

Commute

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\$80 to \$100 a week in fuel if we went the long way around. That's really tough, especially in times like these when people hold down two jobs to survive."

Pischel doesn't commute alone, as he is joined by three or four other commuters for his boat ride. They boat from Niobrara, Neb., east to a stretch of road that remains open. They then pick up vehicles parked at an intersection and cross Chief Standing Bear Memorial Bridge — which remains open for local traffic — for the remaining 13 miles to Springfield.

Pischel and his "carpool" work the overnight shift starting at 10 p.m. Boating in the dark, they take advantage of reflectors left by another commuter to show the deepest river and the best route.

"By the time we get done, we may use 10 vehicles to get to work," he said. "We started doing this at the end of May, when the flooding first started. I figured it would last about a month, but it got to be a lot longer than that. We thought we would be done by now."

Still, when it comes to commuting, there's something relaxing about life in the slow lane, Pischel said. That's especially true when he comes home from the overnight shift at 6 a.m.

"This summer, I have already been on the river longer than I ever have before," he said. "It's a shame, because every morning when we come home from work,

we think that we should be fishing. But you're tired and just want to go home."

Pischel also enjoys the view on the boat ride home. "It's just absolutely beautiful, seeing the sun rise on the (Chief Standing Bear) bridge," he said.

When boating to and from work, Pischel also finds himself sharing the "carpool lane" with a variety of creatures.

"You see more wildlife than you're used to," he said. "There are more deer on the roads, and there's a lot of fish. You see these little bitty fish. If you had a minnow net, you could just haul them in."

Pischel could literally reach out and touch some of the creatures that have gotten used to their human travelers.

"The muskrats don't mind sharing (the river) with you. They're within a few feet of you," he said. "There's also the beavers. The carp is so thick, and you hear a lot of bullfrogs."

On the other hand, Pischel needs to stay alert for loose cattails that can snag his boating trip.

"There's been a lot of loose cattails floating down the river, and they get your attention," he said. "It's like someone grabbed the bottom of your boat. It can be rough at times. You just put your motor in reverse and go on your way."

Overcoming the river is nothing new for Pischel, who found creative ways to reach Springfield before Chief Standing Bear Memorial Bridge was constructed 13 years ago.

"I had just got my job with the prison in 1998. The bridge was supposed to be done in time for

the start of my job, but they weren't quite finished with it," he said. "Back then, I was younger and more ambitious. I would take my motorcycle, load it in the boat, cruise across the river and then ride into town and let the boat sit on land."

A couple of major differences exist between the two times, Pischel said.

"Back then, the river was almost too low (compared to today's flooding)," he said. "And in ways, Springfield, South Dakota, was a country that I had never been to (before the bridge was built). Now, I'm used to it and know where I need to go."

Not everyone has chosen to navigate the river, Pischel said. Some Nebraskans have rented apartments in Springfield or other communities rather than make the daily commute, he said.

And then there are those who travel the other direction, from South Dakota to Nebraska, Pischel said.

Steve Reynolds, who works with the bike shop at the Springfield prison, created a bicycle that raised his seat and pedals so he could drive over water on Highway 12, Pischel said. Reynolds, a stock car driver, travels to Niobrara so he can motor over to races in Nebraska.

For the most part, Pischel has found the water-land combination working out pretty well.

"There have been some white caps when the wind comes up, and there is trash all over the place," he said. "But there really haven't been many problems. You adjust to being out on the river."

While rumors speculated that Highway 12 would open this

week, Pischel thinks his creative commute will continue for some time yet.

"I think this (road closure) will go on for at least two more weeks," he said. "They aren't changing the river level (with the Army Corps of Engineers' releases). How far will it take to get the water inside the banks? It has a long ways to go."

While anxious to commute entirely by dry land, Pischel said he'll miss the solitude that goes with his twice-daily boat ride.

"You really want the flooding to be done," he said. "But as one of the guys said, it's also sad to see some of these (peaceful) things go away."

BY LAND AND BY WATER

While Pischel commutes to the prison for the graveyard shift, fellow prison guards Jeff Barta and Dustin Pischel — Mark's son — have used their own creative ways of reaching their daytime jobs from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Barta, who lives at Niobrara, tried traveling the long way to work but quickly tired of the grind.

"I drove a couple of times to Yankton, but that's an 85-mile ride," he said. "I could never stay awake on the ride home. And I was spending \$30 a day for gas."

Upon switching to the shorter commute, Barta at first traveled by kayak, first with a traveling partner and now alone. Whereas it normally takes about 15 minutes for Barta to travel from his home to Springfield, he takes about 30 minutes because of the kayak ride.

"It's worked out pretty good.

It's probably a mile and a half to get to the bridge, so I had to leave at 4:30 (a.m.) to get to work," he said. "In the morning, it was a nice trip, but in the afternoon it was windy and took 10 or 15 minutes longer."

A kayaker for 20 years, Barta has generally found good conditions on his recent commute. He has run into some cross currents, and he watches for sandbars, debris, thick cattails and submerged items.

"We were lucky. It was windy a couple of days, and there were white caps on the water," he said. "One morning was bad. But otherwise, it was pretty good weather."

While he enjoys kayaking, Barta said he became tired of the daily trek to and from work.

"It was fun at first. Then, it got to be kind of a drag," he said. "It was a workout, and you could tell the difference (physically)."

At first, Dustin Pischel literally hit the road. He and a traveling partner walked over the submerged highway in hip waders, with the water coming up to their thighs.

"When this (flooding) all started, we were walking in water maybe two to three feet deep," Pischel said. "You were just trying to keep the water out of your waders."

The fellow walker later took another job and moved out of the area.

Now, Pischel — who lives in Verdigré — picks up Barta in his buggy as they make a four-mile detour south of Niobrara and then scoot over the bridge. They travel gravel roads and received permission to cross pasture land owned by Matt Colwell and

Kent Barta. The detour adds five minutes to the normal 20- to 25-minute commute, Pischel said. That still compares favorably to the 90 miles one way around Yankton or Pickton, he said.

"We did (the long route) for a week, and then we realized it wasn't going to work," he said. There has been one drawback to using the back roads — Pischel has hit four deer in the past month.

"We usually leave for work around 4:30 or 4:45 (a.m.)," he said. "I take the roads less traveled, and every day I meet the same vehicle each way."

Traveling close to the ground, Barta and Pischel notice many things that they normally overlook on their commute.

After two days of rain, they ran into large numbers of grasshoppers. And they have become accustomed to the sounds of bullfrogs and hundreds of thousands of chirping crickets.

The two men, who have each worked at the prison for about a decade, hope their current detour ends by the summer's end. They figure they will still be taking the back roads into early September.

However, they say their love of the area and their work more than offsets the temporary inconveniences of this summer's creative commute.

"I love the job, and you do what you've got to do," Barta said. Pischel also can't imagine another job or home. "It's beautiful country. I love where I'm at. I would hate to leave it."

Mauch

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About a cupful was all he needed so finding the pint containers which looked like syrup made his day and there was enough for future thrashings if the tradition continued.

The first thrashing session was new territory for Mauch but his mom and Henrietta's folks were there to give any advice and how-tos needed. After all, they were the professionals.

This year Mauch and son Mike only planted five acres of oats and when it was ready, they cut it with a binder. The binder lets three bundles of oats, seeds and stems, drop off at a time. It takes six to eight bundles to make shocks which are stood up on end and scattered around the field so they dry. The Mauch family all chipped to help gather the bundles and Mike said it only took about three and one-half hours to set the shocks from the five acres. It takes about ten days to two weeks for the bundles to dry. In case of precipitation, the shocks were brought home to the Mauch barn so on the planned date, the thrashing event could be held.

More planning went into the special occasion. This is an invitation only event and invites were sent to family, neighbors and friends. In past years, as many as 250 gathered to watch

the thrashing and celebrate afterward. The main dish has usually been sloppy joes provided by the Mauch family and everyone who came was invited to bring a salad and bars.

Several cousins of the Mauchs enjoyed the event and even a few who had first hand experience with thrashing a shock or two were present for the day of old-time fun.

"I've paid my dues," said Jim Steinhauer of Stuart who enjoyed the event with his wife Catherine under a tent pitched by the Mauchs. Steinhauer's mom was Ed Mauch's sister and he had many memories of the Mauch home and thrashing. His grandparents, who were also Ed's parents, lived with Ed and his family and there were many visits to the cousins. A nephew of the Steinhauers, Dave Drobvolny, was also enjoying the event. Drobvolny of Newport had memories of thrashing when he was a small child and looked forward to reliving the event last Sunday.

Since the oat crop was bountiful this year, the Mauch family thrashed some of the harvest before the big day. It would have made for a very long day for the onlookers so they only thrashed three hayracks of bundles. Mauch estimated the crop made 90 bushels to an acre but it might be a little light in weight.

There would be more fun after the thrashing was over. Everyone gathered at the Mauch home and enjoyed mud volleyball, horse-oes and a moon walk house

was available for the kids. An accordion player, LeRoy Hollman of Verdigré would entertain, too.

Mauch said all of his eight children, six girls and two boys, were home to help thrash except for his oldest daughter who lives in Vermont. The Mauchs also enjoy 18 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

An added activity for the thrashing event this year was a restored buggy which offered rides in the alfalfa field while the thrashers carried on. The double bench buggy was originally owned by the Mauch family and was passed to the Schaefer family in the Menominee neighborhood; then to the Hoelsing neighbors; and about three or four years ago, Mauch negotiated a deal to get it back from Grace Hoelsing.

Over that time, Mauch completely restored the buggy. It was a pile of pieces when he got it but the running gear, axles and shaft were in good shape. Interestingly enough, Henrietta and Hubert were at an auction and they had a couple of seats for sale which would work and he purchased them. He recovered them himself and carefully painted the 100-year-old rig which was finally back in the family.

Mauch only found recently a Welsh breed of horse which was trained to pull a buggy in Alexander, Minn., so he purchased that also.

The fifth thrashing event may

be the last for Hubert and Henrietta to organize. Son Mike is the farmer and landowner now and there is some hope the tradition will carry on.

"Sure I love thrashing," said Mike with a big smile knowing he's glad he doesn't have to do it this way anymore. "I hope to be able to continue this in five years. It's a good time for family and neighbors."

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