” she said.

Marttila says walking has helped keep her fit.

“I think I am healthier than most people my age since I can walk without any problem for many miles.” \*



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# Winter was part of the rhythm of life on the prairie for tribes in the 1800s

by SARAH GACKLE

Winter weather was just as extreme on the prairie before European settlers arrived. Preparing for it was part of the daily existence of the prairie's original inhabitants.

In the 1800s, Native American tribes of the Midwest stayed fairly local year-round, unlike today's "snowbirds," who "fly away" to warmer southern climates for the winter months. They followed a strict calendar governed entirely by the

seasons. The Dakota and Ojibwe peoples began preparing in earnest for winter each September.

"They would harvest and dry corn, berries, meat, fish, whatever meat they had in the area, and store it underground," according to Professor Lorraine Grey Bear, Dakota language instructor at Cankdeska Cikana Community College in Ft. Totten, N.D.

That method of food preservation apparently was effective, Grey Bear said, recounting the story of a 1980s farmer who pulled a stump from a field and found a strange package in the roots. Lab analysis revealed it was a still-edible, 100-year-old buffalo pemmican, or dried buffalo meat mixed with fat.

After storing away food for the winter, tribes settled into their

"winter homes"—traditional tipis, but in areas of more natural protection from the elements, and nearby sources of water and firewood. The top of the tipi had a hole in the buckskin lined with a dew cloth to keep in moisture. Two long sticks attached to another piece of buckskin could be adjusted to let out more or less heat.

The men continued to hunt until January, which was termed "Wipehi Wi," which means 'a difficult month for survival,' according to Grey Bear. This was the month when the men returned and everyone hunkered down and took up beadwork and other artistic and useful chores around the fire in the

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Three tipis sit camouflaged by trees and snow at the Lakota winter camp held by the Cloud Horse Art Institute on Pine Ridge Reservation. These camps, led by Tilda Long Soldier St. Pierre and her husband, Mark, offered native youth a firsthand understanding of their ancestors' experience of winter life, including astronomy, biology, cooking, games and storytelling. The camp was most recently held in 2010. *Photo by Mark St. Pierre*

tipi. Gathering together indoors was a natural extension of the Native American community-based culture that prized collaboration and cohesion as a tribe.

The native people knew the winter season would eventually pass. Signs of spring brought new opportunity to plan ahead for the next winter, while rejoicing in the warmer moments outdoors. The men would collect the thick winter coats of animals coming out of hibernation, while young children picked off squirrels and birds as the excitement for warm weather began to build. \*

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**DEC. 10: Christmas at the Depot.** Child-friendly activities start at 11 a.m.: A live nativity includes local children and live animals until 2 p.m. A model train display will feature the dynamic Fenner duo from Milbank until 4 p.m. A Christmas story will be read every hour from 11 a.m.–2 p.m. The depot will be decked

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When it comes to having a view that allows us to contemplate our place in the universe, we are truly in an exceptional place.

— Heidi Marttila-Losure

This photo was shot by Parkston, S.D., photographer Nicole Heitzman, along the Missouri River, near Platte, S.D., in July. She writes, "Night time summer skies are exceptional at the Missouri River, where there is little light pollution. We enjoy camping at the River. The night skies are an added bonus when fishing in the dark. One simply cannot not ask for anything more beautiful!"



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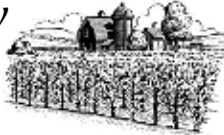
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The Missouri River and a county line run between Chamberlain and Oacoma in the heart of South Dakota, but they are really one community on both banks of the recreationally rich area.

# Chamberlain &

In the heart of South Dakota, nestled into the banks of the Missouri River, two small towns make up one community.

Chamberlain and Oacoma have fewer than 3,000 people combined as of the 2010 Census, but together they have advantages over similarly sized communities in the region. The Chamberlain-Oacoma Chamber of Commerce lists 131 businesses on its webpage, ranging from local mom-and-pop shops to fast food chains to tourism icons.

"You don't expect there to be so much activity" in a town that size, but the community's proximity to two reservations and smaller neighboring communities means 10,000 people regularly depend on local amenities, according to Chamber Director Mike Normile.

"We rely on ... that trade area," Chamberlain Mayor Chad Mutziger said. "A lot of those people come here for employment ... but even with that,

businesses are still desperately in need of help. We have the jobs, (but) the employees to fill them are hard to find. ... Chamberlain-Oacoma is different than a lot of towns this size. If you look at just the number of hotels and restaurants, to make those alone in this community go, that's a ton of employees."

Oacoma offers accommodations for more visitors than its own population. At last count, there were 330 hotel rooms, before factoring cabins and camping spots.

"Our little town of (390), in the peak of the summer, operates—water- (and) sewer-wise—as ... a town of 3,000," Oacoma Town Board President Mike Schreiber said. "Oacoma wouldn't be what it is without the service industry. We built a convention center and a community

center. Our streets are all concrete. You aren't going to find many towns our size ... that are able to do that kind of stuff."

The towns accomplish few projects independently. Situated just inside two separate counties—Chamberlain is in Brule County, and Oacoma is in Lyman—the towns share a school, police and fire departments, ambulance service, summer recreation programs, golf course, development corporation and chamber of commerce. But each utilizes separate electrical and telecommunications utilities and provides its own water.

Nearly 20 years ago, Oacoma simultaneously built a community center that doubles as its town hall, and a provided a business improvement district to build the Bridges Conference Center at Cedar Shore Resort.

"Our borrowing power wasn't able to accommodate ... both projects at the same time, (so) we needed to get creative in our funding," Schreiber said. "We support the (shared)



Ron Madison, general manager of Cedar Shore Resort in Oacoma, S.D., says Chamberlain-Oacoma is both a destination and a layover between the Black Hills and Twin Cities.

18 [dakotafire.net](http://dakotafire.net)



Oacoma Town Board President Mike Schreiber and Chamberlain Mayor Chad Mutziger say that their towns are one community.

# & Oacoma

story & photos by WENDY ROYSTON

## Missouri River towns are stronger together

chamber and the development corporation and the visitor's bureau, and Chamberlain was very willing to step up and take over that portion of that contribution for a period of time, while we were able to get those projects done ... and paid for."

A few years ago, Chamberlain built its own community center and a new pool at the same time.

"We scratched their backs, and they scratched ours—they got their projects done, and then we got our projects done, and we're moving forward," Mutziger said. **"It's kind of a smaller version of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Really, it's a good partnership. It works for both of us."**

### Complicated geography

The two towns do have different strengths.

"Once you cross the river into Oacoma ... the businesses on that side of the river, for the most part,

are hotels, restaurants and gas stations. ... (There are) probably four retail businesses," Normile said. "Chamberlain, on the other hand, is much more than that. There's a really busy retail business area, both down in the valley and up on the hill."

Though the interstate and river bring thousands of people to the community annually, the two complicate the geography of the towns a bit. The area has four interstate exits:

- Exit 265 leads immediately to a small area of businesses, including a hotel, gas station, Dairy Queen and two recent additions—Bomgaars and Shopko. Almost a mile down that road—King Street—is the heart of Chamberlain, at the intersection of Main and King streets, just two blocks from the river.
- Exit 264 takes visitors to the state rest stop, visitor center and the newly installed Dignity statue to the south of the interstate, and the local hospital, school, several churches and another residential

area to the north.

- Exit 263, or "Welcome West," goes to an area showcasing the South Dakota Hall of Fame and South Dakota Veterans Memorial, as well as a clinic, gas station, Pizza Hut, and Taco John's, then a residential area of Main Street that also leads to the Main-King intersection.
- Across the river, Exit 260 goes to Oacoma, and takes visitors to a hotels, campgrounds, gas stations, antique shops and the famed AI's Oasis.

And it's all just as confusing as it sounds, to anyone not familiar with the area.

"I've seen it happen where (visitors) will get off any of our four exits and think they are at the wrong place and head back out of town," Normile said. "We need to make sure that people realize we do have a vibrant business district downtown—they just have to keep going."

The local governments and

*Continued on page 20*

The Oacoma Community Center was built with support from the town of Chamberlain.

Main Street in Chamberlain is one of a handful of business districts within the Chamberlain-Oacoma community.

Right: Mike Normile, director of the Chamberlain-Oacoma Chamber of Commerce, said there's no shortage of jobs in the area he serves.

Continued from page 19

Chamber are working to improve signage, as well as getting creative in the ways in which they market the area.

In September, the Fall Festival included a children's scavenger hunt that required signatures from super heroes strategically placed in all four parts of the community. Each area also hosted its own set of activities, to get people to stay a while.

"There are ways to tie them together," Normile said. "You just have to get creative in how you do it."

### A traditional I-90 stop

In days gone by, Chamberlain-Oacoma was about the only stop between Mitchell and Rapid City, so travelers stopped out of necessity.

"Now, I think people have done it for so long that it's just kind of a ritual for them," said Craig Gill, general manager of Al's Oasis. "A lot of people meet up here just because they've done it for years."

According to Ron Madison, general manager of Cedar Shore Resort, Chamberlain-Oacoma is a destination for some visitors.

"The interstate does bring us a lot of business, but most of it is business that we go out and get—we go out and attract it for the meetings, for the weddings, for fishing, for hunting—it's a lot of those things," he said.

Cedar Shore Resort was built in 1995, after a study indicated that a centrally located convention center could accommodate most any events held annually in South Dakota. In the summer months, 140 people—



Julie Mertz, left, of Chamberlain, S.D., shares homemade pie (served here by Shannon Dolezal) at Al's Oasis in Oacoma every Saturday with friends, and often brings out-of-towners there to dine.

5 percent of the combined population of Chamberlain and Oacoma—work at Cedar Shore in some capacity.

"If you're coming from the east and from the west, it's the perfect middle spot," Madison said of what he considers a unique venue for the Dakotas. "You can come here and (do your business during the day) and then relax. ... Not a lot of places can do outside entertainment, outside beverage, outside food, and have the river" as the backdrop, with weekly entertainment by live bands.

In large part, the locals owe the amenities they enjoy to visitors. Madison said businesses are very accommodating to Cedar Shore guests, staying open into the later



The food and experience at Al's Oasis in Oacoma hasn't changed much in 97 years, despite being sold to Regency Hotel Management in 2013, according to General Manager Craig Gill, pictured here with his son, Liam.

evening hours.

"They can tell when there's a convention in town, because Main Street is filled with people shopping and eating," Madison said.

Many visitors stop to take part in a 97-year-old tradition that could be called the "five-cent investment." Since 1919, Al's Oasis has attracted coffee drinkers for a nickel a cup.

Albert and Dena Mueller opened their grocery store in 1919. In 1950, their son, Alfred, moved the store to its present location along Highway 16—which runs nearly parallel to I-90, linking Chamberlain and Oacoma by way of a two-laned bridge—and added a 10-stool lunch counter, where Veda Mueller fried

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hamburgers and baked apple pies to go along with that iconic five-cent coffee.

"Some of the food has been revamped a little bit, but the soul of it is still there," said Gill, who is employed by Regency Hotel Management, the Sioux Falls-based company that purchased both Al's Oasis and Cedar Shore Resort in 2013. "A lot of the food is still what they've been doing for years. ... The homemade pies are made every single day."

On a busy day, Al's Oasis, which also has a grocery store and gift shop, can see 5,000 visitors.

"It's kind of a badge of honor for (our cooks) when they're on a shift if they've (served) 700 in a day," Gill said. "In a typical day in July, we'll do 1,200 to 1,800 meals served. That's not counting all the people who stopped just to use the restroom and grab a drink or coffee."

### Stronger through diversity

Chamberlain and Oacoma's Census data shows Native American populations of just 14 percent and 6 percent, respectively, but those numbers don't reflect their proximity to the Crow Creek and Lower Brule Indian Reservations, nor the presence of St. Joseph's Indian School.

Folks in Chamberlain-Oacoma say their diversity makes them a stronger community.

"It provides us with a level of understanding that most communities don't have," Schreiber said.

"We need them as much as they need us," Mutziger agreed. "If they want jobs, we welcome them."

The Chamberlain School District—where the demographic is 40 percent Native American—works to mingle the two cultures by teaching and celebrating Native American culture, hosting an annual powwow, and engaging its Native American Club.

"The school does a very good job,"

Mutziger said. "When (students graduate) ... they have an appreciation for different cultures, where someone who maybe isn't exposed to it the way that our kids are maybe doesn't understand and appreciate other cultures and working with different cultures."

School Superintendent Debra Johnson visits each classroom at least three times each year, and each building daily.

"What I see is kids getting along, kids learning together (and) playing together out on the playground, having lunch, being involved together in activities," she said. "We look at it more as bringing everyone together and going to school and learning. That's what it's about."

Three years ago, however, there was controversy, when Native American students requested an honor song be played at graduation.

*Continued on page 22*

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The Lakota phrase "Aktá Lakota" translates to "honoring the people."

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Continued from page 21

After a series of discussions among the school board, the request was declined.

"The board wanted to keep the tradition that the graduation ceremony has always been," Johnson said. In "past years, we've kept our graduation program very traditional, in terms of being Chamberlain Public School system. That was, to me, the ultimate, deciding factor—keeping the tradition the same as it has always been."

The honor song is played at the annual powwow and a separate feathering ceremony before graduation.

"There are many places where we have incorporated the honor song," Johnson said. "We just don't have it at the actual graduation ceremony."

### School construction

Facing record enrollment in cramped, aging facilities, the Chamberlain School District is in the early phase of a construction project that eventually will put all classrooms and offices in one place, rather than spreading them over a few miles.

"We're really glad we've been able to move forward with the project" to address "some space needs," Johnson said of the \$4.2 million project, which will move the district's administrative offices from an older, two-story house across from the downtown elementary building to the high school facility on the hill at the edge of town. This project also includes the addition of gymnastics and wrestling rooms, a weight room, and space for career-technical coursework. The project was already being discussed



### Dignity arises

Earlier this fall, a step was taken toward honoring the impact of Native Americans in the area—and the state—when "Dignity: Of Earth and Sky," a 45-foot-tall stainless steel depiction of a Native American woman wrapped in a traditional star quilt took her place on the bluff overlooking the Missouri River at the local rest stop.

"My intent is for this to be an acknowledgement and celebration of the native peoples who still reside in this state and make up at least 10 percent—if not 12—of our population," said artist Dale Lamphere. "This is next to the Missouri River, centrally located, (and) in some ways it's timely with what's going in North Dakota, because she is in sense watching over the waters, and the Missouri River is of course a very important waterway to all of us, and we should think carefully about what we do with it."

when Johnson was hired seven years ago, but "it's really starting to take some shape now."

The school's multipurpose room "is one of the reasons we're doing our building project—because it is truly 'multipurpose.' It's is lunch, PE, assemblies, gymnastics—and the gymnasts have to take their equipment up and down every day. Now, they will have a space where they don't have to do that."

This year, 525 students from the 924-square-mile area that encompasses Chamberlain, Oacoma, Pukwana and Ft. Thompson convene at the district. The current elementary building was built on a hillside, so it is split into three separate floors that separate off of a single staircase from the center of the main floor of the building.

"It's really kind of interesting to be here in the morning, when everyone

comes off the playground—they go this way, that way—they just know where they are going, and the teachers don't have to really organize it. It's very efficient, but it's really different," Johnson said. "We get so much exercise around here."

Earlier this fall, because of the school's commitment to student and staff wellness, the school nurse traveled to Washington, D.C., to accept the "Let's Move" Health Schools Award. The award was based on a three-year process that involved development of a healthy schools committee that organized a family fun night on parent-teacher conference night, placed healthy food baskets at concessions stands, replaced "junk foods" with healthier vending options, revamped the lunch program in accordance with recently adopted national standards, screened staff for blood pressure issues, organized blood drives,

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and enhanced regular curriculum with wellness concepts, among other things.

Johnson said the schools' libraries are major focal points.

"Kids love to read, and we just want to keep instilling that in them (with) little incentive programs," she said. So, purposefully, the libraries have been made into gathering places. The teacher of the week is announced "right there in the library, which shows the importance of that space, so it's a great place to gather."

## Overcoming history

Diversity in the Chamberlain School District is enhanced by the incorporation of students from St. Joseph's Indian School into the high school population. The nearly 90-year-old boarding school is home to 200 Native American students in first through 12th grades, with the high school students bused to the public campus during the day.

"That partnership allows a lot more community involvement," as well as allows for a fuller educational experience for St. Joe's students, said Jona Ohm, public relations specialist for the school. "We only have about 50 high school students. ... We can't ... offer chemistry and physics and Spanish and German and wrestling and basketball all on our own ... so having such a great district so close by, with such opportunities and all those other students to be a part of everything that is happening in that



Chamberlain Public School Superintendent Deb Johnson (front, right) is pictured with students Will Mahanke, Fiona Bishop, Dodge Knippling and Jacob His Law at the school.

high school experience, has been a great partnership."

St. Joseph's Indian School was founded in 1927 by a group of Catholic priests who had originally been looking for funding sources for the work they were doing in other places—particularly Germany. St. Joseph's was one of many boarding schools that forced assimilation to the dominant culture, practices that today are recognized for the harm they caused to Native American students.

Today, students are brought to the school on their families' accord.

"The students that are here are here because their parents or guardians want them to be here," Ohm said. "That old boarding school stigma of the past just doesn't exist anymore at St. Joseph's Indian School. We're very blessed to work with families who want to be here, kids who want to be here."

Students are offered both Catholic and traditional Lakota spiritual opportunities for personal growth and development.

"In this place, two worlds come together. This isn't a traditional Catholic sanctuary, but it isn't a traditional Lakota place of ceremony. But it's not mutually exclusive, either," Ohm said, in reference to Our Lady of the Sioux Chapel on the school's campus.

The chapel shows the melding of two cultures: The stained glass windows highlight moments in history that united Catholics with the Lakota people, from the first two permanent Native American deacons in 1975 to the canonization of Kateri Tekawitha, the first Native American saint, in 2012. But the most compelling symbols of the two cultures converging are the

*Continued on page 24*



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*Continued from page 23*

icons in the church's sanctuary. Our Lady of the Sioux is a Lakota depiction of Mary, and the Indian Christ originally was a painting by Oscar Howe that now is a tapestry behind the altar. On each pew is engraved with a triangle, representative of the Christian trinity, but also of the tipi, which represents home in Lakota culture. Even the school's name is representative of the cultural compilation.

"We see ourselves as caregivers of these children, just like Joseph was a caregiver to Jesus," Ohm said. "We have found in surveys and conversations with families that it is important that their students have a spiritual education, as well as an academic education."

Though all of the children on campus attend Mass every Sunday and Holy Day, the school also integrates Lakota tradition into that experience.

"We try to make our powwow very educational, to introduce people to the culture and to the traditions ... in a very respectful and easy-to-understand way," Ohm said, adding that the

"Indian Christ," a tapestry from an original painting by Oscar Howe, hangs over the altar in Our Lady of the Sioux Chapel at St. Joseph's Indian School.



powwow is "a big, old family reunion" that is "better than Christmas."

The school provides accommodations for an average of 400-500 members of the students' families and others for the weekend.

"We work very hard to make sure that we have ways for families to stay involved," Ohm said, adding that guardianship of the children remains with their families. "The safety that we can provide, the three meals a day that we can provide, the basketball shoes and the extra-curricular activities, that's all fine and good, but we're never going to replace their families, and we don't want to."

Safety and security likely are factors in St. Joseph's graduation rate—90 percent among all students who attended the school and were of age to graduate between 2011 and 2014. That compares to 87 percent for all students in the state of South Dakota during that time period, and 50-60 percent of Native American students.

"We're getting something right ... putting those building blocks in place, so that wherever they go when they leave St. Joseph's ... they can go learn anywhere," Ohm said. But, because many of the students spend their summers in households that struggle to meet basic needs, coming back in the fall can be difficult. "There's a definite settling-in period, because they're just not used to having everything they need in some cases. I think ... just removing that stress" helps kids flourish academically and socially.

Two years ago, St. Joseph's received

Fourth-graders at St. Joseph's Indian School share some smiles.





Jona Ohm, public relations specialist, and Robyn Knecht, residential coordinator, are among about 270 adults who work with 200 students at St. Joseph's Indian School in Chamberlain, S.D. The residential work varies depending on what the students' needs are. "It's mostly the day-to-day life and managing those independent learning skills that, when you leave St. Joe's you can handle all of that," according to Knecht.

negative press for its pursuit of funding through a direct mail campaign that shared stories of students that CNN said were fictitious. Ohm said the network news outlet did not share the whole story with viewers.

"Our stories are about children who attend school here—these are real stories of real hardships that are happening in our state. We change their names, because it's ridiculous to think that you should tell the whole world that this 7-year-old has this (difficult home life), so we work to respectfully tell their story in a real way ... so that people understand why we need to be here, why we've been here for 90 years, and respect their privacy and their right to just be who they are."

Ohm said staff in her office receive stories of children on the campus from the school's counselors. The children are identified by only age and gender, and development staff add fictitious names and change some identifying details to use those stories in their fundraising campaigns.

"Direct mail is a science, and if we weren't able to send direct mail, we would have to close our doors," Ohm said. "Our average donation is about \$22, and it comes from moms and dads and grandmas all over the United States who think that we're doing the right thing."

Those small donations added up to \$67 million in 2015, providing \$50,000 worth of comprehensive services to each of St. Joe's students. It's an investment Ohm hopes one day will mean she and the rest of the campus's 270 employees won't have jobs.

"More studies are coming out all the time that are identifying the correlations between physical and mental health. ... To put all of those pieces in place, we can truly provide correct and outstanding service for every child we work with, so in 20 years, when these children have children, those children won't need to be at St. Joseph's Indian School. It's pretty exciting stuff, even at the cost of working ourselves out of a job," she said. "Our mission is truly 'caring for the whole child—mind, body and spirit.' They're physically taken care of, they know they are safe, and one of our best alumni quotes is, 'I know who God is, and I know no one is allowed to hurt me.' That's what they took away from our school after the years that they spent here, and that is changing the future of the world that we live in." \*

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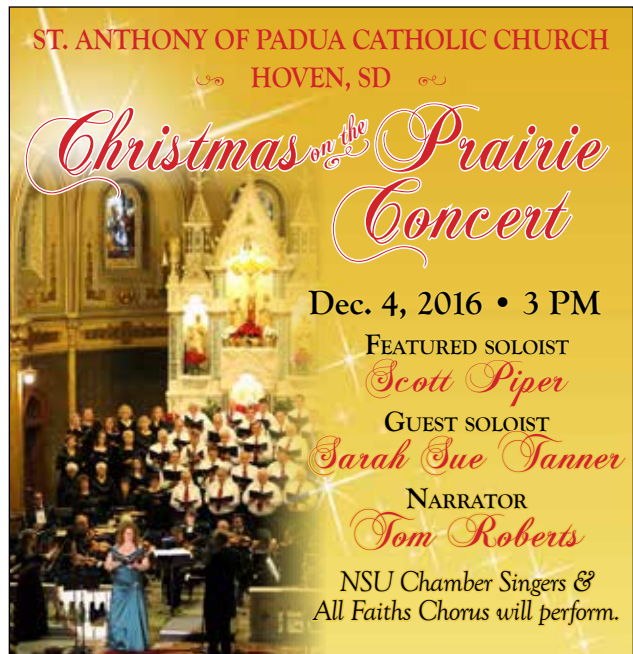
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# The view of the Dakotas from a bicycle

.....story and photos by CHRIS REGISTER

“But it’s all so ... flat.”

I heard this time and again from folks when they learned what I was planning: a 2,000-mile, six-week exploration of the American Midwest—by bicycle. Just about everyone seemed to think that I was set to experience the dulllest, most featureless bike tour ever undertaken.

They were right about one thing. In terms of rote topography, the Midwest—in this case, the eastern half of the Dakotas—is about as flat a place as any in America. But here’s a secret: Because cyclotouring involves loading down a bicycle with all sorts of heavy stuff and then pedaling it for hundreds of miles, flat is nirvana.

I suspect that most of the well-meaning folks who pooh-pooled the Dakota prairieland have seen it only through the window of a fast-moving car or airplane, and so it’s easy to understand why they don’t share my enthusiasm for flat. But as my unhurried roll through America’s bread-and-ethanol-basket progressed, I

came to realize that the folks back home had missed another, more important point: though vertically challenged, the East Dakotan landscape is incredibly diverse. It just takes a little time to unfold.

To begin with, the prairie is hardly static. Scattered in plain sight along the infinite hashtag of Dakota roads are clues hinting to a radically different past. Monolithic boulders sit stubbornly where they don’t seem to

belong, borne southward and then orphaned by the wax and wane of once omnipotent glaciers. During my tour I first saw one of these glacial erratics in a field near Letcher, S.D., and it made me wonder how many woolly mammoths had lain eyes on the same rock. A leisurely amble by bike makes it easy to pull over and run a gloved hand along these and other geological storybooks.

But the bicycle-paced traveler doesn’t have to span eons to extract more than just flat from the Dakota countryside. While a motorist might



Glacial Erratic / Day 31 / Letcher, South Dakota / Mile 1,400

view the prairie highway as just a necessary means between two ends, the cyclotourist finds the same stretch of asphalt to be rich with sensory delights. Instead of a roadside blur of monochrome green, the slow-rolling cyclist is flanked by a sea of knifed, ridged corn-stalk leaves constantly rustling with the wind. Sometimes cyclists even experience the supernatural. I was north of Yankton one morning when I learned that my bike seat had the power to morph “just another bunch of cows” into a herd of iconic American bison. Whether it was really magic or because I took the time to look twice, I’m not sure.

That indistinct bump felt by the rushed driver reveals itself to the moseying cyclist as a turtle—a turtle in a pickle. **Since no one expects someone traveling by bike to arrive on time anyway, the cyclist can take a moment to pick up the animal, to marvel at its heft and the sharp edges of its shell, and then to turn it over and be stunned at the bold, beautiful mosaic of colors splashed across its belly, usually hidden from the world.** When this happened to me near Huron, I wondered whether the turtle had saved this quaint surprise as a special reward for those kindred spirits who likewise move deliberately, such that they can assist an otherwise doomed road crossing,



Western Painted Turtle / Day 32 / Huron, SD / Mile 1,455

## Conversations along the road

I’m told that the chance to see rocks and plants and wildlife won’t convince everyone to slow down for a pedal through the cornbelt. What else adds relief to the Dakota flatlands?

Dakotans.

Above all, a leisurely bike tour is about exploring a region’s most varied and unpredictable of features: its human landscape. A touring bike is a conversation piece on wheels. Everywhere I go, locals want to hear about where I’ve been, what I’ve seen, and what I’ve learned about America. They ask me if I need anything. I reply:

“A few minutes of your time?”

These were some of the moments that helped me truly appreciate the diversity and essence of the Dakotan terrain:

- Rolling along the solid bedrock of the Dakotas’ manufacturing economy during my conversation with Delbert Schrum at the metal fabrication shop he runs in Eureka;

*Continued on page 28*



Delbert Schrum / Eureka, South Dakota



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*Continued from page 27*

- Finding the furrows of the region in the rumped brow of a seeing-eye dog as she kept a relaxed but keen eye on her master, Dawn Brush, while Dawn and I chatted at Aberdeen's Red Rooster Coffee House;
- Feeling the warmth of a prairie sunrise melting away the threat of frost as new Dakotan and Yankton archery coach Josahan Jaime-Santacruz described to me how she and her family are living—building—the American Dream.

During my thousands of miles cycling across America, I've discovered that the best way to peek inside the heart a region is to get on a bike and take it slow. The landscape will reveal its true contours along the way. \*

*Chris Register has interviewed over 150 Americans during 9,300 miles of pedaling through the U.S. for his Conversations with US project—and he's not finished yet. To explore the logistics of cyclotouring, see video from Chris' tours, and hear the voices of these Dakotans and others who have shared their thoughts for project, visit [www.conversationswithus.com](http://www.conversationswithus.com). For the best photos and updates, you can also find the project on Facebook and Instagram.*



Dawn Brush / Aberdeen, South Dakota



Josahan Jaime-Santacruz / Yankton, South Dakota

*Author Chris Register, center, with some of the friends he made along the journey.*





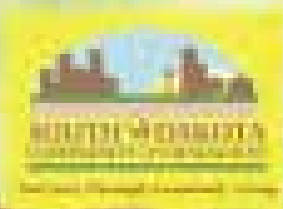
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