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views & commentary...

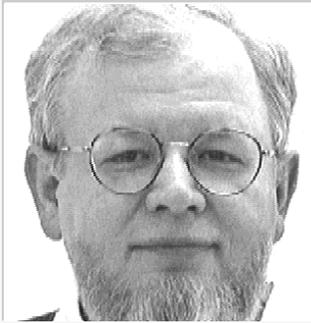
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THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

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Dear friends,

I have arrived in the Pacific Northwest and am settling into my new home. This month's newsletter commentary contains an overview of the multitude of perceptions and feelings I had during and after my four-day drive west across the continent.

—Bill Herbst

DRIVING THROUGH DISNEYLAND

America will fool you. Because we are an image-based culture that leans heavily on myth and archetype, and especially because we are addicted to television, America is vulnerable to crude stereotyping, even among ourselves. Falling into the error of oversimplifying who we are as a nation is all too easy.

In reality, America—like most cultures, and certainly like all great nations—is more complex than simple, more contradictory than straightforward, more paradoxical than logical, and chock full of ironies so dense and thick they couldn't be cut with a sharp knife.

America's heart pulses to many themes. Among these is the classic Road Trip. Throughout our history, America has been expansive and on the move. Daniel Boone needed elbow room. Gold rushers chased imaginary fortunes. Immigrant farmers trudged west behind Conestoga Wagons. Trees were felled, mountains cut, and roads crisscrossed the land. We tried railroads first, but we are not a mass-transit nation (not yet, anyway). In the single largest construction project ever undertaken by human beings, the Interstate Highway System was built in the 1950s. Interstate highways are the continental Church of the Internal Combustion Engine, a 75-mph-conveyor-belt altar to our worship of oil, for which we now risk everything.

People in other countries migrate when necessary. Americans go on road trips for any damned reason we can think up. Families on vacation. Twenty-somethings with kinetic wanderlust. Mid-lifers getting away from it all. Seniors RVing. Relocations for that hoped-for better life. Daddy's got a new job in California. Put the house on the market and go. *"So they loaded up the truck and moved to Beverly Hills, that is. Swimmin' pools and movie stars."*

America is all Disneyland now. One great, encompassing fantasy theme park, from shore to teeming shore. The whole country is a giant Hollywood back-lot. Like eager beavers or colonies of ants, we modern humans are industrious builders, but not for permanence. Other, older cultures necessarily built for the ages—the Pyramids of Egypt, the Coliseum in Rome, the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu in Peru. Americans build for the moment, especially these days. Precious few of our most impressive works will stand the test of time. In a thousand years, our skyscrapers and buildings, highways and bridges, dams and towers all will decay, crack, and crumble to dust. Curiously, our engineering and construction feats most likely to endure are the massive caves and missile silos carved out for America's Cold War national defense. Rather than evidence of our flowering art or fruitful commerce, we will leave behind burrowed expressions of fear.

When I announced to my friends that I was leaving Minnesota and moving to Olympia, Washington, they all said the same thing with the echo of a Greek Chorus: "Billy, you've got a 14-year-old Saab that's held together with spit and bailing wire. Don't drive! Save yourself the wear and tear and the risk of the car breaking down, stranding you in Bug F--k, Idaho. Fly out to the west coast."

My friends, of course, were being perfectly logical and pragmatic. But something about their good advice didn't sit right with me. The idea of packing my stuff and shipping it off, then FLYING to the Pacific Northwest was just wrong somehow. You're in Minnesota. You get on a big commercial jet, and three hours later you land on a different planet. Bang! Sudden. Shocking. Dislocated.

No, I wanted to drive. Despite the 2,000 miles. Despite four grueling days alone in a car. Despite cheap motels and bad fast food. I wanted to feel the ground under my feet, to actually have the experience of "going somewhere" across half a continent rather than being beamed up like some character from Star Trek. I wanted time to think, to contemplate, time to assimilate the fact that I was, indeed, moving very far away, time to see the topography of the landscape shift and the climate change, time to meditate on American life and my life in particular.

I wanted to drive through the Badlands and Deadwood and stand on the Little Big Horn battlefield where Sitting Bull dreamt and Custer died. I wanted to stare up at Devil's Tower and drive through the breath-taking mountain cliffs of sidwinding Beartooth Pass. I couldn't do that last one, though, since the Beartooth Scenic Byway was closed until Memorial Day due to snow, so I settled for a slightly less spectacular portion of US Highway 212 that ascends up the eastern slope of the Rockies and that unbelievable stretch of I-90 from Missoula to Coeur d'Alene that barrels down hairpin turns through the snaking mountain passes of western Montana past the Continental Divide—an awesome engineering feat of sheer wonder set amidst the staggering beauty of steep mountain forests you can almost reach out and touch.

So I traded in my 14-year-old 1991 Saab 9000 with all its problems for a used 1999 Saab 9-5 SE SportWagon with (hopefully) no problems. Got rid of one ridiculously expensive luxury touring car with 135,000 miles for another ridiculously expensive luxury touring car with "only" 71,000 miles. Perfect condition, though. Absolutely cherry. Owned by a guy who summered in Minnesota and wintered in Florida, so this Saab has never seen cold weather or snow. All service records, oil and filter changes every 5,000 miles, certified by an independent Saab dealer. And since Saabs depreciate like stones tossed into a pond, the \$38,000 sticker price new had shrunk to only \$11,000 at barely five years old, minus two grand for my trade.

No warranty, of course, although I could have purchased an aftermarket warranty if I'd wished. I didn't. Like many Americans who are not financially well-off, I rolled the dice. Even with a warranty, buying cars (new or used) is always a gamble. Karma rules, so to speak. If I'd wanted to play it safer, I could have bought a used Honda Accord. Stable, dependable, great cars, but boring. Nope. I went for my third idiosyncratic Saab in a row. For safety, for luxury, for the kick of driving an asymmetrically turbocharged V6, plus it gets 30 miles to the gallon on the highway. That should come in handy when gas at the pump rises to \$5.00 a gallon (which may come to pass sooner than we realize, dear friends, despite Bush's imperial wars and drilling in Alaska).

After a month of packing and giving away stuff, I entrusted my remaining furniture and possessions to Allied Van Lines, cleaned my apartment, spent the last three days of my quarter-century life in Minnesota at the home of a beloved friend, then headed west in my spiffy new (used) Saab to see America.

To some extent, major American cities still retain their individual and idiosyncratic flavors. Minneapolis is literally a "blue" city in the subtle hue of its tall buildings, while St. Paul's architecture has a contrast-

ing pink tone from its older granite stonework. New York has the skyscrapers of Manhattan and the distinct surrounding boroughs. Chicago still has wildly divergent ethnic neighborhoods. Miami is Cuban in rhythm and pace. Los Angeles is Mexicali woven into the dream-machine of Hollywood, and San Francisco is, well, San Francisco—Baghdad by the Bay (the magical Baghdad of Ali Baba, not the war-torn Baghdad of present-day Iraq).

But move outside those urban centers, into the first- and second-tier suburbs or further out into the less dense exurban zones beyond, and we now find what I consider an appalling sameness. In our rush toward boundless commercial development and the collective wish for the safety of the familiar, we have malled America to death. Everywhere looks and feels pretty much like everywhere else.

Change the topography, climate, the indigenous plants and trees, and Beaverton, a suburb of Portland, Oregon, looks almost exactly the same as Burnsville or Apple Valley, suburbs of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Huge corporations dominate not only the economy, but the visible landscape as well. Cardboard cutout restaurants like Pizza Hut, KFC, Taco Bell, Appleby's, Perkins, and Denny's are ubiquitous near interstate exits, as are the mall-ruling giants like Office Max (or Office Depot), PetSmart, Best Buy, Target, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and the myriad other mega-retailers of modern American consumerism. Car dealers and gas stations are interchangeable anywhere in America. Quaint motels from the 1950s still dot the landscape, especially on the business loops of small towns, but the large chain hotels/motels have gobbled up the lion's share of the interstate highway business—Super 8s, Motel 6s, Howard Johnsons, Best Westerns, La Quintas, Ramada Inns, Days Inns, Hampton Inns, Fairfield Inns, Doubletrees, Hiltons, Radissons, Westins, Sheratons, etc., seemingly ad infinitum (and ad nauseum).

Traveling across America, one could easily get the feeling that tourism is our only remaining business. Hundreds of miles of billboards throughout every state hawk the tourist traps that promise “good, clean family fun”—Reptile Ranch, Diamond Cave, Prairie Homestead Museum, the Corn Palace, and the endless fishing lakes, resorts, petting zoos, and water slides. Chambers of Commerce must spend all their time dreaming up bogus new attractions to lure vacationers—festivals, parades, rodeo days, whatever. Anything to bring in a little money and keep their economies afloat. Wall Drug in Wall, South Dakota, near Badlands National Park (which is truly amazing, by the way), is a perfect example of the marriage of tourism and marketing.

Then there's the gambling. Not just big Indian Casinos, but smaller gambling parlors in so many medium-sized towns. You see the signs along the business loops: Restaurant and Casino. Motel and Casino. Laundromat and Casino. When did this all happen? When did we go cuckoo for gaming tables and one-armed bandits? I mean, Las Vegas is all well and good, sort of, and Deadwood, South Dakota is pretty cool, but enough is enough already.

And what is the deal with Chinese buffets? Not only have these cheap eateries taken America by storm, but they all charge about the same prices, serve the same food, prepared the same way, in the same basic (cheesy) surroundings. They vary a little in quality, but not much. This must be a brilliant scheme by the Chinese Mafia, because all these restaurants seem to order from one supplier, probably some grungy industrial park in Hoboken, New Jersey. You can drive from the east coast to the west coast of America and never eat anywhere but Chinese buffets. It's unbelievable.

One new thing I love are the windmill farms now being built. Huge tower windmills for electricity generation, sometimes 200 feet high with 30-foot propellers. In Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota, you'll occasionally see 40 or 50 of these windmills spaced over a 2-3 mile stretch of windswept rolling prairie. They look like toy beanie-propellers from a mile or two away, but when you pass close by, you realize with a jolt how big they are. Very high-tech and way cool.

So yes, regional differences continue to exist from state to state. In Oregon you can't pump your own gas. Minnesota has more Vietnamese restaurants per capita than anywhere else, and in Missouri fireworks stands sprout like mushrooms along the interstate exits. North Dakota and Washington levy no income tax, while Oregon has no sales tax. In Montana, you can drive in excess of 90 miles per hour on the highways with blithe impunity.

Basically, however, whenever you arrive at the outskirts of any urban metropolis, the landscape suddenly morphs into the familiar and monotonous. It is only between the cities or off back roads away from the interstates in less-populated, more open territory that you see evidence of what remains from a vanishing America.

Judging by South Dakota and Montana, no place in America is truly unpopulated anymore. Forget wilderness. That's gone, except for a few protected zones, such as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota. If it isn't legally protected, we've messed with it. Even the more desolate regions through which our highways run are pockmarked by the handiwork of human industry. Power lines cut across the country in great swaths. Gas stations are mostly never more than 30 miles away. Even the tiniest towns are likely to have at least one or two newer fast food chains to go with their old faded Dairy Queens. Between those towns are farms and ranches and small homesteads, some of which are slowly disintegrating into ruin, while others are stunningly opulent.

That's what impressed me most driving across the western half of the continent—the paradox of conspicuous wealth coexisting with equally extreme poverty.

For four solid days, covering about 500 miles per day across five states, I couldn't help but be impressed by how rich we are in America, at least collectively. Knowing that almost half the world's population lives on incomes of \$2.00 a day or less, the overwhelming bounty of this country is all the more staggering. To me, the Gross National Product is just a meaningless abstraction of inconceivably large numbers, but driving across country gives visible, tangible evidence of how very well off we Americans are.

And yet, for the past 30 years, we have chosen to systematically change the laws to transfer wealth upward, away from the middle and lower classes and into the bank accounts of those who already have more—more money, more land, and more power. The concentration of money into fewer and fewer hands is shocking. That is, of course, the history of the world, but until recently America was a sterling exception. Not anymore. Now we are just another caste society with ongoing class warfare, and the poor are losing.

Especially over the last 15 years, the rich have become fabulously richer, while the rest of us have seen our share of the pie shrink dramatically. With the rise of the perverse brand of greedy conservatism that came to power with the Reagan presidency, we have steadily removed many of the safety nets and opportunities for advancement up the social and economic ladders that marked the initial decades of the post-WWII era and created the bountiful nation into which many of us were born. The dismantling of programs to assist the poor did not end the welfare state; America simply shifted welfare from individuals to corporations. Only big business, with its well-paid lobbyists, gets government favors and bailouts today. The White House and Congress serve the special interests of the plutocracy. Any populist rhetoric to the contrary from politicians is mere lip service and propaganda.

On the stretch of Highway 212 across the Crow Indian Reservation east of the Custer Battlefield in Montana, I saw dramatic evidence of the worsening poverty that exists in America. Mile after mile of isolated, dilapidated trailers and shacks, most with numerous rusted, junked cars surrounding the tiny homesteads. This is not simply poverty, but hopeless, grinding, dead-end poverty, the kind that sucks the life and hope and soul out of human beings, and seeing it was chilling.

Between the visible extremes of wealth and poverty are many millions of middle-class homes and neighborhoods, which appear stable at first glance. That seeming stability is misleading, however. Rising home prices, increasing consumer debt, and spiraling health care costs are pushing the middle class to the breaking point. I couldn't see that on my trip, but I know it's happening.

Another thing that impressed me on the drive were the surprising number of "Support the Troops" ribbon decals on the trunks of cars, trucks, and SUVs. Thousands of them, everywhere. Admittedly, I was driving through "Red State" territory, but I was still unprepared for the gonzo patriotism and jingoistic nationalism that I encountered. Yeah, I too support the troops—I support ending all illegal, immoral, imperial wars and bringing home our soldiers. I support bringing them home in one piece, not in body bags or minus limbs or with psyches scarred for life from what they've seen and sometimes done. I can't know for sure, but somehow I didn't get the feeling that most of those drivers with ribbons on the backs of their vehicles shared my anti-war sentiment. Apparently the stern lessons of Vietnam have been forgotten very quickly.

I think back to 1969, to seeing "Easy Rider" at a midnight sneak preview in Washington, D.C., then driving a thousand miles cross-country the next two days back to Columbia, Missouri. As a then-college student with long hair who lived in an urban commune, I felt a certain intangible fear on that road trip so long ago, if only from marijuana-induced paranoia after seeing that now-famous Dennis Hopper movie about hippies and drugs and rednecks and violence. Last month, driving across the western half of the

continent, I didn't feel fear, but I did experience a curious alienation from the America I saw, as if it were no longer a country in which I belonged or about which I could feel any pride, only sadness, given all that has transpired since those halcyon days of 1969, with Woodstock and Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon.

Yes, the landscapes along the drive west are still impressive. The seeming infinity of the plains; the majesty of the Rockies, the Cascades, and the Coastal mountain ranges; and the magnificent, rough turbulence of the Pacific Ocean in the northwest are truly awe-inspiring. I experienced again firsthand how blessed we are in natural resources and beauty. But that beauty is increasingly despoiled by the engines of human commerce, by our headlong pursuit for ever more wealth. The spirit of the land (in the truest sense of "spirit") is sullied by the toxic footprint of human activity. Too many people; too much waste; too much ugliness. I was well aware that I, too, was part of that ugliness, driving my fossil-fuel-burning automobile across thousands of miles of concrete ribbons, viewing America through the windshield, as if it were not actually real, but just another Technicolor movie.

Early conservationists such as John Muir foresaw the environmental crisis looming a century ago. Not just in terms of poisoning the environment, but in the loss of nature's gift of a profound aesthetic. The contrast of natural beauty and human ugliness is a spiritual paradox we live with as best we can. Compared to all other species on this planet, human beings are the most alien, as if we had come here from somewhere else, with no knowledge of and little feeling for living in harmony—with each other or with the earth herself. Our big brains have gotten us into serious trouble, friends. We have feasted off the land, so much so that six and a half billion of us are alive today. Current projections show that figure at nine billion by 2050, but that could be altered downwards by any number of unpleasant man-made or natural catastrophes over the coming decades. I need not repeat them here; most of my readers already know what we are risking by our current path.

In total, my long road trip was exhilarating, but it also left me with an ineffable sadness for what we have already lost forever, and what we are losing more of every day. Our souls are diminished in modern America, scarred as the land itself is scarred, and that is a great loss indeed.

Two weeks after arriving in Olympia, I finished my journey by driving to Portland to visit friends, then heading west to the Oregon coast. It just so happens that one of my distant forebears was Meriwether Lewis (my maternal grandmother's maiden name was Lewis, and she was a family relation of the famous explorer). I had followed the route of the Lewis and Clark Expedition from South Dakota on, and finally I arrived at the Pacific Ocean—the craggy cliffs and boulders of Indian Point at Ecola State Park near Seaside, Oregon, just south of Fort Clatsop, where whales gather and the Expedition wintered in 1805-06.

There I was, almost exactly 200 years later, following my ancestor's footsteps and canoe routes for 2,000 miles all the way to the Pacific coast. Lewis and Clark took two years to reach that very shore, undergoing extreme hardship and near-exhaustion. I made the journey alone, in comfort and luxury, in mere days.

I know of no feeling more central to spirituality than reverence, the experience of awe and humility at life's vastness and mystery. Standing on that still-pristine shoreline gazing out into the pounding surf of the Pacific Ocean, wondering about my own past and our shared future, I felt deeply reverent.

Collectively, we could use a lot more of that feeling.



Bill Herbst resides in Olympia, Washington. To schedule an astrological session, either in-person locally or long-distance via telephone, send an email to bill@billherbst.com, or call 612-207-4486 and leave a voicemail.

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