

South Dakota or Bust!!

Three days and 900 miles later, a charter bus full of county extension agents from across the country pulled back in to our starting point of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. We took advantage of an opportunity to mix a little sightseeing in with a lot of agriculture before our National Association of County Agricultural Agents Annual Meeting/Professional Improvement Conference held in Sioux Falls, South Dakota in mid July.

When you put a bunch of county agents together, we constantly look at the crops growing and the land on which they're grown and compare them to our home area. Let's just say that South Dakota and south Georgia are about as different as they are far apart. Corn, soybeans, and hay fields stretched as far as we could see and sometimes that was 50 miles or more. They even cut and baled the right of ways and the medians of the interstate.



Then all of the sudden we reached the Missouri River near Chamberlain, which pretty much cuts South Dakota in half. Instead of huge tracts of corn and soybeans, we saw huge tracts of grasslands and sweet clover. South Dakota has approximately 3.85 million head of beef cattle and are ranked 5th in the United States and are the nation's leading producer of bison. By the way I highly recommend bison burgers. South Dakota is also the United States' 2nd largest producer of honey, which comes from the more than 270,000 bee colonies throughout the state.



Imagine you're a settler heading west in search of a better life than what you had back east, then all of the sudden you encounter what is now known as the Badlands. Now it is also the name for a geological formation that occurs when soft sedimentary rock is extensively eroded in a dry climate. This type of soil is a great environment for finding fossil traces of roots, burrows, and even animal bones; they have even found marine fossils there.





It was not a very hospitable place, unless you're a prairie dog. These holes were everywhere in the western half of South Dakota. This prairie dog was just hanging out at the front entrance to the Badlands National Park and was not fazed at all by the tourists.

The next day was jam packed with tourist activities that we started counting the number of black socks with Bermuda shorts we saw.

We started out in Rapid City at the Chapel in the Hills, an exact replica of the Borgund stavkirke church of Laerdal, Norway that was built in 1150.



Then we embarked on the winding road into the Black Hills to reach Mount Rushmore. As we drew closer, the magnificence of this sculpture of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln became even more awe inspiring. We were able to get extremely close by walking on the Presidential Trail which took us from one side of the carving to the other. It is amazing to think that it took 400 men 14 years to create this monument.



Our last stop of the day was at the Crazy Horse Memorial that is still being carved after initial blasting in 1947.



After our return to Sioux Falls, which is on the opposite side of the state, for our conference, one cool feature in which we participate is a professional tour. Often I try to go somewhere or see something I normally do not encounter in south Georgia. This year was no exception; because of my interest in showing lambs I decided to take the Sheep Tour. Our first stop was at Begalka Club Lambs, one of the premier breeders of show lambs in this country. They only lamb about 250 mature ewes (female sheep) but embrace both artificial insemination and embryo transfer technology as a way to improve the genetics and success of their lambs. I only wished I had shown lambs that good when I was showing.



Our most impressive stop was at the Van Well Sheep Farm, a family farm that runs about 5,000 commercial white-faced ewes and a feedlot finishing system. In the most recent marketing year Van Well marketed over 143,000 lambs for restaurants and meat cases. The sheep specialist with us noted that he saw a Van Well Family Farms Rack of Lamb in a butcher store in New York City priced at \$39 a pound. This system involves multiple barns, pens, and laborers and a tremendous amount of feed.



While it was a long 8 days before I got back to south Georgia, it was an amazing trip! I got to see history, different geographical features, and lots of agriculture. I made even more friends from around the country and have wonderful networking opportunities in the future. Who knows my next trip might be to Thibodaux, Louisiana or even upstate New York.