SAFE IN THE CENTER: RUGBY'S A WORLD AWAY FROM GULF:

I don't know about you, but I'm getting really, really, really saturated with bad hurricane news. My brain is as sopping wet with storm prediction, disaster coverage and economic devastation as Gulf Coast residents are wet with brackish water, spilled sewage and toxic waste. Frankly, I'm going numb with the national pain.

But this is an op-ed column, not a Dear Abby letter. So here's my opinion. You need a break from hurricanes too.

I bring you Rugby, N.D., population 2,983. This place is about as far away as you can get -- geographically, climatologically, culturally and psychologically -- from the disaster zone to the south. Reading about Rugby is a pause that refreshes.

Let's start with geography. Just beyond the truck stop off Highway 2 is a monument that reads: "Geographical Center of North America." In other words, this heartland town lies midway between the Gulf of Mexico and the Arctic Ocean, and the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. I'm not quite sure how the U.S. Geological Survey figured this all out in 1931. But if you actually go there, you would probably agree Rugby is the middle of either nowhere or everywhere. More locally, Rugby is between the tourist Meccas of Minot and Grand Forks, in a state whose capital is the one you probably forgot, Bismarck. The nearest large city is Minneapolis, about an eight-hour drive to the southeast at maximum legal speeds.

Rugby sits on a layer of well-drained, rock-hard glacial drift. This sits above an unbroken stratum of rock-hard sediment that's been dry for at least 60 million years. This, in turn, sits on amazingly ancient crystalline rock from the Achaean Eon, more than five times older than the elderly stones of New England. Even better, the compressive strength of this rock could easily support the tallest buildings in the world, and is thousands of times stronger than the average Gulf Coast soil.

As for storminess, Rugby is so far off the hurricane track that it has never had one. The place does get summer thunderstorms, but they're not as severe or as frequent as in more southerly states. Tornadoes aren't much of a problem either, because very few make it this far north. The only life-threatening hazard of local concern is freezing to death during a winter blizzard. Fortunately, this problem is easily solved by going inside and shutting the door.

As for evacuation, the problem is trivial. To begin with, there are only a few thousand people in an area the size of Houston. Most folks are independent farmers spread out sparsely over the lonesome prairie. Empty farm and county roads are nearly everywhere. Almost every farm has an enormous tractor with a cab big enough to hold the entire family in an emergency, dog included. These vehicles are big enough to drive straight across the flat, unforest landscape in any direction, right over the fences and stalled SUVs if necessary. And there's little worry about running out of gas; most farms have their own fuel tanks with more than a week's supply.

As for racial, cultural and class tensions that might complicate recovery, Rugby's very homogenous. Nearly everyone there is a third- or fourth-generation descendant of a Norwegian or German farmer who moved down from Canada when the town was founded in 1886. Nearly everyone is linked economically either to farming or to service stations and stores along the two-lane section of Highway 2. Rugby, with its splendid remoteness, low population and Lutheran leanings, may be the furthest thing on earth from a cosmopolitan party town.
During this year's hurricane mop-up season, it's nice to know a place where the most hurricane-weary and hyper-stressed evacuee from Katrina or Rita could emigrate, if he so desired.

I'm glad that Rugby is part of our country. I hope you are too. Have a nice day.