

**Testimony of Tracy Potter, President, Northern Plains Heritage Foundation on S. 2098
Subcommittee on National Parks of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
November 8, 2007**

Mister Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 2098, an act to create a new National Heritage Area along the last free-flowing stretch of the Missouri River in central North Dakota. After working on this project for the better part of three years, I am convinced that this region is worthy of National Heritage Area designation. I hope now to convince you, as well.

My name is Tracy Potter. I am a historian and have been a heritage tourism professional for the last twenty years. I've also recently become a North Dakota State Senator, but please don't hold that against me. My real job is as Executive Director of the Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation. Our mission is to preserve, develop and promote the historic properties within Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, including the 7th Cavalry's posting, the last home of George Armstrong Custer and On-a-Slant Mandan Indian Village. Prior to coming to the Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation in 1993, I served six years at North Dakota Tourism in various capacities, including directing the state office through a legislative session for Governor Ed Schafer, recently nominated for Secretary of Agriculture.

I come before you today as President of the volunteer Board of Directors of the Northern Plains Heritage Foundation.

National Heritage Area defined:

A National Heritage Area is a place designated by Congress where natural, cultural, historic, and scenic resources combine to form a cohesive, nationally distinctive landscape arising from patterns of human activity shaped by geography.

The proposed Northern Plains National Heritage Area certainly fits that definition. The natural scenic beauty of the Missouri River Valley is legendary. There are places along the river that take your breath away. The landscape apart from Bismarck-Mandan often appears unchanged since the glacier receded 15,000 years ago - the glacier that turned the Missouri from emptying into Hudson Bay to its current course to St. Louis and the Gulf of Mexico.

The cultural and historic resources are even more stunning. Some of the most famous people in the world, of the 19th Century, made history within the proposed Heritage Area. Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark spent more time there than any other place on their famous mission. Lewis and Clark met and hired Sacagawea and her husband Toussaint Charboneau in the area. George Armstrong Custer and the 7th Cavalry were stationed at Fort Abraham Lincoln, a key historic site within the proposed Heritage Area. The reason Custer was there was to chase the Lakota leader Sitting Bull, another legendary figure who rode and hunted and fought along the

Missouri River all through the region.

The cultural resources of the proposed area stretch back more than ten thousand years, to the people who first mined the nearby Knife River Flint quarries to make spear points for hunting mammoths. The first focus of the proposed Heritage Area will be on the Native peoples of only the last thousand years, however. These are the earthlodge people, the Mandan and Hidatsa, who pioneered agriculture on the Northern Plains. They settled the area, grew crops and hunted, built cities and developed trade relations stretching to both coasts.

At first the villages of the Mandan and Hidatsa were temporary, lasting only about 50 years before the wood resources and game played out. Later, in the Heart River Phase, the villages became permanent cities, lasting hundred of years with populations of two and three thousand. They had achieved a balance with nature and with other nations and those cities might still be here today if not for the devastating smallpox epidemics of 1781 and 1837.

The ancient cities and the even earlier villages are still there, of course. They are just empty. There are approximately 100 village sites within the proposed Heritage Area. This is where the plan to create a Northern Plains National Heritage Area dovetails with your committee's responsibility for preservation of prehistoric ruins. Many of the sites have been impacted by cultivation or urban growth. Of the others, a handful are under the protection of the State Historical Society of North Dakota as State Historic Sites. One is a National Landmark, another is protected in a State Park and three others are part of the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site. (Insert Slant beauty shot) But there are still others, as yet unprotected. Working not in a regulatory way, but strictly with incentives and encouragement, the Northern Plains Heritage Foundation could help preserve this valuable piece of our heritage.

This is, to me, the most attractive element of the National Heritage Areas, that they are not in any way regulatory, but that they pursue preservation and honor our national heritage strictly with incentives and encouragement. They are all carrot and no stick.

The Northern Plains Heritage Area is significant as a transitional region, both on the north-south axis and east-west. This was the northern frontier of prehistoric agriculture, where talented Mandan and Hidatsa Indian agronomists developed strains of corn, beans and squash adapted to the short growing seasons of the Northern Plains. Later farmers in the area learned from the Mandan and Hidatsa experience, and even adopted their predecessors varieties for their own farms. The Oscar Will Seed Company distributed Mandan and Hidatsa corn, for instance, throughout the Great Plains and other northern crop lands.

John Steinbeck well described the east-west transition.

“Someone must have told me about the Missouri River at Bismarck, North Dakota, or I must have read about it. In either case, I hadn't paid attention. I came on it in amazement. This is where the map should fold. Here is the boundary between east and west. On the Bismarck side it is eastern

landscape, eastern grass, with the look and smell of eastern America. Across the Missouri on the Mandan side, it is pure west, with brown grass and water scorings and small outcrops. The two sides of the river might well be a thousand miles apart.”

John Steinbeck
Travels with Charley

What Steinbeck noticed in 1962 was recognized by the Mandan Indians a thousand years previous. Mandan Indian traditions recount the creation of the world by First Creator and Lone Man. The Creator said to Lone Man, “Together we will make the world,” and he assigned to Lone Man the region east of the Missouri, taking for himself the creation of the west river country. When Lone Man was done with his task he reported back and asked First Creator what he thought of his handiwork. “Too flat,” was the response. Not enough trees, either. Man wouldn’t be able to live by the hunt in such a territory because game would see him coming at a distance. It was dangerous, too, because enemies would see each other and consequently be unable to avoid coming to blows. The west river country was better, the Creator thought, with woody draws, bluffs and buttes.

Man did, however, come to thrive at the junction of these two eco-systems, figuring out how to utilize both sides of the Missouri River. The villages of the Mandan people became centers of trade and population, both fueled by agricultural surplus. The first villages were started nearly a thousand years ago. By the 1700s, tribes from all over the Northern Plains, from the lakes and woods of Ontario across the prairie to Saskatchewan and down to the Black Hills and even from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains people were coming to the Mandan villages of the Heart River region. French-Canadian traders first arrived in the region in 1738, when Pierre Gaultier, Sieur de la Verendrye visited Fort La Butte, a yet unidentified earthlodge village. Contact with fur trade posts on the Assiniboine River was constant after that. The Heart River villages carried on a brisk trade as the frontier of the trade gun from Canada met the frontier of the horse, coming from the Southwest.

When Lewis and Clark entered the area in 1804 as the first representatives of the United States to meet the Mandan and Hidatsa, they found abandoned villages along the Missouri from the Heart River almost to the Knife River. The smallpox epidemic of 1781 had emptied those ancient cities. At the Knife River, clustered for mutual defense against nomadic enemies, the Mandan and Hidatsa lived in five villages each one of which was equivalent to the population of St. Louis, or Washington, D.C., at the time. Those five villages, now partly preserved as the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, were central to a vibrant international trade network that included the Crow and Assiniboine, the French and Metis of the Northwest Company and the English of the Hudson Bay Company.

The Mandan exhibited such hospitality to the men from the young United States (the Mandan chief Sheheke famously said to Captain Clark, “If we eat, you shall eat.”) that the explorers named their winter quarters Fort Mandan. Upon their return from the Pacific, the Captains were able to convince Sheheke to accompany them to Washington, where he met President Thomas Jefferson, December 30, 1806, cementing an enduring friendship between the two nations.

After Lewis and Clark, other visitors to the five villages included George Catlin, John J. Audubon, Prince Maximilian of Wied, and Karl Bodmer. The art and journals of those visitors chronicle the rich and unique culture of the earthlodge peoples.

History didn't end, of course, when the smallpox epidemic of 1837 devastated the Knife River villages. Decades after the Hidatsa and few remaining Mandan emigrated upriver, the United States military moved into the region, establishing a string of forts, including Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1872. The Northern Pacific Railroad and settlement arrived simultaneously. Though they were gone, the work of the pioneering agriculturalists, the Mandan and Hidatsa, influenced the development of production agriculture in the area, and eventually in a much wider distribution.

Significant attractions of the Northern Plains Heritage Area

The area is anchored by two federally-recognized properties: Huff Indian Village State Historic Site on the south, which is a National Landmark; and, the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site on the north, which is a unit of the National Park Service. Between those lie the major attractions of Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, the North Dakota Heritage Center, Fort Mandan and the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center. There are six other State Historic Sites and another State Park within the proposed area.

Fort Abraham Lincoln includes the reconstructed Custer House and four other 7th Cavalry buildings, and six reconstructed earthlodges in the Mandan Indian Village of On-a-Slant, occupied from 1575 to 1781. A CCC-era fieldstone building serves as the park's Visitor Center with the finest museum displays on the Mandan Indians to be found anywhere. Fort Lincoln, operated jointly by the North Dakota Department of Parks and Recreation and the non-profit Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation, is a major heritage tourism attraction for Bismarck-Mandan and the state as a whole. More than 70% of visitors to Fort Lincoln come from other states and annually between 3% and 5% are from foreign countries.

The reconstructed Fort Mandan and the nearby Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center at Washburn are similarly draws for heritage tourists from all over the United States and the rest of the globe. The Interpretive Center holds a complete collection of Karl Bodmer aquatint prints, one of four such sets in the world. It also contains a state-of-the-art exhibit on The First Farmers, a very direct tie to the main theme of the proposed Heritage Area.

The North Dakota Heritage Center on the state Capitol Grounds is the state's museum. From prehistoric to modern times, the Heritage Center has a heavy focus on agriculture and agricultural issues appropriate to one of the most rural states in the Union.

Those redeveloped and reconstructed sites are well protected, professionally interpreted and recognized by both state government and the state's residents as important to both the state's heritage preservation and its economic benefit. Heritage tourism is widely regarded as one of the state's most important and fastest growing economic engines.

Cashing in on investment

Over the last two decades, a combination of private donations and state and federal appropriations has resulted in substantial investment in building a critical mass of heritage tourism attractions within the proposed Heritage Area.

Designation as a National Heritage Area will produce tremendous return on those investments. The stamp of credibility, the marketing resources, and particularly, the linking of the various sites under one comprehensive and comprehensible theme will have an important economic effect on each of the sites. It will stimulate further private sector investment in lodges and bed and breakfasts and tour operations. Designation is the last critical component which will bring the investments together and make them pay off for the residents of the proposed area.

The various non-profit organizations, supported by private sector donations, and the state and federal agency workers in the area already work together very cooperatively. Designation of the area will deepen that cooperation, providing a vehicle and a common goal for joint actions.

The great thing about heritage tourism is that it gives us the economic incentive to do the things we want to do anyway. We want to preserve the past and educate our children about their heritage. But, when we put the desire for investment in preservation and education up against human needs for food and water and housing, investment in museums and historic sites, and preservation of prehistoric ruins can seem trivial. But when those investments return economic prosperity – when the investments in heritage preservation create tax-paying jobs and businesses everyone benefits.

Who will benefit?

As I just mentioned, really everyone benefits when we invest in heritage tourism growth, but specifically in this case the first beneficiaries will be the existing state and private organizations engaged in heritage tourism – we can expect increased visitation to our sites to result simply from gaining the credibility of designation. Adding the area to the National Park Service lists and website will encourage visitation. Billboards will announce to travelers on I-94 and US 83 that they have entered a National Heritage Area. Brochures and electronic literature will help define and link the existing sites, providing excellent cross-selling opportunities between Fort Mandan, Fort Lincoln, the Knife River Indian Villages NHS, the state Heritage Center and other sites in the area.

A second, and even more important benefit will be the encouragement for additional private sector investment in the area. Designation, with accompanying public relations work, will create a wave of enthusiasm for new development in canoe rentals, lodges and bed and breakfasts. I've been saying for about 20 years that the only thing wrong with North Dakota's tourism product is a lack of cash registers. We have natural beauty, compelling history, and friendly people dotting our wide-open spaces. What we lack are cash registers to ring.

The coming of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial provided encouragement for development of major sites in the proposed Heritage Area. We got all dressed up. Designation now, linking those major sites, will provide encouragement for another tier of development – creating jobs and ma and pa businesses, particularly in the more rural areas, providing a counter to the depopulation of rural counties North Dakota has seen for the last 75 years.

Community support

Since the incorporation of the Northern Plains Heritage Foundation, discussions about creation of a National Heritage Area along the Missouri have taken place in a completely transparent and inclusive way. In public hearings before city and county commissions the meaning of such a program has been discussed and the commissions have unanimously provided their encouragement. The directors of three state agencies: North Dakota Tourism, North Dakota Parks and Recreation, and the State Historical Society of North Dakota serve as ex-officio members of the Foundation's Board of Directors and they have each shown their dedication to the project by their personal attendance at Foundation Board meetings and support for our direction. You can reference the official letters of support in the Feasibility Study conducted over the last three years and published last May. I guarantee you, we're in the land where the deer and the buffalo roam, and there has been nary a discouraging word about the establishment of the Northern Plains Heritage Area. There have been only two questions asked has been about the Heritage Area. One is about the possibility of federal impingement on individual property rights in the area. When we answer that the program is all carrot and no stick, all incentives and marketing and encouragement with no regulation, there is nothing left to do but cheer for the concept. The other question is how to expand the area, because it sounds like such a good idea. The answer to that is focus and concentration. There are very understandable historical-cultural reasons why this area represents the heartland, the homeland of the Mandan and Hidatsa and their pioneering of agriculture and permanent settlement of the Northern Plains. But more than that, on a more practical, economic basis, the heritage area program requires focus. The storyline needs to be simple ... the Rivers of Steel are about the heritage of our steel industry; Motor City is about cars. Here we tell the story, along the last 80 miles of free-flowing Missouri River about how people came here 1,000 years ago and established a way of life that echoes down to us today, still affecting and improving our lives. Within this proposed area are a critical mass of excellent historical sites, well-preserved and interpreted, as well as several prehistoric ruins, old village sites in need of attention.

North Dakotans respectively request and welcome federal designation of the Northern Plains Heritage Area.

A vision of the future derived from the past

North Dakota doesn't have Mount Rushmore. If we had mountains, I'm not sure we'd carve them. No Yellowstone, or Chaco Canyon. In North Dakota tourism circles we have long recognized the need to cluster our several remarkable historical sites to create a critical mass, a destination attraction. Those of us in the region, engaged in both preservation and promotion work well

together. Recognition of the national significance of the stories told in the Northern Plains Heritage Area will bolster local efforts and by a stroke of a pen, or an act of Congress, provide a prosperous future for the heritage of our past, a prosperity both in economic activity and the richness of the cultural and historic resource.

Appendix

Description of Northern Plains Heritage Area:

The scenic breaks of North Dakota's Missouri Valley overlook a rich agricultural tradition stretching back a thousand years. Along the length of the state's remaining free-flowing Missouri River, from Huff National Landmark on the south to the Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site on the north, the Northern Plains Heritage Area encompasses the ancient homeland of the Mandan and Hidatsa American Indian nations.

While farming methods have changed, the agricultural traditions and the scenic, cultural and historic values remain. The same attributes of geography and climate that attracted the Mandan and Hidatsa later appealed to homesteading farmers and ranchers and the energy industry, all of whom benefited from the natural resources of the land.

Natural Values:

Beyond agriculture, Mandan-Hidatsa culture depended on fishing and wildlife. The Missouri Valley remains a haven for both geese and walleyes, for turkeys and white-tails. Endangered species like the Piping Plover and the Least Tern, rarities for birdwatchers' lifetime lists, depend on the free-flowing Missouri's sandbars; and ancient Pallid Sturgeon swim below its surface. Once-endangered species like the Bald Eagle, a symbol of significance to Native Americans and other Americans alike, have made a remarkable recovery along the Missouri.

Distinctive Landscape:

This National Heritage Area extends nearly the entire length of the last of the free-flowing Missouri River in North Dakota, the last place the river can be seen as it was seen by Lewis and Clark and the ancestors of today's Mandan and Hidatsa.

But what makes it a particularly good fit for a National Heritage Area is the distinction arising from the patterns of human activity shaped by geography. This is the northern extremity of Native agriculture on the Great Plains.

Cultural and Historic Resources:

The cultural and historic resources of the National Heritage Area will include the vast majority of

Mandan and Hidatsa villages ever settled, among other sites important to the Mandan and Hidatsa, including the nationally-significant sites of Fort Mandan and On-a-Slant Mandan Indian Village.

Past the main theme of the Northern Plains Heritage Area, there are a number of other important sites, providing a deeper look at the layers of heritage filling the Valley.

The mission of the Northern Plains Heritage Area is to preserve, develop and promote the Native American and natural scenic heritage of the Missouri River in North Dakota. The Northern Plains Heritage Foundation is a non-profit, 501(c)(3), private sector organization raising and distributing funds in furtherance of that mission.

Related Facts: The area is 55 miles long, as the crow flies. It is a 90-mile drive from Huff National Landmark up ND 1806 through Bismarck-Mandan, and ND 1804 past Double Ditch and through Washburn, to ND 200 to Stanton and the Knife River Indian Villages. It includes two national sites, two state parks and five state historic sites, mixed agriculture and ranching areas and significant energy development.