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## The New York Times The 6th Floor



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### Alec Soth's Great Plains Dispatch

By STACEY BAKER



Alec Soth/Magnum, for The New York Times

An oil-pump jack in Williams County, North Dakota.

*For [this week's cover story](#) about the oil boom in North Dakota, we asked [Alec Soth](#), known for his photographic road trips, to drive from his home in Minnesota to northwestern North Dakota last fall and document life there. Recently he answered a few questions about the project via e-mail.*

#### **What most interested you about this assignment?**

About a year ago I woke up to the fact that my photographic work had become a bit too self-indulgent. Fed up with my Twitter-ish navel-gazing, I started working on a series of small stories about Middle America. More often than not these stories were about the tenuous nature of community, particularly in a time of economic turmoil. Most of this turmoil has been recession-based. So when I was approached by the magazine about photographing this community turned upside down by an economic boom, I was thrilled to see what it looked like.

#### **I know you like to drive to your locations. Why is that?**

Driving is a way of getting my head in the game. There's something about spending a lot of time in the quiet container of the car with the landscape whizzing past that somehow prepares me for the kind of attention needed while photographing. When I fly to an assignment, I feel like my body is there but my brain lags behind.



Alec Soth/Magnum, for The New York Times

A truck near a drilling site east of Watford City, N.D.

### **How have your road trips evolved over the years?**

I used to need solitude in the car. All of my early work was made while driving alone. When I worked with writers or assistants, I felt self-conscious. But over the years, a lot of that has dropped away. Lately I prefer having other people in the car with me. It helps dampen my solipsistic inclinations.

### **In your book “From Here to There,” you compare yourself to Joel Sternfeld, calling him “more of a social documentarian,” someone who “really is interested in the social issues of the day.” Are you becoming a social documentarian now?**

You are absolutely right. I’ve been really aware of this shift in my approach. Just a couple of weeks ago I tracked down an old copy of Life magazine with W. Eugene Smith’s “Country Doctor” essay. While I’ve always admired his work, I never I thought I’d identify with it. More and more I seem to be working in that tradition. But I really haven’t thought through all of the ramifications of this on my career. It just feels like the right work to be making at the moment. But who knows, in six months I could be back in my basement finger painting self-portraits.

### **Tell us about the cover photo.**

The great thing about this particular assignment was that there weren’t all of these specific expectations to fulfill. I was given extraordinary free range to photograph whatever I wanted. That said, there was this one lingering expectation to make a killer cover picture. This meant not only making a great vertical image, but also a picture that functions as a kind of shorthand for the story. This led to what I came to call the “There Will Be Blood” problem. Since this is a story about oil, everyone involved in the project, myself included, had a mental picture of men covered in oil. But when I asked a local, he chuckled and said that such scenes might have been common 80 years ago, but it wasn’t like that anymore. (Afterward, my assistant and I joked about carrying around a bucket of oil to dump on men during our shoots.) So you can imagine my delight when I encountered Brian Coffey at one of the drilling rigs I visited. But here’s the thing, it isn’t oil – it’s the slurry used in the drilling process. Nevertheless, it worked for the picture. But the magic is the contrast of this grime with the snow and fog. When I saw that, it actually surpassed the mental picture I’d been dragging around with me.



Alec Soth/Magnum, for The New York Times

Customers waiting for Walmart to open on a Sunday afternoon. Williston, N.D.

**What were your impressions of this community that has been so tremendously affected by the boom?**

What's happening in North Dakota is a perfect inversion of what's happening in the rest of the country. While most of America is still dealing with the collapse of the housing bubble, there's a housing boom in North Dakota. While many American citizens can't find jobs, North Dakota employers struggle to find workers. What was interesting, however, was that it still looked and felt like a community in crisis. The infrastructure simply can't handle what's happening. Everyone I talked to complained about the exorbitant rent, the crowded and understaffed Walmart, the bad roads and so on. The place didn't look or feel any happier than most of the recession-stung towns I've been visiting of late. If anything, it helped me appreciate the moderation inherent in the sluggish rebound of the economy at large.