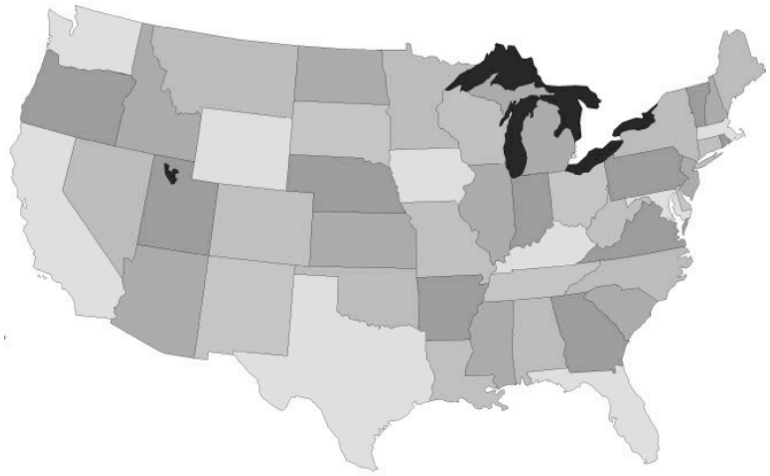
1. Backroads Mindshift



Shunpikers

I was hooked from the very first time.

As the last long leg of an overland trip from Bangkok to Berkeley in 1969, I drove across the United States for the first time. After writing and travelling in Southeast Asia for two years during the Viet Nam War, I was accepted at Berkeley for graduate school and, rather than fly the Pacific to get there, took six unhurried months to wander the back way across the other three-quarters of the globe through India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, the Balkans, Europe and then across my own country. Having been raised on four continents, lived in seven countries and been to forty-five others, I've lived wanderlust large but to this day overland from Bangkok to Berkeley still ranks as the most fascinating trip I ever made, and that is saying something.

This was in the day of Arthur Frommer's books on *Europe* (or wherever) *on $5 a Day* but on this trip I didn't average close to five dollars until I got to Europe. This was the era before heavy westernization and economic development in the Third World when a good meal or a passable bed could be had by the budget traveler for fifty cents. Or as I did more than once, sleep was on a long-haul bus or train, or under the stars on the platform of a rural Indian railway station beside people who slept there every night.

I exchanged ideas with razor-sharp Indian intellectuals on trains, walked the crowded back alleys of Old Delhi, hitched a ride up the Himalaya foothills to Kathmandu with a Swede and an American who had driven their VW bus from Stockholm, bathed in a Nepali stream running cold with Himalayan snowmelt, hopped a bus from Pakistan to Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass, walked the bazaars and back streets of the then peaceful Kabul, saw the Shah's F-4 fighters at the ready in Teheran, wandered the catacombs of Istanbul, shared an Orient Express rail compartment from there to Stuttgart with three Turkish Mercedes-Benz workers who fed me along the way, hung out with two young blue-collar Italian couples on the Mediterranean in a two-week travel respite, marveled at a Viennese cathedral dating from the twelfth century, drank local Italian wine at six US cents a bottle, and gave full throttle to that old American wanderlust. What a trip!

It would be easy to think that from this 1969 trip nothing could top the Asian and European portions of it, every mile exhilarating, but the trip's high point for me came that September when I got behind the wheel with an easy schedule and dawdled my way coast to coast across my own country for the first time.

By then I'd spent nearly half of my life overseas and, when living in the United States, all but two years along the Atlantic coast. The furthest west I'd ever been was Illinois for a couple of years as a teen. Ever since owning my first car as a college student, I had been in the habit of piling into whatever old jalopy I owned at the time and heading off to some *terra incognita* as the spirit moved me. I enjoy driving, especially taking the kind of roads which no map is detailed enough to tell me what I might see along them. As I set out, destination Berkeley, across what I was to first see as the magical continent that it is, many was the deliberate remote detour I'd already taken.

I've lost track of how many times I have now driven across the United States and Canada, or the pretexts I've used to drive instead of fly—moves, vacations, graduations, visiting relatives and friends, assignments, or just for the pleasure of it. Counting round trips as twice across, it must be a dozen times at least that I've made the drive. I never tire of plotting out some off-the-Interstates path, seldom in a straight line, that strings together sights that I'm curious to see, old friends along the way, and, especially, broad swaths of beckoning territory that I've just never seen before, the more remote the better. I treasure every foreign overland trip I've ever made but most enticing to me still are those across North America.

Even before that first transcontinental drive and never abating since, my appetite for these

trips was whetted by writers who, as I, were fascinated by exploring the places and people of their own country. In a nation continuously peopled by the special breed possessed of enough gumption to undertake a wholesale exchange of continents, it was surely natural progression that road books and their travelogue precursors would end up occupying a healthy footage on the American bookshelf.

In the earliest nineteenth century, the eastern seaboard and the few budding trans-Appalachian settlements became enthralled by the journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition's Sergeant Patrick Gass, and later by the growing legends of backwoods trailblazers Daniel Boone, African American Jim Beckwourth, John Fremont, Kit Carson, Jim Bridger and others. Later in the century Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Irving, Tocqueville and Twain, to name only the 1800s' best known, added to the earliest American travelogues, creating a vigorous, persistent, almost uniquely American book genre. Using Whitman as example, road book reviewer Kris Lackey elucidates that, "Whitman's 'public road,' tramped by a lusty bard and teeming with images from all walks of American life, has snared the fancy of the broadest range of road writers."

The first road book as we know it today based on automobile travel was Horatio Jackson's *From Ocean to Ocean In a Winton* in which Jackson recounts his and chauffeur Sewall Crocker's sixty-three-day odyssey across the continent in an open two-seater, bushwhacking their way through in some places where there were no roads. This epic 1903 excursion was taken when five states were still territories, barely a decade after Sitting Bull's assassination and the United States Census Bureau declared the frontier closed, and less than a generation removed from the Battle of the Little Big Horn. For the American adventure traveler, Conestoga wagons and Huck Finn's raft had been succeeded by the revolutionary new invention, the automobile. Even more astounding in 1903, on the cusp between wild west and the dawn of modernity when there was still not a single continuous road across the continent, two wanderlust brothers from Dayton actually took to the air at a place called Kittyhawk.

By 1913, the year the Cal Tech professor had built that first RV, the nation's first transcontinental highway was conceived at the behest of the burgeoning number of automobile owners and their earliest state associations. On April 15, 1914, Governor Edward Dunne turned the new route's first spade of dirt at Mooseheart, Illinois, to begin paving a two-mile section by local volunteers using state-loaned equipment, the first improvement on the new route which got its start by linking existing roads such as they were, trails and trackless gaps. By 1923, the road, named the Lincoln Highway, had been blazed through coast to coast with less than half of the original 3,389-mile route consisting of improved roadway. The Lincoln Highway entered the Great Plains at the spot on the Missouri River where barely a century before Meriwether Lewis introduced himself to a delegation of Oto and Missouri Indians in what was then purely *terra incognita*. From there, the Lincoln Highway wound its way through what had been only a generation before the wide pre-"reservation" domains of the Iowa, Missouri, Omaha, Oto, Pawnee, Shoshoni and Wind River nations. (Demographically, a generation averages twenty-nine years in length with worldwide extremes of twenty-six to thirty-two years.)

Adventurers, tourists, families moving, the earliest long-haul truckers and the just plain curious soon hit the new cross-country road, an immediate national sensation, some taking the twenty to thirty days needed to go the entire route from Times Square to San Francisco's Lincoln Park, assuming no serious breakdowns of which there were many. Such free-spirited high adventure, spawned by that archetypal American inventiveness, was the transportation high tech of its time, Thoreau at twenty-nine cents a gallon as road writer Warren Belasco put it.

Predestined, the mystic relationship between the long open automobile road and the ever-wandering American was born and it never lessened. A certain kind of person became irretrievably attached to long road travel, the longer the better, just for pleasure and the satisfaction of curiosity. *What's over that next mountain*?

A Lincoln Highway Marker

Over the years, the original Lincoln Highway has been rerouted and straightened in many places across much of the continent but long existed mainly as US Route 30, today more often as Interstate Route 80. The Lincoln Highway Association, now over a century old, has identified every foot of the original route, conducts frequent excursions along portions of it, and encourages communities to maintain the remaining original Lincoln Highway route markers from the street pole sign in Times Square to the original standard Lincoln Highway cement marker at the Highway's western terminus at Lincoln Park. Shown here is the intact marker at the Nevada ghost town of Jacobsville along US Route 50, "the World's Loneliest Highway" (which isn't but some of the faint dirt tracks running from it could be). The only stretch of the Lincoln Highway inaccessible today is through Utah's Dugway Proving Ground, a federal site for chemical and biological warfare experimentation.

By the 1920s, road books were coming into a popular genre of their own with prominent writers including Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, and later D. H. Lawrence, Ralph Ellison, Nelson Algren, Carl Rowan, Henry Miller and William Saroyan reflecting on their time behind the wheel cruising the inviting roads of an ever expanding national highway network. Robert Pirsig's 1974 *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* put the genre on two wheels.

American travelogues and road books have not been the exclusive province of men. The earliest known road narrative written in English was by a woman, Margery Kempe, whose fifteenth century autobiography told of her many years of travel to European and Palestinian holy sites. British social activist Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* and *The Refuge In America*, both published in 1832, relied heavily on her widely moving about in the United States, relating her finely attuned impressions of regions, customs and American travel itself.

The twentieth century before World War II saw fully a quarter of all nonfiction transcontinental road narratives written by women, and over half of road book fiction of the period authored by them. The best received of these early works were by Agnes Wilby, Zephine Humphrey, Winifred Dixon, Beth O'Shea and, not as much out of character as one might think, Emily Post of *Etiquette* acclaim who in 1916 motored all of the Lincoln Highway on assignment by *Collier's* magazine. It isn't clear why women's writing of road books tapered off after the 1930s. Modern essayist Vanessa Vaselka's analysis of the near absence of road narratives by women after World War II does not come to a clear answer. Not road books *per se*, recent best-sellers *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert and Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* get close with their personal accounts of international spiritual travel quest and Pacific Crest Trail through-hiking, respectively.

American road wanderlust found other outlets as soon as new means of expression came along. Film's *Easy Rider*, television's *Route 66* and the Internet's *Google Earth* are perhaps the best examples from their media. Even the Hell's Angels and other motorcycle clubs got into the act.

But yet to come were the best of the road books which put the genre front and center on national best-seller lists, captivating imaginations of the post-World War II middle class who could now afford cars. The first of these most classic of road books I read as a high school student when in 1959 Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* came out, the all-time best-selling road book by any American (or other) road junky author.

Kerouac's seminal book, famously poured out in a few days in a roaring stream of road-fueled Kerouac consciousness on a single 120-foot scroll, blew the lid off the somnolent 1950s and thrilled any number of mostly younger readers with the possibility of the kinds of spontaneous adventure that Beats Sal Paradise, Dean, Mary Lou and Camille Moriarty, Carlo Marx, Old Bull Lee and their madcap friends, scattered in the oddest pockets from coast to coast, found in *On the Road*. I tucked the book away in the back of my mind until eight years later when, having

just arrived in Berkeley on that first cross-country odyssey, I read Tom Wolfe's just-out *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*, which, in Wolfe's typical style, is, with the exception of *On the Road* itself, the nerviest, most inventive, out-there of road books. In it one learns that *On the Road*'s Sal Paradise was actually Kerouac, Old Bull Lee was dissipated Beat writer William S. Burroughs, Carlo Marx was *Howl* poet Allen Ginsburg, and the utterly improbable, likeable/despicable, hoochy-koochy, feral wild-man Dean Moriarty was a real person, icon-to-be Neal Cassady, who as the central figure and more than any other character in *On the Road* combusted the imaginations and break-out longings of a generation ready for something more alive than the lock-step 1950s. I wasn't impressed with the scruffy lifestyles, the whoring, the neglect of their children of the Beats, but did find myself taken by their wonder of the freedom of the open road and by the kaleidoscopic flashes of the broad, broad American experience that they drew in close to themselves along the way.

When I pulled into Berkeley on that baptism of over a dozen cross-country jaunts, I'd just had my first taste of this exhilaration, was hooked for life and knew it. What would captivate me ever more deeply were a habit-to-be of cross-country sojourns and three more very fine road books by authors tripping along out there just seeing what was to be seen along the long, long American highway. The next of these for me was Steinbeck's *Travels With Charley: In Search of America*.

In 1960, John Steinbeck, melancholy that his doctors had done all they could for his faltering heart, bought a GMC pickup truck, bolted a custom-made camper shell into its bed, and lit out from his Long Island home to satisfy what he described as a deferred need to get better acquainted with his country, "in search of America" as he would subtitle his book. Steinbeck's road trip was motivated by a long-standing case of wanderlust but also by the need he felt to rediscover the United States which he believed had passed him by during twenty years of living in Europe and New York City. Steinbeck felt that he had been writing about America abstractly as something he no longer knew and that he needed to become reacquainted with his country before writing of it again in any depth. As his subtitle suggests, Steinbeck sought not just to better inform himself but to tie his book together thematically by trying to plumb the essence of his country. To do this, he set out asking people he encountered, "What are Americans like today?" but in writing, found that he had to fall back on his own observations much more than on the rambling answers he got to his question.

Steinbeck named his travelling rig Rocinante after Don Quixote's horse. The character which author Cervantes wrote into the equine Rocinante was Don Quixote's spiritual double: inelegant, over the hill, and pushing against his limits in a venture better suited to a much younger man. And so it was in the soul-match of Steinbeck and his beloved mechanical steed.

Steinbeck's "Rocinante"

For company, Steinbeck took along, in his words, "an old French gentleman poodle known as Charley. Actually his name is Charles le Chien . . . a born diplomat." Man, dog, rig, road and America worked themselves into a fine personal elixir for one of the best writers the country ever produced. Steinbeck's leisurely drive covered 10,000 miles along a box-shaped route that closely hugged the perimeter of the nation. His stays included campouts in Rocinante and occasional stays in friends' homes and hotels, the latter several times with his wife Elaine who would fly in periodically to meet Steinbeck wherever he happened to be.

In wonderfully descriptive style laden with his polished clout evoking place, mood, sensation and his customary razor-sharp observation, Steinbeck's road trip journal mused as much about the United States as did it describe what he encountered, so much so that some critics later seriously suggested that *Travels With Charley* left the realm of nonfiction. Who cares? When the book was published in 1962, it made it to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller

list (but only for a week to be displaced by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*). Later that year, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his body of work including his most renowned, the poignant *Grapes of Wrath*, in its sad telling a road book itself and which, far better than any other road book, writes not of the classic tender notion of the road but of the non-roady's unfortunate experience of it, no road highs encountered.

In deliberately choosing yesteryear backroads roads and in some of his books, tragic themes, Steinbeck had probably heard of shunpikers as he was travelling as one.

The term entered the vocabulary as American English in the 1850s. A turnpike in those days was often a toll road and as such tended to be the best maintained of roads and therefore heavily travelled. My wife Vicki and I live along an old rural turnpike which used to be a macadam toll road. A hundred years ago our county would pay my great-grandfather to round up the neighbors to maintain the road. Today it is a sleepy two-lane back road state highway. Going back centuries, there have always been thrifty travelers who rerouted themselves away from pikes to save on tolls, but then also another kind, even back then disliking turnpike hubbub, who would shun the pike for quieter, more pleasant travel. That latter special breed called shunpikers still exists wherever one goes, and the United States has millions if not tens of millions of us today. Shunpikers exult in swapping practical for inquisitive travel.

The year *Travels With Charley* was published, I was a college student still more than a half decade away from that earliest cross-country drive out to Berkeley but, now thanks to Kerouac and Steinbeck, had a much whetted appetite. My sojourns then were in my old thirty-six-horsepower 1957 VW Beetle, the last year with the funky porthole back window, into the rural parts of Maryland and Virginia to Appalachian hiking trails, caverns, swimming holes, abandoned quarries, and Atlantic beaches where I would sleep on the dunes.

During my first summer of graduate school at Berkeley, I was offered a job with the federal government as a management intern in Washington, DC, the ideal excuse to drive back across the country unhurried which I did after arranging a delayed arrival with my employer. I got out the map and plotted my way across on some of the backediest back roads I could find just to scratch the itch of what was there in the yonder of the "out yonder" of an almost endless continent. I began by driving up California's hushed US Route 97 for my first view of America's most sublimely proportioned peak, Mount Shasta, then up into the Oregon high desert where I headed east on an unnumbered dirt track that went through specks that the map said were Fort Rock, Christmas Valley and Wagontire.

Fort Rock was barely hanging on to inhabited existence. Christmas Valley had a faded wooden sign announcing that you had arrived there but no buildings, no people, and, other than a small faded tumbleweed cemetery, no indication of previous habitation to be seen. Ghost towns almost always have *some* sign that people had once lived there. But maybe Fort Rock and Christmas Valley had been old *tent* ghost towns which all of a sudden one day would just pull up stakes and vanish. Wagontire had people—live ones—a couple of old buildings, and a one-pump gas station. When I reached there it had been 150 miles and most of a day from pavement to pavement across a very large patch of Oregon high desert so desolate that perhaps no one had ever lived there. I've long thought about it and have never quite come up with an explanation for how a place where one would absolutely never choose to live can have such pull on a person passing through. I loved that get-away-from-it-all day in the silent Oregon outback and still do.

And that's how it went, zigzagging my way onto the faintest roads including, just for the hell of it, some that weren't even on my maps—*What's down there?*—all the way across the continent until I was finally consigned into the riotous maw of the world's largest bureaucracy.

A year later I had completed graduate school, drove across the country again to take up a post-graduate fellowship at Princeton, crammed a year into a semester to be on my impatient way, then headed overseas once more, first to Korea for The Population Council for two years advising the Ministry of Health on management of its National Family Planning Program, then

to Thailand for eighteen months running a population project for the United Nations. I still had the itch, loved piling into the old Toyotas I had and roaming around both countries, staying in half-dollar hotels and visiting places that my Korean and Thai friends in Seoul and Bangkok had never heard of, asking "Why on Earth did you bother to go *there*?" To see what was there!

Returning to the east coast after seven years roaming through Asia, I bought the *de rigueur* camping vehicle of the time, a VW camper which a dope-smoking Florida attorney had tripped out with his homemade driftwood fittings including a hand-painted wooden rear bumper. Groovy as they used to say. My first wife, our four-year-old daughter Shanti, and I buckled up, and headed out across Canada, my first time spending much time there, meeting always-friendly Canadians across their far northern sub-Arctic Plains, making it over the beyond-beautiful Canadian Rockies with our camper's drastically underpowered engine, and then rolling west downhill to Canada's greener-than-green temperate coastal rain forest. Our destination: back to the mellow, free-thinking, higher-plane Berkeley of which I had only grown fonder during five years away.

There I founded the company which I still run, became a father again, and embarked on the male's mid-life securing of his family's future, paying my mortgage dues, tithing quite a bit of time to the communities where we lived, putting children through college. Time fled. All the while, how I longed for the open road again, the free will of the steering wheel, and time once more just to poke myself along wherever my American wanderlust might damned well aim me. Amidst my crucial middle decades happily spent securing the future, how I longed for those free-as-a-bird road flights.

In the midst of that midlife discipline, William Least Heat-Moon's 1982 Blue *Highways: A Journey Into America* didn't help but did. Native American, his name comes from his Osage father being Heat-Moon, his elder brother Little Heat-Moon, and he, therefore, Least Heat-Moon. (A tidy naming method but, if least means least, what would another son have been named?) When referring to him by last name, writers often mistakenly truncate it as Heat-Moon, but Least Heat is the full pre-hyphen given name and so, properly, Least Heat-Moon is the surname as here.

Separating from his wife and losing a teaching job at the University of Missouri on the same day, an exasperated Least Heat-Moon wedged a bunk into the back of a van he named Ghost Dancing, bought a Coleman stove and tote-along toilet, chucked a few belongings into fruit-crate shelves and headed off with a copy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* on a three-month, 13,000-mile search for America and some peace of mind, half way around the Earth as he scaled it. Least Heat-Moon's "blue highways" refer to lesser, often unnumbered, two-lane local roads shown in blue on older Rand McNally maps.

While Kerouac had used the road to announce a budding strain of Americanism that would permanently revector the national mindscape beginning with the tumultuous sixties, and Steinbeck's reacquaintance with his country through road tripping channeled his high musings, Least Heat-Moon used his journey explicitly to examine his country's peoples, mores, folkways, outlooks, landscapes and histories in all of their complexity, mosaics and, often, mysteriousness. Of everything I've read in the high-prose road book genre, I've found Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* the most engaging. Entrancing would not be too strong a word. His Native American perspective of his people observing strain after strain of newcomer continually hybridize but not obliterate his 12,000-year-old culture gave Least Heat-Moon a long lens for his terrific book, for me the most perceptive of all American road books.

Returning to Missouri, Least Heat-Moon spent the next four years working through eight *Blue Highways* drafts and a series of publisher rejections, supporting himself as a night-shift dock loader for a newspaper to have his days free for writing. When Atlantic Monthly Press published *Blue Highways*, it started out as a dark horse—*What is a "road book anyway?"*—but quickly became a publishing sensation which stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for forty-two weeks.

His term "blue highways" quickly claimed a permanent place in the American English lexicon.

In turning notes into book, Least Heat-Moon saw his road experience through native eyes not so much as road tripping but as ancient Indian vision quest. As he explained in an interview, "Blue Highways came about through my perception of the Indian vision quest in which the young man, the young woman, goes into the wilderness and once again, does what he or she can to enlarge perceptions, to get out of the restrictions of self, the restrictions of egotism. That's very much the purpose of the vision quest. When I was taking the trip, that was not in my mind. It was not at all conscious. But in writing the book, those ideas once again slowly surfaced. It's easy for me to see now in retrospect that the book is kind of a vision quest. Indians that I've heard from who have read the book almost immediately pick that up. It's part of their background and understanding. Other readers, especially reviewers, more so, in fact, than individual readers, have tended to see the book simply as traveling."

Indeed, even the *New York Times'* book reviewer did not get beyond *Blue Highways* as travelogue.

Relooking at other American road books through Least Heat-Moon's prism, surely with *On the Road* and *Travels With Charley*, one sees that they, too, are actually road book incarnations of the vision quest, quite likely without their authors knowing them as such. In writing *Running on Empty,* I came to see vision quest as apt a way to think of the frame of mind which the road book author experiences as anything else which could be proposed. Road books owe this key perspective to William Least Heat-Moon.

The Longing

By the nineties I had remarried, by the naughts my children were out on their own, and by the two-thousand-teens I had worked my practice down somewhat from 24/7/365, an enjoyable blessing since 1976 but elbowing out other things I wanted to do, especially writing more and hitting the road.

In the naughts, I began finding more time to write, first two books on the Underground Railroad, then *Underground Railroad Free Press* in 2006 which became the international Underground Railroad community's leading news publication. In 2012 my best book, *Remembering John Hanson: A Biography of the First President of the Original United States Government,* astounded me by winning two national book prizes in biography. Most recently my latest, *Palace of Yawns: How the United Nations Failed Poor Nations in the Population Explosion,* won a 2014 national book prize for foreign affairs.

Having more time to write as I eased past sixty proved to be sheer pleasure, but that equally insistent yearning begged: the longer without driving coast to coast, the stronger the itch became to saddle up again. Despite very pleasant drives to New England, the South Carolina coast, and most summers to Delaware's Atlantic beaches, my growing yen to spend not days but unhurried weeks, months if I could, out behind the wheel taking in the astounding panoply of a huge continent was telling me that it was past time to go. All along, Kerouac, Steinbeck and Least Heat-Moon steeped in my imagination, and likewise other travel writers: Lewis and Clark, Tocqueville, Twain, London, T. E. Lawrence, Lieutenant Colonel Dwight Eisenhower—imagine this dignified chain being succeeded by Kerouac—and later, Charles Kuralt, shuttling between wives to whom he was married simultaneously who found out about each other only when he died. (What possessed him?)

Perhaps my wanderlust is genetic as my fifth-great-grandfather, Franz Ludwig Michel (German-speaking Swiss: Mee-KEL), a Bernese nobleman and adventurer, was in 1707 the first European explorer of the western reaches of Maryland where my wife and I live.

Then, too, my father, a United States Air Force officer, had his share of wanderlust, landing overseas commands as often and for as long as the Air Force would let him. Growing up, I

spent half of my childhood overseas, and never minded pulling up stakes and moving on over five continents, four as a child, just to see what that next place was like. Since first going overseas to the mouth of the Amazon as a four-year-old, I have moved fifty-seven times, always anxious to see that next place. Wanderlust!

Charming Brainiac Hits the Road

After several cross-country trips together under our belts in sixteen years of marriage, my wife Vicki, as good a travelling companion as there is, was also ready to head out once more. Vicki is a painter who conjures beguiling magic with landscapes but whose best work is portraiture. Her talent of wholly capturing facial expression began in her early teens. As we had wistful discussions about hitting the road, she began dreaming of painting her way around the country.

As a divorced custodial parent who went late to college full time while working three-quarters time, Vicki made it all the way to Rhodes Scholar semi-finalist. (How do people do all that at once?) She had finished high school in three years just after her sixteenth birthday. In college, she had wanted to major in mathematics but, as a practical career measure, double-majored in economics and business instead.

She had a twenty-five-year career in commercial lending and private banking with major West Coast banks in San Francisco and Sacramento. When big banks began sliding from the safe, carefully regulated culture run by people who concentrated on good customer service, prudent lending practices, and bank health, Vicki began having her doubts about banks. When they morphed into today's post-Glass-Steagall, bank-versus-bank, growth-and-sales culture pushing exotic products like credit default swaps, derivatives and subprime mortgages on people who didn't need them, Vicki knew it was time to leave a corrupted industry and did in 2004.

That year, we moved from California to Cooling Springs Farm. With its pretty countryside in all directions, Vicki revived her long-suspended painting and drawing talent. Before we left Sacramento, I had bought her a fold-up portable easel to help get her restarted.

In Maryland we began to make friends and, sure enough, within months Vicki received two very attractive unsolicited banking job offers putting her life choice front and center. When she came home puzzling what to do with the second offer, I urged her to follow her heart which she did, swapping boredom for beauty to very good effect. So it was that an extended painting trip came up on her horizon.

When I introduce Vicki to audiences, it is as the brains, charm, talent and good looks in the family.

For my part, I pondered keeping a daily journal as we travelled to see if it might be worth turning into a road book. As the urge built, this time Vicki and I decided that, rather than the usual travelling in our comfortable sedan alternating motels with camping, we would look for a used RV. The very methodical Vicki made an online study of what kinds of RVs were out there, what they cost to purchase and operate, their relative comforts and shortcomings, and any number of other aspects in her calculus, and quickly settled on a couple of brands specializing in compact RVs.

RVs come in two main distinctions, self-propelled and towed trailers, in a long array of sizes from fold-out ten-footers to sixty-foot behemoths, and in a range of prices from mid four figures for a basic towed pop-up tent model into seven figures for the super-plushed-out, three-bedroom, two-bath, split-foyer rolling palaces used by music stars. With those, one would think that it would be hard to "get away from it all" when taking it all along. What we wanted was something that did not have to be towed, would fit into a standard parking place, get decent mileage, and maneuver easily down small back roads. Mainly on the basis of customer

reports, Vicki narrowed our search to a popular Canadian brand, Roadtrek, which makes compact RVs in a variety of internal configurations seventeen, nineteen and twenty-one feet long. With reasonable operating expenses, excellent owner reviews and full maneuverability, a Roadtrek looked like our optimum which it turned out to be.

Her search for a used Roadtrek began. Mainly Vicki used RVTrader.com, a huge used-RV site with typically 100,000 or more RVs and several hundred Roadtreks for sale throughout the United States and Canada at any one time. She quickly narrowed her search by price and how many miles had been put on a vehicle, and kept a close eye on what became available day to day. I was prepared to fly anywhere in the United States for what looked like the right vehicle and drive it back home to Maryland.

Roadtreks begin life on a Chevrolet, Dodge or Mercedes van chassis with the manufacturer's front cab. With a Chevy or Dodge, Roadtrek drops onto the chassis rails a one-piece fiberglass shell tall enough to stand up in, and outfits the interior into a compact camper. Unlike many longer RVs, especially those being towed, Roadtreks can make any standard road turn or corner, even fairly tight U-turns when asked. The one-piece camper bodies are also lighter, but sturdier and safer than constructed-box RVs and trailers.

After five months patiently looking, the ideal Roadtrek fell into our laps when Vicki found a well-priced 2001 Roadtrek twenty-one-footer with barely 17,000 honest miles on it only forty-five minutes from our Maryland home. It had been bought new by Harry and Ruth Schwab, a retired couple who had driven it no further than Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. They had died in their eighties a few years before, and their son was just getting around to selling the vehicle. During the spring, we had plenty of fun outfitting it with conveniences, comforts and navigation tech, and began planning trips. Thus we brought into our fold what we would soon come to regard as a very likeable third traveling companion.


A Roadtrek

As soon as the weather was warm enough, we ventured out on a trial run a couple of hours away to the western Maryland Appalachians' Rocky Gap State Park with its two-mile lake and placid RV campground. We stayed two days and nights, and learned how to work the vehicle's electrical, plumbing and water disposal systems, appliances, awning and other convenient gadgetry. We cooked, slept, watched a movie, washed dishes, flushed, and stayed warm and comfortable. We came home very impressed with the thoughtful design and construction, and how everything one needs for overnight stays is neatly tucked away in under a hundred square feet. With a very pleasant trial run behind us, we began planning an extended cross-continent venture.

We planned what we thought would be a leisurely seven-week cross-country schedule which proved more compact than we had anticipated. Although we scheduled a few stops to see family and friends, mainly our itinerary was chosen to keep us off Interstate routes and on Least Heat-Moon's blue highways, and to let us see places where a certain kind of traveler goes but tourists don't. For the most part, we ended up hitting the mark on this. The key to convenience was a detailed packing list which got longer the more we thought about what would make RV travel comfortable.

As Western Maryland's typically colorful spring curtsied itself into summer and I was imagining what kind of America we might discover, I decided to keep a daily journal of my impressions. As writing a road book from the trip became a fonder notion, I was considering giving it a specific theme by asking people we met something specific, and decided on what it meant to them to be an American. I had no sooner settled on this design and query than out came Philip Caputo's *The Longest Road: Overland in Search of America, from Key West to the Arctic Ocean,* a well written road book patterned rather much after *Blue Highways*. As Steinbeck had

attempted with *Travels With Charley,* Caputo sought to have Americans tell him something exacting about the nation that he hypothesized would prove to be a cohesive revelation. To do this, Caputo asked those he and his wife met, "What holds the country together?" At nearly the last minute before our trip, Caputo had added one more good road book to my ruminations.

Philip and Leslie Caputo rented a classic fifty-year-old Airstream trailer and towed it behind a strong pickup from Key West, Florida, as far south as one can get in the continental United States, to Deadhorse, Alaska on the Arctic Ocean, the nation's northernmost point, then back south to the end of their trip in Texas, a truly epic 16,241-mile adventure. The Caputos nicknamed their truck and trailer Fred and Ethel after the *I Love Lucy* neighbors. Steinbeck had taken Charley along; the Caputos took two dogs.

What Caputo found early on in his eighty or so conversations en route was that people were not responding well when he asked his, "What holds the country together?" He found that many had never clearly thought this out and meandered ineffectually trying to answer in platitudes. Others responded with stock far-right or far-left diatribes. Yet others had no clue at all and couldn't respond. So few were able to articulate anything that Caputo could use, that part of the way toward Canada he abandoned his question and intended theme, and in his book relied on his own observations to try to divine what it might be that holds the country together. By book's end, he had only hypothesis.

Thinking of Steinbeck and Caputo drawing blanks, it was apparent that my asking Americans much the same question—"What does it mean to be an American?"—would very likely get the same spotty results which they got, so I abandoned the idea and am glad I did. If Steinbeck and Caputo, two Pulitzer Prize winners, backfired trying to pose a question to the country, I probably would, too. But I remained highly intrigued by what might be out there. I decided just to look and listen to see if any thread or cohesive observation, if such even existed, might present itself from people we met as we wove through the tapestry that is America. I would let America come to me on its own terms, if it chose to at all, and did it ever.

Before setting out, it was instructive for me to compare the three extraordinary road books from which I had long benefitted and now Caputo's to get a closer idea of what appeals and doesn't in a road book, and to begin to suggest to me an approach to our trip, my note-taking, and what perhaps I should attune myself to along the way.

Kerouac, Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon and Caputo all turned out terrific reads with proven high appeal to the uniquely American wanderlust. All four set out on their journeys explicitly or implicitly "in search of America." Only Least Heat-Moon traveled alone. Kerouac travelled with people, Steinbeck with a dog, Caputo with both. Steinbeck and Caputo attempted to discover the country by asking those they met nearly similar questions, both of which failed to elicit anything resembling a cohesive national profile, and both abandoned their quests en route. Least Heat-Moon attempted the same through quiet observation and got closer to the mark. Kerouac's, Steinbeck's and Least Heat-Moon's road books all became blockbuster best-sellers, and Caputo's hasn't done poorly. Steinbeck and Caputo were Pulitzer Prize winners, Kerouac probably would have been had he lived in a less starched era, and one is left to wonder why Least Heat-Moon was not even a finalist in 1982 when his beautifully written *Blue Highways* was published. Residual starch perhaps.

The four writers varied in age by nearly a half century when they wrote their road books. Kerouac's rambunctious rides were in his mid-twenties and *On the Road* was completed when he was twenty-nine. Least Heat-Moon took his tour at thirty-eight, Steinbeck his at fifty-eight, Caputo his at seventy. There is a close correlation between these authors' ages when their travelogues were written and their books' respective impacts. Many brilliant people peak early: Einstein discovered the Theory of Relativity at twenty-five, Lafayette commanded American troops as a Major General at nineteen, and Mozart wrote his first musical composition at five. Early genius might explain the blazing imagery and lasting magnetic pull two generations later of Kerouac's *On the Road*. Young genius also often flames out early: Kerouac died at forty-seven of alcoholism, Mozart from the same at thirty-five.

Although Caputo's *The Longest Road* is well worth reading, it doesn't quite attain the grace, punch and compelling power of the other three works. In exceedingly readable elegance, *Travels With Charley* and *Blue Highways* captured the American people, land and variety, and became lasting classics. But the road book with the strongest, most durable appeal is the oldest, *On the Road*. Of the twenty-four million titles listed by Amazon, all four of these road books still rank in the top one-tenth of one percent in current sales among all titles, a stunning collective longevity record given that three of these books were published more than thirty years ago. Within their individual sub-genres, sales of none of the four ranked lower than fiftieth as of late 2014. Of the four, the current top-seller by a good margin is *On the Road* which continues to sell in the top one-hundredth of one percent of all Amazon titles, and number one among all titles in its sub-genre. *On the Road* was written over sixty years ago.

Is There a "Character of America" to Be Found?

From these four road warriors I concluded that if I were to consider writing a road book I shouldn't convince myself that the country can be captured through any one-question survey, but that I should flip the proposition by rendering keen observation, letting the country, however its current condition, whatever is currently on its mind, come to me if it so chose. Rereading each of these four road books during the weeks before Vicki and I began our trip sharpened my perspective on what to expect and not expect in my own search for America, and on what makes for a good road book. I am grateful for the inspiration lent by each of these four exceedingly fine writers and enthusiastically recommend each of their elegant road books.

On the very day before shoving off, I also received good last-minute advice from our friend Fergus Bordewich, the eminent Pulitzer-nominated American history author, who advised that, "The notion that 'America' can somehow be summarized just doesn't work anymore because the country has become too complex." Bordewich offered the cogent argument that, "Any book that aims to get at the core of America these days has got to be as attentive to failure and uncertainty as to innovation, eccentricity, success, and the old can-do spirit." With Fergus's warts-and-all caution, and the successes and failures of the four road writers as lessons, I set out convinced that faithfully portraying the vastly wide-ranging country that is the United States would require emphasis not on some supposed explanatory common thread but, at the least, on variety in the most innately varied country that the world has probably ever seen.

I expected that on our odyssey America would not offer up any steady suggestive message, much less any revelatory drumbeat, and that either I would have to divine the riddle of the country or just be satisfied that there may be no riddle at all. Having put myself at ease with this probable nonappearance of any single national chord, we set out on our trip only to find a steady drumbeat indeed, and not a pleasant one.

❦

We have cats. I thought of Steinbeck having such good company with Charley, the Caputos taking their two dogs along in their small Airstream, and the possibility of taking our two indoor cats with us on our trip. But I also remembered the saying that you have probably heard that dogs have owners, cats have staff.

Ever tried to teach a cat to sit? I have actually been able to teach one of ours, namely the taciturn Felix, to lie down on command (when he feels like it). He has also learned to "get down" (when he feels like it). It took three years. I'm also convinced that, in his feline superiority, Felix *clearly* understands much more than he lets on. Felix is striped and fully believes that he is an accomplished tiger out on some far savannah, lord of all he surveys, laying stealthily in wait for giant mice. As for Phoebe, she is convinced that she is perfectly suited to giving charm lessons to all. It was an easy conclusion that cats, cat toys, bedding, litter boxes, food bowls, cat food, cat barf and assorted feline paraphernalia were not a good idea in a small moving space subject to pitch and roll, and possible escape.

My good cousin, the Reverend Marya Michael, agreed to house-sit our home and care for Phoebe, Felix and Ferrell, our outdoor stray, for the seven weeks we were gone. The gentle and very spiritual Marya, a prize of a cousin and human being, lives alone an hour or so away in the thick of the Washington suburbs, has been coming to our farm for family reunions and visits since she was a young child, and loves the place which is her ancestral homestead. When Marya had to be away from the farm for a few days, animal whisperer Kelly the Cat Lady would come by and give good care to our cats, tamp down their partying and restore order.

The timing of our trip needed to coordinate with an annual campout that I go on every September with five old California friends and to make it easy en route to have a get-away with our children and grandchildren. We laid out route and schedule, checked off everything on our take-along list, stocked groceries into the RV, said our goodbyes to felines and humans, and rolled down our farm lane out onto blue highways on a fine August morning. We planned for an October 1 return.

Van Gogh Comes Along

Steinbeck had his Rocinante, Least Heat-Moon his Ghost Dancing, the Caputos their Fred and Ethel. Kerouac criss-crossed the country in a variety of thirties, forties and fifties automobiles used too interchangeably to acquire names. There is clearly an early comradeship that takes hold between road writers and their rigs that compels them to name their rides. As I would quickly learn, there is a palpable difference between going on a driving vacation in a squishy well-appointed sedan versus setting off in search of one's own country in something one lives in. We, too, fell under the spell of wanting to settle into a close friendship with our ride and to anthropomorphize it. It was Vicki the painter who early on came up with the artist's play-on-words, Van Gogh, as what we would name our camper. Only well into my note-taking on the trip did I realize that I was referring to Van Gogh not as "it" but as "he" or "him." The three of us did indeed buddy up.

Vicki and Van Gogh made the trip so much more pleasurable for me than it would have been without them, and what a trip we were in for. Along the long American road, those Vicki and I would meet gently spoke their minds as we were feted by a delight of uniquely personal stories, local history, yesteryear small towns, a tall tale or two, and a never ending run of American vignettes. At the same time, the full range of the continent's majestic geography would unfold—a mysterious desert amidst Great Plains grasslands, our crossing of Lake Michigan, Yellowstone splendor, several unintended days stranded in the mouth of the largest volcano, nights beside languid rivers, red rock Great Basin vistas, the High Sierra, Nevada ghost towns, a family living in a house made of bottles, a huge forgotten inland delta, a rustic lodge in the Cascades backwoods, Cajun bayou towns disappearing to rising sea levels, Mississippi juke joints, Faulkner's walls, the longest cave, scalped mountains, destitution, appalling materialism and much, much, much more.

In meeting scores of Americans along the way, we would hear a particular, entirely unexpected disquiet persist: ranch hands, park staff, telephone linemen, nurses, executives, oystermen, college faculty, trailer park pensioners, couples with upside-down mortgages, the poorest county, the wealthiest county, Americans of all races would sing verses of the same song—at best growing apprehension over only treading water economically, at worst hard times from widening American economic disparity over the past generation. I wasn't looking for this repeated entreaty or anything in particular and was dismayed to hear it over and over.

We would hear that Americans are finally awakened to the growing income and wealth gaps which over the past thirty years have eroded the middle class and hit the poor hardest of all, and that this means them, those we met. Upon our return, I felt that, as candid as so many Americans had been with me and as insistent and personal as their message had been, I owed it to them to make known in *Running on Empty* what they had had to say. A moving example given by "Hope Winters" is provided later here. After *Running on Empty*'s entry of the trip's last

day, I called on my economics and demographic background to dig into the American economic disparity which we had heard and seen on the trip. It was not difficult to demolish the arguments of the nation's economic one-percenters, trace the roots of growing economic inequality back to their source, and expose how the ultra-wealthy and largest corporations purchase seemingly impregnable privilege through the protection money called "campaign contributions."

Thus *Running on Empty* joins a growing vocal chorus of articles, books, studies and television specials on how economic disparity has been allowed to creep up on America for a generation, what needs to be done to correct it, and the nation's prospects if it is left untended. My fondest hope is that *Running on Empty* makes its mark in helping to restore wellbeing to the middle class and poor.

II. Headed West

Crossing an Enamoring Continent