

11-4-93

4SHORT.DOC

SHORTGRASS

October was a deliberate choice of months to go to Minnesota. In the fall, school kids keep the parents home and out of the hamburger stops and the travel lodges; nature cooperates by forcing the black flies and mosquitos to retreat into rotten logs or wherever those pests go after cold weather.

However, once I returned to regular newspaper service at Minneapolis, I read that the state entomologist reported the three frosts toward International Falls and up the north shores of Lake Superior lacked the chill to kill the mosquitoes.

His findings startled me. Only the high winds off Lake Superior had spared me from certain anemia and a low blood count that'd have made the metabolism of a tree sloth appear to be wound to the pitch of a ballerina.

Scandinavians tender enough for a mosquito to bite, like the Danes in Iceland or those rosy-faced Swedes scattered about Minnesota, host thick enough blood to protect a mosquito from 20-degree Fahrenheit temperatures.

In Minneapolis by the time I checked in, the winds around the street corners blasted away so strong and fierce that a mosquito could have caught a tail wind and been in the Florida Keys by the next morning.

The Twin Cities area of a million or so people must use a lot of white collar starch and black tie racks. Live theater and classy concerts and art collections compete, and do quite well, against a full schedule of sporting events. Evenings offered as many as three plays per night and chamber music and jazz programs rounded weekends of symphony and dance.

My hotel was down by the abandoned flour mills on the west bank of the Mississippi River. Completely unrelated to chain hotels, the place glowed in a soft, luxurious ambiance of prism glass chandeliers and curlicue wine and tan patterned carpets. By far the most popular place in town for weddings, so many receptions take place on the mezzanine that bellmen's shoes lose their traction from walking on the streams of rice kernels.

Free hotel van service took me around town. One morning standing out front, a guest also waiting for transportation started asking rapid-fire questions: "You having trouble finding a cab, buddy?" And "Where you from, mister, someplace like Texas or down at Georgia?"

Without pause, he said he was in chemistry in South Dakota. Claimed he knew a lot of ranchers from Texas and New Mexico, but didn't stop to explain how he knew I was a herder or what he meant by being in chemistry.

Stunned, I replied that the newspaper that morning said the Department of Agriculture no longer planned on counting farmers and ranchers as we'd dropped to 1.9 percent of the population.

"Under two percent?" the chemist said. "By gawd, that sounds just like the right amount to me."

On a trip across the river to the state capitol at St. Paul, the cabby's radio reported a worthy had been caught charging \$90,000 worth of long distance calls to the state. All the other legislators were being granted amnesty to report any telephone bills under 200 bucks by the week's end. One Congressman grumbled he was even going to have to pay back the four or five calls he made to his mother.

While walking around the Capitol building, I passed by several pay phones, but they were all too busy or in too dark a place to read the penalty for using slugs or Canadian coins. Until auditors and grand jurors became so picky about the state's long distance telephone bills, I figured Congress had passed some mighty strict laws to punish pay phone swindlers...

##