

NORTH DAKOTA

Hello, I'm Lee Brudvig, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, and I want to tell you about my home state, North Dakota.

Not a lot of people hail from North Dakota. Although relatively large in size, North Dakota is the 3rd least populous state, with less than 700,000 inhabitants.

North Dakota is located in the northern Midwest of the United States. The city of Rugby marks the geographical center of the North American continent. North Dakota is bordered by Minnesota, Montana, South Dakota, and Canada. The capital is Bismarck but the largest city is Fargo, home to about one sixth of the state's population.

My hometown is Aneta, which is known for production of wheat and turkeys. My family still has a large farm in the area producing mainly Durham wheat, used to make the best pasta in the world by many countries including Italy!

North Dakota has exceptionally cold winters, ranking second only behind Alaska. However ND isn't cold year round. In summer, temperatures regularly exceed 90 degrees. The first Europeans to explore North Dakota were French Canadians in 1738. They traded goods with the Mandan Native American tribes. Most of North Dakota was part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. On March 2, 1861, President James Buchanan signed a bill creating the Dakota Territory, which originally included the area covered today by both Dakotas as well as parts of Montana and Wyoming. In 1889, both North and South Dakota became states simultaneously. Alphabetically speaking, North Dakota is the 39th state and South Dakota the 40th.

Being so far inland, North Dakota wasn't truly settled until the late 19th century when railroads were built. After that, homesteaders quickly began farming the land, often living in sod houses. Nearly all of the settlers were of German and Scandinavian heritage.

In fact, one of those settlers was my great Grandfather on my mother's side, Lars Hillesland. He left in Norway in 1880 with three brothers to homestead in North Dakota. Let me show you a picture of his first home (picture of sod house). He and his brothers prospered and multiplied. Here is a picture of him with my grandmother and their nine children. My grandmother is on the far right. And here is a picture of the four brothers and their offspring in 1934!

Agriculture remains the leading industry in North Dakota. Ninety percent of North Dakota is devoted to crops. It's the largest producer of grains such as barley and durum wheat in the US. Energy is another of North Dakota's major industries. North Dakota is the 4th leading producer of crude oil in the US. Its flat, unbroken landscape makes it ideal for wind energy.

My state is thriving. Since 2001, North Dakotans' personal income has grown nearly 25 percent. At 3%, North Dakota's unemployment rate is the lowest in nation. This economic boom can be attributed to the oil rush in 2008.

If you want to commune with nature, this large and less populated state is the place to visit. Every year tourists come to enjoy the untouched beauty the state has to offer. Popular tourist activities include hunting, fishing and hiking.

At the Canadian border, you'll find the International Peace Garden, where more than 150,000 flowers are planted every year. This garden, established in 1932, earned North Dakota its nickname: "the peace garden state."

Theodore Roosevelt National Park in the state's southwest corner is an ideal destination for the outdoors lover. Aside from miles of hiking and riding trails, the park is one of the few places in the US where horses and bison roam free. The park borders the badlands and features some of the most unique landscape in the region.

North Dakota has its own culture too. Check out the United Tribes International Powwow, one of the largest in the nation. The powwow features Native American parades, singing, dancing, music and regalia.

In fact, the Native American culture is so important in this area, that even the name, "Dakota" comes from the Sioux Indian word for "friend."

My favorite thing about North Dakota is the wide open spaces. The state is mostly flat with huge farms. In the summer the wind on the wheat looks like waves on a golden ocean. In the winter the wind blows snow against the farmhouses and sometimes covers them. As a child, I remember being able to walk from the snowbanks on to the rooftop of the family farm.