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My American journey

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MY AMERICAN JOURNEY

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Abstract

In 1976, the bicentennial year, my father took a trip around the United States for a college project. Now in the same place as him, I decided to set off and recreate his journey. I packed my father along and we drove 10,000 miles around the country retracing his tracks and exploring how our country has changed and how it has remained the same. Along the way I found stories that help to frame our country's current state. A number of these stories were published in the *Detroit Free Press*, just as some of my father's stories were published in the *Flint Journal* in 1976.

"Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who people the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady rooted ones stayed home and are still there." – John Steinbeck

"Having travelled Europe for a few months, I would prefer nothing more than to sit idle. But honestly, idleness is not befitting of me, so I leave for the country.

Loneliness was my biggest fear as I dreamed of exploring America alone by bus. So I invited along a companion who became the driving force in turning this Steinbeck-like adventure into an epic, cross-promoted media event.

This journey is not what I originally envisioned, but looking at the trip now, my initial dream couldn't have been realized. Bus travel is limited in its geographic reach and relatively slow. Even a solo drive from coast to coast in a month would have been more exhausting than rewarding. Instead I decided to follow my Dad on a 21st-century retracing of his Bicentennial adventure. The constant access to a 4G hotspot for our iPad and iPhones, to GPS directions, to digital photography geared for instant publication, and to our iPad and IPhones themselves, they all are common parts of our lives. To capture a snapshot of us interacting with America without these tools would be unrealistic. We cannot carry a pitchfork and claim to be American Gothic. We are middle-class American suburbanites, and this is our story.

What will happen is unknown and incredibly exciting. The country is big and bold, posh and poor, natural and gritty." --**My Journal, July 29**

Introduction

The trip I am about to describe was conceived four years ago as I toured colleges near the end of high school. At the College of Wooster in Ohio students are expected to spend their senior year doing a research project. As I walked, I thought of many projects on that Wooster tour. The recollection of my father's own senior research project at the University of Michigan Residential College stayed in my mind ever since.

In 1976, the year of the American Bicentennial, my father proposed a grand survey of the country to the Flint Journal, his local newspaper. As a college student who had barely left his state, it seemed a great idea to see his homeland and write about the experience. The *Flint Journal* accepted, and he set out on a three-month journey. My father couldn't afford a car and instead opted for an Ameripass, a bicentennial-year deal from Greyhound for one-fee unlimited travel. Then off he went around the nation, publishing a weekly article in the travel section and seeking to write the great American novel in his free time; the latter hope was naïve and the novel never was published.

Now I am the same age as my father when he undertook his journey. Over the past third of a century, the country has experienced major changes. I wanted to look for those changes as well as aspects of the country that haven't changed. There were, however, a few problems with perfectly recreating his trip. The Greyhound bus schedule is not as far reaching or as extensive as it once was. Even if the bus system had been the

same, bus schedules limit times of departure, slow travel with local stops and box in the traveler's points of travel to the towns listed in the schedule. I only had one month to complete my trip, I didn't have an entire summer to devote to this project, and I didn't have the money necessary to finance a months-long excursion. So I changed the parameters to a trip by car (an old red minivan my grandmother had given us, to be exact) to make the journey within my time frame. At this point my father mentioned that he wanted to come long on my trip. Realizing that he could help pay for things, keep me company, recall aspects of his trip, and most importantly convince my mother to lend me our van, I allowed him to come. I expected that this would be something like Travels with Charlie by John Steinbeck. I would be Steinbeck, he would be Charlie.

After this stage of planning I went off to England for a semester of study abroad. I frequently emailed my father about scheduling a planning session of some sort; however he always told me that the planning would go fine and I need not worry. So, I took his advice and experienced Europe. I took a three-week trip around continental Europe that would later prove a useful point of comparison to my experiences around my own country.

Upon returning home from my extensive trip abroad I discovered that my dad had gotten quite excited about our trip. He already had a number of people lined up to host us in their homes around the U.S., and he was looking into routes and hotels for the nights when we wouldn't be making home stays. My father was no Charlie and was instead intent on leading the planning. At first, I was taken aback. This was supposed to

be my trip. When he had gone on his jaunt across the states no one had helped him plan. Luckily, after a bit of discussion, we came to an agreement that his finding people to stay with was a great thing. Not only did it greatly limit our costs—even Motel Six's are expensive if stayed at over a month's time—but it also allowed us to experience each area with a tour guide. I had gone to Brussels with no tour guide or guidebook and frankly it was a disappointing visit. My father's contacts were also people I never would have found on my own. Once again my outlook on the trip turned positive, and I was excited.

Before describing my journey I must first take the time to explain what my father does for a living, otherwise his actions and ability to fund my journey will not make sense. My father was for many years a journalist for the *Detroit Free Press*, developing many contacts around the country. Presently, he writes articles for an online magazine that he and his cousin founded called ReadTheSpirit.com. The website regularly publishes articles concerning spiritual life, American values and cultural diversity. His small company also publishes books in related fields. My father decided that my trip would be an ideal series of articles for his magazine. I agreed and the bonus was that my father's business would reimburse us for gasoline and motel charges—a bonus too good to pass up.

There is one last part to tell before the trek begins. My father proposed his trip to the *Flint Journal* in 1976. This experience would shape his life and ultimately steer him towards his career in news media. I decided we should pitch the story to the *Detroit*

Free Pres,s and my Dad made some phone calls. While I am not planning on becoming a journalist, this opportunity to be published in a major newspaper was still quite exciting. After getting a curious response from a *Free Press* editor, we drove to downtown Detroit and went into the *Free Press* building. In truth, because of the declining fortunes of newspapers in recent years, the building is the *Detroit News* building, with half of the floors leased to the *Detroit Free Press*. The weakness of the Detroit newspapers signaled an important difference between 1976 and 2010. When my father proposed his trip, newspapers were a dominant form of media in the United States. Now they are struggling to stay in business. The *Flint Journal*, the paper that published my father's travels, has considered entirely ending paper distribution. There is a statistic that my father likes to point out: ten years ago there were over 200 full-time religion news writers employed by U.S. newspapers—currently there are only a half dozen. For years, he had been the *Free Press* Religion Writer; but when he founded ReadTheSpirit in 2007 and left the newspaper—the Free Press ended that particular specialty byline after nearly a century of religion newswriters. When we walked into the Free Press building, it was obvious that they were desperate for our content as four high-level editors came to our meeting. In the old days when newspapers were thriving, such an idea would have been a plum for a senior staff writer. Today, newspaper writers rarely hit the road like this. The *Free Press* editors liked our proposal and agreed to co-publish our trip along with my father's website. The editors wanted a post every weekday for their online editions, plus a piece for their Sunday print editions. The meeting could not have gone better.

At this point, I asked my Dad about getting a sponsorship from Ford to drive a convertible Mustang around the country. He vetoed that plan. Among other things, a corporate sponsorship would not have allowed the *Free Press* to accept our stories as journalism; taking a corporate gift like that would have violated their code. So, a minivan we would drive.

We bought snacks, my dad choosing fancy crackers and myself picking Target brand beef jerky and peanuts, loaded up our van with all possible equipment and got ready for our epic journey. It was hard to sleep that night.

Leaving early on Friday July 30, we set out towards Sault Ste. Marie, MI, the first stop from my father's trip. One of the first notable differences from my dad's trip was the existence of Global Positioning Systems. From the moment we left we knew approximately what time we would arrive at our destination and how many miles were left. We also had little chance of getting lost. We had more navigational power in our little Garmin GPS than the greatest explorers before us. It was our Sacajawea and our North Star.

Our first stop was only an hour north in Goodrich, Michigan. Both of my parents grew up there and both sets of my grandparents still live there. We pulled up to the family farm and met my aunt and uncle who keep the place running. It was sweet corn season and their stand, which sells the best sweet corn in all the land, was in full operation. We said quick hellos and goodbyes to everyone, loaded up some sweet corn and hit the road once more. It turned out that my father had managed to interview my

aunt and uncle about their thoughts on the current state of the country and of the world and that became our first article. It was an important interview as the small farmer, like newspapers, was once a mainstay of American society. Now, they're disappearing. Yet, my aunt and uncle still farm and still cling to that image of Goodrich as a small farming community, even though most of its farms have been turned into subdivisions.

Letting my dad take some time to compose the article I took the wheel. We made steady progress into Northern Michigan. A driver who has driven this route knows that we also made steady progress into the wilderness. Searching for a way to make the first day more exciting I spied a sign that read "CCC Museum Next Exit." I immediately took it. Not only had I seen that sign on a couple of trips before and been intrigued at the prospect of some Civilian Conservation Corps history, but I also wanted to cement into my dad's head that I was the leader of this trip and we would make the stops I wanted. The rebellious part here was lost on my dad who was excited at the idea of a museum dedicated to a Great Depression era program dedicated to providing manual labor for out of work Americans. It is a good thing we have similar interests.

The drive to the CCC museum was our first experience with poor signage. We turned left, like the first sign said, then drove for five miles. There was no sign of anything at all, aside from a couple of cottages. We turned around and went back to a gas station by the freeway to ask directions. The attendant told us it's down the road, past a church camp and around a bend. We asked him if people say they like the

museum. He told us he's never seen anyone after they venture off towards the museum. We left a little unnerved.

Finding the museum just around the one bend in the otherwise perfectly straight highway we parked in the empty lot and set off to have a look around. Set amidst the woods in what used to be a CCC camp, the museum was quite memorable. While it would be a disappointment in an urban setting, since it was amongst the endlessly straight lines of towering pines planted by the very workers the museum was honoring there was a certain rustic quality to it that made it memorable. The only other person on the compound was a nice young DNR employee who happened to know nothing about the museum as this was her first day on the job. She showed us around, played a video tape and showcased the bronze sculpture that stands outside. The sculpture is an interesting piece. It was a ripped young CCC worker with the face of FDR.

A man wandered near us at about this time and my dad immediately struck up a conversation, an ability I have yet to develop. This man turned out to be just about the perfect model of this museum's clientele. His father had ridden a bicycle from Detroit to this exact camp to escape the poverty of his home. The man had never talked to his dad about the story and only found out about it later while reading some old journals he found. The man was himself recently unemployed and had come to the museum for inspiration. He of course drove a car up here and had little interest in planting trees, but was still unsure about his future, as well as the future of his country in these tough economic times. The echoes of the father's story in this own man's was both eerie and

amazing. Here was another person like myself retracing a journey that his father had made. This man represented a theme I found in Americans. He was sure that he wouldn't plant trees or ride a bike across state. He was very modern. However, at the same time he was desperately seeking his roots, searching for his past. The thought occurred to me that I could've been making this trip after father had passed. I was glad I wasn't. It started getting late, so we set off again.

The drive up to the Mackinac Bridge was a somber reminder of just how dangerous our trip might have been. In 2009 one person died of a shark attack in the whole US. This received much media attention. That same year over 33,000 people died in car accidents. The majority of these fatal accidents occurred on roads with speed limits of 55 mph or more, which would include most of the roads on our route. Only after a half hour we came across a large camping travel that had flipped over across the freeway and had blocked all lanes. The truck that was once towing it was now hanging from the trailer hitch like a toy. We got there before the police and were therefore able to go around the accident on the shoulder. Only some twenty minutes later we hit a horrible traffic jam. Traffic was slow enough that the people in front of us got out and had me take their picture in front of some trees. When we finally got to an exit and pulled off for gas and bathrooms we learned that there had been an accident with multiple fatalities. We bought our drinks and drove on a bit more carefully.

We stopped at the Mackinac Bridge to take some pictures and stretch. The weather was good, with the temperature being high, higher in fact than any

temperatures until California. The view of the two great lakes was uninterrupted. It was serene and beautiful. We had to leave for the road.

After what seemed like an endless amount of time driving amongst trees we reached Sault Ste. Marie. A small city next to the Canadian border, it is famed for being the location of the Soo Locks. Once the biggest locks in the world, they are still impressive in scale today. We stopped and watched a small boat ride into the lower end of the locks, slowly rise up and then sail off into Lake Superior. It was slow and majestic. It was also exactly the same scene that my father had seen on his trip. Inside were signs about a new lock to be constructed, but for our trip the locks had been unchanged since 1976. While some changes in America come at light speed, others are glacial.

After that we realized we needed a place to eat. On the outskirts of town there was only the traditional array of American fast food restaurants. The logos are so common it is merely expected that they are in close proximity to one's present location. In the historical downtown area all of the restaurants appeared to be tourist traps. Every traveler in the US should learn to spot these places. They are covered in neon, advertise things like A/C and how many seats they have; and they usually have a gift shop. The food will be overpriced and most likely of poor quality. We avoided them at all cost.

While walking in front of a line of these types of establishments, debating which one looked the oldest (if it's old it must have some merit we reasoned), we came across VFW Post 3676. There was a sign out front for fish fry Fridays. The sign was old as was

the building beside it. After much debate we decided to go in and try it. The room behind the door had two elderly women smoking and drinking beers. An old man half asleep at the bar was surrounded by bottles. There was no sign of fish. I poked my dad and started for the exit. Just then a waitress popped in and said, "You guys here for the fish?" and without pausing for an answer pointed to a door marked "meeting hall." On the other side was a large room with tables and women in floral prints telling us to go and buy a ticket. We were then seated and brought coleslaw and baked beans in little plastic cups. They were okay, but a bit strange. Finally our server came back with a tray of fried fish and unceremoniously put them on our white foam plates. They were, without question and beyond debate, the greatest pieces of fried fish I have ever eaten. The fish fell off the skin. The breading was flavorful and the perfect mix of breading and crunch. It was good enough to act as onetime Pavlovian training, as my mouth waters still at the thought of that fish.

There were other amazing parts of the fish fry aside from the fish itself. The first was that prior to stepping into this place I had been bemoaning the conformity of America. Then it was inside this standard building (there being presumably at least 3675 elsewhere) that I found a unique experience in the fish. I realized I had never been in a VFW post before even though I drive past them all the time. New experiences can be had in the most normal of places.

The other amazing part of this fish fry was the people. We got to talking up some of the people around us. The men got into a detailed discussion of how the fish had

been caught the day before by Native American fishermen and brought to the VFW post over night. The people near us were both young and old and some were well dressed and groomed and others were, simply put, not. Everyone, no matter how they looked, was eating the whitefish. And everyone was very happy. The people of America are not very good at coming together over politics or religion, but can apparently come together over good food.

We went to sleep at our Super 8 motel. The problem with staying in cheap motels is that they are always outside the city center and in the land of parking lots and drive thrus that surrounds most American cities. This one was no exception and the view from our window was a Walmart. I kept the blinds closed.

The next morning we set off bright and early, planning on leaving Michigan for the first time of the trip. We decided to start our day off with a good American breakfast. I had been missing a nice proper full English breakfast complete with beans, sausage, toast, eggs, a rasher of bacon, mushroom caps and black pudding. So I went for the American equivalent and got an egg McMuffin.

We started across the mostly empty UP. It is an interesting test of one's willingness to drive the speed limit up there. The limit is 55mph almost exclusively. And the stoplights can be counted on one hand, as can the police officers. Anyone who can drive the whole way under the speed limit is either very old or very boring, or perhaps both. I decided we go 64mph, in hopes that we get a lesser penalty if caught since we weren't a full 10mph over. It turned out that any time gained from speeding was lost

upon reaching Hulbert, MI. I wanted to send a text message to my friend with the same last name about my discovery, only to realize I had left my phone in the hotel room. An extra two hours was wasted as we had to drive back to get it. The level of conversation went down with our moods as rain started to fall. A bird flew in front of car and got whacked. It was perhaps not the best start to the first full day on the road. We pushed ahead to Marquette and a burrito place.

The driving from then on was scenic hills with packed pines. Lakes dotted the sides, some big, some small. The idea of untamed wilderness was stunning. It both excited with the prospect of the unknown and created an insulating silence, free from Wal-Mart and KFCs, that is in fact unnerving. A Rite-Aid within 5 minutes is a fact of life in my metropolitan home. I wondered how long these forests that had first held native peoples, then drawn Americans through them to the West, would last. Almost all of the trees here were relatively new, due to Michigan's previous timber industry. All of the wood for Ford's famous "Woody" came from up here. Since then, they've been left alone, some becoming protected forests, others just abandoned.

It is near this point that my feet became frozen. This was caused by my Dad's fascination with A/C. I wore a jacket, but my socks were buried in the trunk. Frostbite in August became a possibility. I bring this up because it highlights the climate. In 2010 it is expected that buildings have air conditioning, even in the relatively cool northern reaches. It is also expected that all automobiles have it as well. Obviously, ours did. Earlier in the century A/C was a luxury. Also important to point out is that the climate

was on everyone's mind as we went around the country. Every time someone would take us on a tour and talk about the weather, they would make a reference to how global warming or global climate change has affected the weather over recent years. Regardless of the exact science behind the debated phenomenon, it is definitely an important issue to many Americans.

The chill of the A/C became more noticeable because once one passes into Wisconsin the scenery drops off. Driving to Duluth through Wisconsin is duller than the UP. Hills that once were scenic now only limit visibility. The trees are dense and the only excitement comes from passing the slower moving automobiles. The information center near the Ashland islands is the first point of excitement after endless trees. There are stuffed animals (don't think plush, think taxidermy) everywhere, including sea turtles and toucans. There are also bubbly Park Rangers, looking far too official (wearing uniforms and badges) for their jobs as information clerks. After a stretch on the stairs up to the observatory, it was off again.

After passing the third sign for a historical marker and feeling guilty for skipping each one (as my major is history), we decided to stop. We turned down the old road following the sign. The next sign we see said "Rough Road – Drive at your own risk." The road commission wasn't joking either, after the first few potholes we turned at a stop sign and started driving over one of the worst road surfaces I've ever seen. We saw a sand turn off point and stopped. Behind some trees was a beautiful unspoiled beach. It

wasn't a marker, but was definitely worth experiencing. On the way back we saw that we had taken a wrong turn, but decided to give up and head back to our proper course.

On the final drive into Duluth we passed a rusted out beached tanker labeled "American Victory." It was less a metaphor for a rotted city and more a show of the past and the future being built on top of it. Quite quickly the image of the tanker is lost as you drive up a brand new bridge that takes you to new heights and you can see the whole of the renovated waterfront district and the downtown.

Having come into the city earlier than expected we went to the waterfront, a remade port area where the warehouses are now shops and the docks are filled with antique tall ships, to grab some food and see the sights. The waterfront had once been a bustling Great Lakes port, but had then lost much of its traffic when manufacturing left the area. To further the problem it was determined that the ships that were still coming were better off docking elsewhere at newer larger docks. The warehouses downtown were abandoned. Since then developers have gone in and made the area walkable, exciting and the best place to visit in the city. Like the "American Victory" ship the old worn sides of the warehouses now existed for gawking at what once was as you experienced what is.

For food, My Lonely Planet USA guide (a monstrosity that I can't imagine is useful for anything other than the type of trip we were on) suggested a small establishment located in the basement of an old brick warehouse called Amazing Grace Bakery / Deli. The walls were lined with photos of musicians who had played on the

small stage. I ordered the Chicken Salad on wheat. It was superb. We had had two excellent dinners in a row. We were happy. My dad decided to interview the owner, an older woman who just happened to be in to pick up some food. She told us how she didn't have a story to tell, just a tasty business to run by their motto: "Be Kind, Be Brave, Eat Good Bread."

As an aside, the cutest girl I had seen in some time made my sandwich. Blonde, big-eyed, a tie-dyed t-shirt and one of the sweeter voices I've heard in my life. Sadly, it is far too last century to like a girl for her sandwich making ability, so I'll just remember her fondly. We decided to try and eat breakfast there tomorrow.

I wrote then in the journal I was keeping about where I saw my relationship with my dad going:

> "We will see how the relationship with my Dad will hold up. Topics of conversation aren't exhausted, but they are becoming depopulated. Also, no issues have yet arisen. If one does, I predict it will be due to my father's over-planning and my own free-form travel. Or perhaps my humour style being different from his.
>
> Otherwise, it's been great."

Leaving our motel we packed up and got in our van. My Dad backed up and there was aloud "bump" as we clearly ran over something. Having seen many homeless people in the area, I was afraid we had just hit one. Slowly, my Dad went out to check.

He brought up his computer bag. He then silently pulled out his brand new Mac Powerbook and handed it to me. The screen lit up like shattered stained glass. There was a large bend in the middle. Still both speechless, my Dad next pulled out his IPad. That just did nothing. In about ten seconds of driving he (he drove and had moved the bag) had destroyed about $3000 worth of electronics. I laughed a bit at the horrible nature of the situation. My Dad just swore under his breath.

We started off again. I asked him if he was okay, he said yes, but we didn't speak for a little while. Eventually he came around to normal and started acting cheery again. Later we were told by a Buddhist Priest my Dad knows that this was a Zen experience. I agreed that the true nature of experiencing the open road was partially obscured by our fancy electronic devices. In 1976 the most expensive thing my Dad had on him was probably a radio. The idea of portable electronics would've been a watch. On this trip I felt naked when I had left my phone at a hotel. From here on out he now only had his iPhone and my laptop to borrow. We had lost neither of us nor the vanm and therefore our trip was still going well in my book.

Out next destination was Bemidji, Minnesota, but our next stop was Grand River, the birthplace of Judy Garland. Driving through the place, one can easily imagine why she wanted to get out. We barely realized we were in the city before we were out of it again and had to turn around to find the museum dedicated to her. The first part of it was strange to say the least. The linoleum floor was yellow, I guess to seem like the yellow brick road. Instead it all just looked like a High school. Next to the check in desk

and the posters from Garland's best movies was a life size Velociraptor model. Apparently the museum also housed a local science center, although I like to think that they were trying to get a movie made that is the Wizard of Oz meets Jurassic Park. I'd have watched it.

The best part of the whole place was the connected house that Judy Garland once lived in. It was the best because it was literally a house. There were barely any signs and no cases or plastic shields or anything. You could literally touch any artifacts, and there were no curators to stop you. I resisted the urge, due to my respect for the historical, but the prospect of pretending to be part of the Garland family was enough. Quickly though, it felt less like you were in a museum and more like you were committing a home invasion, and I moved on. To its credit it was more real than any museum I've ever been in.

Grand River was also near the start of the beautiful Minnesota countryside. The land of a thousand lakes was really a good moniker as the lakes truly were dotted by more lakes. The grand natural design was only interrupted occasionally by casinos. Was gambling in the woods better than in the city? We didn't find out

We then got to Bemidji. My thoughts from my journal at the welcome center:

> "Standing at an intentional aquatic "weed" area and looking at the flowers I noticed a plastic water bottle in the middle. Smack dab too far to reach. Too close to go unseen. At that moment I could've slugged the person who did it. Or, if they looked tough, yell to inform them of the trash can twenty feet away. I

had to turn away to prevent more fuming. I don't believe the perpetrator hated the nature or the beauty (unless it had once swallowed their puppy). Instead I suspect the person simply didn't care. Was apathetic. Nature is irrelevant. That, I think, is the scariest stance of all."

After my thoughts I went back to collect my dad who was engaged in a discussion about proper area coffee shops with locals standing next to a 20ft high representation of Paul Bunyon and his ox. We crossed the Mississippi for our lattes, and then uncrossed it to find our first home stay, the Nerburns.

Kent Nerburn is an author and artist who specializes in Native American themes. He makes a point of noting that he is definitely not Native American, but he is well respected within that community. He is middle aged, married and a rustic fellow. The Nerburn's house is back in the woods, overlooking a lake. The house itself is custom built and incredibly beautiful, designed to blend in with the surrounding landscape. Getting in late we said our hellos, found the room we'd be staying in and went to sleep.

The next morning we awoke to the beautiful smell of breakfast. The Nerburns had taken it upon themselves to make us bacon and French toast created with homemade bread. Next we were off to the continental divide. The point we went to marks the end of the Mississippi watershed. Everything on one side goes north and everything on the other goes south. Our guide, Kent, talked of the subtle differences between the north and south portions. He summed up his findings by saying going north was an inhale and going south was an exhale. The plaque for this doubled as a plaque

for a misguided Italian explorer who had labeled a nearby lake as the source of the Mississippi, which it was not. As best I could tell this explorer's mislabeling had no effect on anything, except his own pride. It is interesting what counts as plaque worthy history. We continued north. I was moving along a divide in America that I had never crossed. I inhaled... then exhaled.

Our trip then took us to Red Lake Indian Reservation. Ken, who had previously taught there, gave us a tour. I'd been to Red Lake before as a high school freshman. It was a church trip, and I didn't learn that much about tribal culture, something I looked back on with dismay. I imagined the porch I helped build and the paint I helped brush on was helping one of the many home owners. We drove past the old casino. Then we drove past the school were I had slept, and that a student had shot up nine months later. Then past the new casino. When the school had been shot up by a troubled student I remember seeing an interview with the principal where he talked about how he thought maybe this would make people care about the current plight of their tribe. I hadn't heard about Red Lake since.

Just outside the reservation boundary we stopped our car at a local artist's house, Al. He works with metal, creating some of those interesting but common welded hunks of metal that looks like an animal or some other shape. His more uncommon art involved stones wrapped into welded metal and faces etched into the stones. The half welded skeleton of a rusted chain giraffe lumbered over us. Al's shed was a seemingly

random but uncannily organized , and it had guns welded around stones hanging on the wall.

Stepping over a partially completed railing for the local homeless shelter lying on the floor Al began to tell us about his work with kindergarteners and welders (A match which I figured would fuse more children together than metal), and how some of his greater pieces came from them. His "toolbox", a box literally made of tools, was the highlight.

As we entered his aluminum shed to gaze on his piles of rusty metal, Aaron Copland was playing on the radio, making Al, in old blue jeans, a bizarrely colored cap and an unbuttoned denim Christian shirt, seem the most American man in the world. Support grew for this theory as Al, a town board member, described his trek through the democratic process in getting a fellow artist's sculpture put back up in town. The piece, a fiberglass beaver painted with a clear vaginal representation, was carted off by police due to obscenity violations. Using a well-attended town meeting and letter writing campaign, Al convinced the board to let the beaver be put back up. Now all the town can gaze on the bizarre beaver with a flowing flowery vagina on its chest.

Al was also very close to the Jeffersonian ideal. He pushed for low taxes and believed everyone should at least partially be able to support themselves. He said he believed everyone should own chickens. Al was a rarity along our trip as he had no interest in technology or in modernizing. He just wanted to subsist and do good. I couldn't imagine that his life was easy, but he loved it.

Lunch at a café in Bemidji involved soup and half a Great Lakes wall-eye sandwich, which was all well and good, save the bizarre wild rice, dried cherry and walnut goop that was a few revisions away from the delicious treat the menu promised. Refueled, Ken gave us a tour of Bemidji. The tour was not long. We stopped at the local science center, which was running out of money, due to the government's decision to move funds to a new hockey arena. Somehow in a time of countrywide budget deficits, money can always be found for sports. The place was busy at least. Many little kids were running around poking displays and looking at some animals. Outside stood a towering metallic T-Rex designed by Al. Each metal "bone" was picked from a scrap pile by a different school kid. Ken pointed out his son's bone, a hooked claw that looked like a piece of a monkey wrench. Jefferson himself had an interest in art, so it goes with Al's Jeffersonian label (of which he took pride in) that Al enjoys beautifying the city. We stopped at a coffee shop worked by a cute girl. The coffee had quality to match its server. For a city of 13,000 the number of coffee shops was astounding.

The whole day Kent had been asking us if we wanted to meet this man he knew. Kent kept sounding uneasy about it as this man was a bit different than most, having been raised in the Canadian wilderness. He was Native American and lived on a reservation on the other side of Bemidji. Since we had nothing else on our plate that day we decided to go out and meet him. On the way we discussed the 40 below temperatures that northern Minnesota experiences for a couple of weeks every winter. I decided I didn't want to live in Minnesota. I also decided the high number of coffee shops was to accommodate literally freezing locals during the winter months.

The man Kent took us to was named Morris. His house was a mobile home, but the yard was spotless and the garden was kept up. There didn't appear to be anyone living too close by, only woods on either side. My first impression of him was that he was a bit odd (if for no other reason than his long hair), but interesting. He was stripping basswood. Morris gave an explanation that basswood, when made into a drink, can prevent and even cure poison ivy and poison oak. (We thought of this as silly; however, later on Wikipedia we discovered that basswood is a key ingredient in new poison ivy research.) We introduced ourselves and he offered to show us around his yard. In one corner was a pristine children's playhouse, looking like it was fresh out of a department store. Morris built it himself. Woodwork was not the only thing he could do. He showed us where he was tanning hides, building a birch bark canoe, raising chickens and rabbits for food and had a full sweat lodge in the woods. We then sat down for an interview.

Morris was amazing. His life was that of a traditional native trying to make do in a modern world. He wants to live his life in a way as much like his ancestors as possible. This task is quite hard for him. His wife has been blinded by diabetes and must go to the hospital frequently. Recently, a truck had gone by spraying herbicide along the road to get rid of weeds. That same strip along the road also is home to most of the berries that Morris eats and uses for medicine. Shortly after that, the deer he hunts for food started getting tumors all over. In the early 70's my Dad saw the "Keep America Beautiful" ad campign, with its famous crying Indian. By my trip those issues hadn't gone away. However, Morris doesn't just stand and cry, instead he did more. He has five children, all of whom are adopted. A few he rescued personally after they had become addicted

to drugs before the age of 10. His beliefs in the Native gods and in the ancient wisdoms were steadfast. It was as close as one can get to seeing an "indigenous person" in the US. Morris was truly someone special. Within a short drive of each other were two models of American vocation. One was a Jeffersonian workman, educator and community activist. The other was just as skilled and capable as an artist and builder, but in more traditional crafts.

Later, back at the Nerburns, who had just served us dinner from a grill that looks like a ceramic rocket ship and belched flames in all directions, we sat down for an interview with Kent. Not really taking part in the interview I wrote these reflections instead:

> "Sitting in on an interview with my Dad is humbling and stupefying. Firstly, because he has perfected the art of interviewing. His conversation style creates a natural tone, while his ability to shape the theme of the discussion keeps it on topic. Second, I sat today in a small room with two middle-aged men imparting life wisdom. My thoughts sounded foolish, or naïve. Sometimes both. I listen intently, trying to pick up this wisdom I have not yet learned. Still, conversations you don't talk in aren't really your conversations. I often begin to feel like a decorative hassock. I appreciate the Indian style of conversation which involves more listening than talking. Listening I can do. Morris, our Ojibwe friend, said he learned something about listening from me. It made me happy."

I imagined that my father was more like me on his trip; young and inexperienced, unsure about the truth of life. That night I couldn't sleep, ready for the next section of the trip. I wrote some more:

> "I lay in my bed listening to the sounds around me. Classical music playing in another corner of the house. A muffled voice and footsteps creek. A loon crying, but always in the background of all of it is the road. The wind like rush of cars, the burst of sounds from a car going too far onto the shoulder. I want to get back on it and drive. To get sucked back into its flow. Like a river I'll let it funnel me off into the unknown. 25 miles west lay the Great Plains. An American land mass I've enver seen. They excite me. Raised on a ¼ acre in the middle of a solid grid of roads and development I'll finally get to go West."

The farthest West I had ever traveled up to that point in my life was Bemidji on that church trip I mentioned earlier. We passed that point after a few minutes of driving and after only a handful of miles more the trees opened up and the land flattened out. Very quickly it started to become fields. As far as the horizon were fields of wheat and soybeans, with the occasional gorgeous break of sunflowers. This was North Dakota, the beginning of the glorious 75 mph speed limit and endless nothing. The fields were so constant that even driving full speed down a freeway you lose track that you are moving at all. We passed a car that was perhaps from '76. It was towing an old horse trailer with "Boss" emblazoned on it. I imagined that this was what the roads looked like when my dad was on his trip. Up front was a youth in a cowboy hat and plaid shirt. He was talking

on a brand new IPhone. We decided to stop in Bismarck, mostly because there was nowhere else to stop.

Bismarck appears out of the hills, a modern day fort of civilization in the prairie. We pulled off at the Capital Building. Its 18 stories, seen from miles away, are cold and ugly on the outside. But the art-deco interior and display of Rough Rider award winners (which include the apparently rough Lawrence Welk) made it a worthy stop. We tried to find a traditional soda fountain listed in the guide book, but even with the GPS we couldn't find it. So we settled for lunch at a restaurant/antiques store. My sandwich involved Wonder Bread, American cheese and Ruffles. It was a vile American construction that a European would have laughed at, but to its credit it filled me right up. Then off through nothingness. Even gas stations and McDonalds had trouble penetrating this far.

Eventually we reached Badlands National Park, the adopted homeland of the original Rough Rider – Teddy Roosevelt. Kent had told us to top and true to his word, the park was beautiful. Everywhere there were ornately carved hills shaded in tones of blue and red. The park felt classy and the road for the driving tour was freshly paved. A driving tour would've been foreign to the earliest explorers, but if we had to hike we couldn't have stopped. Driving is just so convenient. We saw our first buffalo, a mother with its child, as well as prairie dogs. Unlike the elusive buffalo there was no shortage of little dogs to see. I wanted to stay and commune with nature. My dad determined we had to move on, into Montana. Eventually, we stopped at the welcome center, which

was already a ways into the state and saw a sign explaining that the distance from Waibaux, Montana, our present location, to the other side of the state was the same distance as driving from Chicago to New York. It's the same distance, just without the two cities on either end, really without anything on either end. We drove a circle through Waibaux and only found people on four wheelers. We stopped at our Motel 6, which is the cheapest chain of accommodations in the country, once we were in Miles City. We tried to stay in family owned places, but they're very hard to come by. The Motel 6 had hard beds and few frills aside from a free Dixie cup of coffee in the morning. It's amazing that with only horses and bed rolls earlier men and women had pioneered through this area. It must've taken some zeal and determination to not just give up and turn back. We were driving through at 75 mph and still found the trip arduous. Still, looking out through the windshield at the wide open plains my mind wandered to thoughts of buying a plot of land here and trying to build a life free from the constraints of the congested metropolitan area that I'm from.

Our next day was one of endless driving again. We covered about 600 miles a day for those two days. That feels like a considerable amount of driving when the landscape is lacking in features. The hills of Montana are pretty for the first few hundred miles, but quickly become just plain hills after that. Although, I must say that the monotony was a bit magical. The moniker Big sky Country is befitting for Montana, because it really becomes just you, the road and the massive sky on the horizon. If I hadn't grown accustomed to living with modern conveniences I might've liked to live out there amongst the sprawling plains. Plus, there was my favorite sandwich shop of

the whole trip. In the middle of a stretch of nothingness, deciding that we would eat whatever was at the next exit, which most often was nothing, we came across Wheat Montana. It was an entirely new looking grain processing facility, combined with a restaurant and a gas station. The only other thing in view was an adult book store across the street. Inside Wheat Montana your nose smells only baking bread. I ordered a sandwich from the young cheery workers, a juicy shredded chicken sandwich called the Big Sky Club. I was truly impressed. The dining room was crowded with old men in overalls, biker couples and college kids. Exiting through the fake aluminum silo façade which was stacked with 50lb bags of grain for sale we ate our sandwiches on the road. They were good. The store had seemed like a 2011 trading post, in that it was a gathering place for people from all four compass points. We overheard two men who had just met for the first time discussing how national parks were full of foreign visitors this year. It acted a bit like a "listening post" and a community point for travellers, just as trading posts had over a century ago.

After the flatness of most of Montana, the terrain of the Rockies is like a theme park ride with ups and downs. On our long driving days we had been listening to Timothy Egan's new book *The Big Burn* about the large wildfire in 1910. The story centers around the town of Wallace, which resisted any suggestions from the park rangers up until the wildfire was right next to their town. The whole town burned and a number of park rangers lost their lives fighting the blaze. Being the 100th anniversary of that event and being that Wallace happens to be on the freeway, we pulled off for dinner. Regardless of its near complete destruction 100 years ago, it is now a

picturesque American town. We ate in a newly opened BBQ restaurant, which cooks its product in a giant smoker on the sidewalk. The food was amazing. We toured the town's two museums, one focusing on the fire and on the mining, the other specializing in railroad memorabilia. They were small, but nice and the mining one even let us in for free, because it was about to close. The biggest threat to Wallace now is not fire we learned, but instead is a lack of jobs.. The mining industry has long since left and the locals are poor. The owners of the barbecue restaurant opened it because there were no jobs for them in Wallace, but they desperately wanted to stay. Luckily they hadn't opened a McDonald's.

Our next stop was Cour D'Alene, Idaho. Contrary to the images of potato fields that fills one's head when thinking of Idaho, Cour D'Alene is a beautiful city on a lake, nestled in between some mountains. We stopped here, because my grandfather had been stationed here for a few months during World War II. For much of his life he talked about moving there one day. Since he is now too old and frail to ever make such a move, we decided to see why he loved it. Judging the city solely on its scenery, it is amazing the whole state of Idaho doesn't pack up and move there. The lake reflects the encircling mountains covered in trees to create what could be an American landscape painting. Then very quickly I realized this place was not a quiet hamlet. Parking amongst new luxury cars, we walked the streets, and discovered that Cour D'Alene is now a resort town. Posh hotels invade the views, as do brightly lit restaurants. We left a different way than we came in and discovered strip malls, fast food buildings and

parking lots that mark the inevitable American sprawl. It's amazing to me that amongst such natural beauty, people can build such ugliness.

We stopped for the night in Sprague, Washington. Our plan was to stay at one of the few family-owned motels we could find. Sprague is a very small city outside Spokane. Our GPS apparently had never been there as it had us drive across a glorified hiking trail (my father was yelling about possibly getting stuck the whole time) and then told us we had arrived once we were next to a church. My father still upset from us almost getting stuck on a hill on the trail started thinking we should ask locals. I looked around and saw no locals. There must've been a population of 200 people total in the city. I caught a motel sign out of the corner of my eye and drove towards it. It was flavored with purple neon cowboy boots as well as pink garland. It turns out we had stumbled upon what must be the only gay motel for hundreds of miles. Foregoing the themed rooms which charged an hourly rate we asked directions from the flamboyant owner and discovered our motel down the road. The room smelled like my grandma's house. Like the barbecue restaurant, it was also started by locals who had to either make jobs or move somewhere else. It struck me as amazing that some Americans will sacrifice everything in the pursuit of wealth and others will try so hard to stay right where they are.

Seattle

Seattle is the typical American city. Well, at least it should be.

While rising in the Seattle Space Needle, a teenager in our elevator made the inevitable comparison to the Eiffel tower. Both were made for World's Fairs and both have become iconic images of their respective cities. Both have restaurants on them that are quite expensive. Both cost money to go up and pack people awkwardly close together into an elevator. Most importantly, they both rise until we should get a Google Map's view of the area, but Seattle's landscape rises so quickly that the Space Needle only reaches the canopy of this urban jungle, not above it.

But, to simply write off the Space Needle as a lesser version of the Eiffel Tower is unfair to the needle. Its design as a flying saucer landing on a podium is as strong a symbol as any of America's Cold War fascination with space flight. While the space ship's view isn't as high as its French peer, it does include the Puget Sound, a remarkable body of water with edges bespeckled by greenery. Both structures are also meant to boast human progress through height. The Eiffel Tower sought to showcase what can be built through the use of industrial iron. The Space Needle evokes images of modern science.

While the two spires invite comparisons, the cities do not. The streets near the tourist areas of Seattle are filled with noisy tourists going on duck-boat tours into Puget Sound. The 2000 hit single "Who Let the Dogs Out?" blares from one of these car/boat

contraptions, while the passengers quacked using plastic duck bills and had me wishing it was duck season. Of course, annoying tourists are no reason to hate the attraction itself. Pike's Place Market and the accompanying waterfront were delightful, the market for its distinct local character and the waterfront for its gorgeous views.

Throughout Europe, museums and historic sites are major goals when seeing cities. In Seattle, that presents a problem. The Space Needle is a historic site, but only since 1962, a practically brand new structure by European standards. There are a handful of museums, but they tend to focus on recent popular culture and don't have the impressive, grand and serious feel of major European establishments. Filling that void in Seattle now is commercial tourism.

The goal at Pike's Place Market is shopping, from little toy cars to classic Life magazine ads suitable for framing. Asian pastries and small cheesecakes sell next to fruits and vegetables. There are men yelling while throwing fish, street musicians looking for a dollar and coffee pilgrims making their way to the holy site for Starbucks drinkers: the first store on Pike's Place (not to be confused with the new Starbucks store one block away). It's all asking for your money and yet it's still all very appealing.

Moving downhill to the waterfront, the cramped urban streets open and I finally felt freer, that is until I started looking at restaurant prices on the piers and immediately felt poor. One of the big downsides of Seattle, now crowded with titans of technology like Microsoft, is the sheer cost. Finding a cheap meal that's not fried is nearly impossible. Finding a cheap place to stay in the city is even harder.

The refurbished waterfront is at least free to walk along and is well worth such a physical exertion. While the piers in the area appear to serve only ferries and cruise ships there is evidence of industry. The meeting of tourism and trade has always appealed to me, giving the tourism a sense of reality and giving the industry a generally needed beautification. Like Duluth the city had experienced a reinvention. Once the manufacturing left, Seattle was tasked with figuring out what to do with its infrastructure. Technology and tourism are two of the things that have taken its place.

Just before leaving Seattle I visited Microsoft. Led around by a friend who is interning there, I was taken through shiny new office buildings that felt happier than the stuffy gray cubicles I envisioned. I got to accompany him into what felt like a hermetically sealed back room and look at the employee factory store. I then got to load up on free cans of soda from the employee cafeteria.

Leaving Seattle, I pondered the same thoughts I had after leaving Brussels earlier this year. Touring Seattle is worthwhile, but what I really felt as I left is how good it would be to live here. Seattle has an air of success and growth, yet everywhere I went I could feel the city's blues and greens from the nearby forested mountains and the even closer water. If they could just do something about the freeways that are more congested than a sickly person with a sinus infection and if I could find some high paying job in the area, I just might return.

We went onwards towards Oregon, where we would make two home stays. The first, in Tillamook, Oregon (home of Tillamook cheese) was with the notable bible

scholar Marcus Borg and his wife Marianne Wells-Borg. My father has been a long time contact with Marcus and figured this would be a prime story for his online magazine. We mostly chatted and spoke of life and religion. I spent most of the time admiring his Mercedes convertible and walking on the sandy beach of the Pacific Ocean. It was interesting sitting in on the family life of a famed scholar. Not only was it comical to see someone with encyclopedic knowledge of the bible talk about his dog's "poo-poo," but at one point, when Marcus was about to serve us dinner he said "I'm now taking orders" his wife snapped back with a quick "that's the only time you'll ever hear him say that." Laughter was the only way to escape the silent tension. There is an Earthiness even in the American elite.

Driving further down the coast of Oregon is a splendid jaunt, filled with views of sand dunes and the wide open ocean. We took this longer route to California as my Dad's cousin Doug Yunker was vacationing in a cottage just north of the border. My Dad wanted to catch up with him, and I wanted to meet him for the first time.

My Dad essentially pushed me out of the door of our van at Doug's house as he determined he had to go find internet at a library. I said hello to my cousin and he, smoking a cheap cigar and drinking wine, suggested we sit and talk on an old bench overlooking the coastline. Quickly my apprehension left me as we deftly maneuvered through the minor chitchat of what I was studying and what he did for a career (he is a retired social work professor) and moved onto a discussion of life and our futures. He has come to a point in his life where he has determined he has done his life's goals and

now just enjoys living and imparting life wisdom. I found it ironic that I was searching for advice from an elder who had chosen to leave all of his elders and move west. Although, this original lust for new surroundings had clearly been filled, since he was now set in place and permanent. I made the obvious connection between his story and the American story of "going west." He agreed and told about how he was stuck in a small town in Indiana and could see no other option than picking up and heading far away. Sometimes life imitates history.

Once my dad returned from his internet search, Doug took us on a tour of the nearby towns of Florence and Yachats. Florence is a big tourist city that still has a touch of charm. We spoke with a Tibetan immigrant who ran a stand at a local market, selling Buddhist paraphernalia. He had followed his brother across the ocean to try and start a new life in America. His outlook on the future was positive. His English was quite good and he seemed industrious. 100 years ago, he would've been up against fierce racism. Today his biggest problem is the bad economy. I think his prospects are good. We met a single mother who had recently decided to open a children's book/novelty vintage store in the downtown area. This had been her lifelong dream and she wanted to teach her daughter a lesson about chasing your dreams. Opening a bookstore in the day of the e-reader seemed strange; however, an American opening a small business to pursue their aspirations did not. This city on the coast seemed quite American. Yachats was much the same. We went to the new store, a specialty wine and cheese place. The owner, who we all agreed bore a striking resemblance to the Campbell's soup girl, had also dreamed of running her own shop. She decided to open it in a town that had maybe 6 other stores

total. She was very kind and helped me pick out the first bottle of wine I ever purchased. That night we enjoyed the wine over a Columbian stew whose recipe Doug picked up working at a Columbian clinic. The next day we had to leave my new best family friend, who sadly I will probably not see again for a long time.

The Redwoods

Stopping in Redwoods National Park there was a feeling like I landed on the forest moon of Endor, from Star Wars: Return of the Jedi. The trees shoot up and up, leaving a partially shaded floor of ferns and shrubs. With the Redwoods shooting up that high, it feels as if one is inside a building. The walls are made of fog and the splotchy ceiling that towers overhead is made out of pine needles.

We stopped at the Lady Bird Johnson dedication site, because for some reason that sounded like an interesting place to go. All I knew of the woman was that she tried to get rid of billboards some time ago. The actual site, some ways out in the woods was about as exciting as the name suggests. And by that I mean it wasn't. There was a plaque and a picture or two of the whole ordeal, but it looked more like an unkempt picnic ground than a historical site. On the way we ran into a hiking tour by a park ranger. Dressed in a typical park uniform of green pants, brown fleece and those circular straw-looking hats, Jim Wheeler was imparting his knowledge of the possible extinction of some seafaring bird. The problem it seems is that the bird's chicks look exactly like tasty morsels of deliciousness for larger birds (think chicken nuggets to a four year old).

We followed Ranger Wheeler along as he pointed to a seemingly random clump of forest and gave us a quite interesting tidbit about edible berries, uses for the specific type of bark and the history of the place. It was fascinating, far more interesting than a Lady Bird Johnson plaque. The truth was that the old forest (some of the trees may have lived there for more than 2000 years) was a great deal more interesting than anything humans had done there in the past few decades.

To laugh at Mrs. Johnson's 1964 patch of dirt and trees would not be appropriate, though, given the importance of what she was a part of. Nearer the beginning of the twentieth century, when conservation was just starting to enter common parlance, those concerned with preserving the last redwoods were only left with some 4% of the original forests to save. Everything else had been cut down and sold. The last groves of the tallest trees on the planet were very close to the lumber barons' saws or the homesteaders' axes. Luckily for the trees, metal did not meet wood. Through the hard work of various individuals and organizations state and national parks were eventually formed that preserved much of what was left.

So, thank you Mrs. Johnson and your many peers for a good hike through the woods that hopefully, someday, I can take again with a son of my own.

Oakland and San Francisco

California brought warm climates and new landscapes. While our car almost overheated on the roads in, we arrived in Oakland safely. We stayed with another of my

Dad's cousins, Mel Bricker. Once a Methodist minister, he later moved out to California. Unlike Doug I'd met Mel before; he had been home to Michigan a number of times. We chatted some, but my father wanted to get to sleep early, he had a big meeting the next day in San Francisco with a division of Harper Collins.

Our drive into the city was a bit underwhelming. We weren't in the right area for the Golden Gate Bridge, and parking cost something like $20 an hour. But we made the best of it and walked along the waterfront. After a brief taking in of the sights and sounds we hired a rickshaw driver to carry us up the numerous hills to our appointment. My Dad got talking with the man and it turned out our driver was a Bulgarian tour guide who had a Master's degree in Russian history. His wife was having a baby and he needed some more money. Then he biked off into the distance. I sat in on the Harper Collins meeting, and listened to everyone, and collected business cards from the majority of the office who had all assembled to meet with my father. The intricacies of the meeting are not important here – it is my Dad's story to tell, not mine.

Our time in San Francisco was short, a common occurrence when trying to fit the whole of the continental United States into only 40 days. Yellowstone, Salt Lake City, Nashville and New York city are just a few of the stops I would've loved to make given more time. I will have time later on, just not on this trip. Tocqueville got 9 months to study the US and he only had 24 states. I had to see 50 states in only one month.

To LA

I must at some point delve into an interesting difference between my Dad's trip and mine. That difference is our 3G internet connection that was with us the entire way. Aside from a few remote locations our Sprint modem has given us the ability to connect with the rest of the world no matter where we are. On a strip of California highway I decided to have a Skype video chat session with my sister and mother. We were practically all in the same room, even though we were on different sides of the continent. Back in '76 my Dad had to look for payphones to call home on and, should his parents not answer, the wait for another phone could be days. Similarly, when I wanted to meet my friends at Microsoft in Seattle, I just sent a few text messages on the way into the city. I can only imagine how my father must have felt, completely disconnected from the people he knew.

Our contact we stayed with in Los Angeles was Tom Eggebeen. He's a Presbyterian minister who moved from Detroit a few years ago. His claim to fame in a city built around fame is his church service for dogs. I imagined pews filled with puppies, but it turned out that a church service for dogs means that the humans who come can bring their canines with them. Skeptical, I sat in the back and watched people come in and sit around the altar, all lugging their dogs in. Some came with dogs in purses, others with giant breeds. There were about 20 dogs that showed total. It was truly a sight to see. There were old people who looked like life- time church goers and young people, who revealed that this was probably the only time of the week where they interacted

with people over 30. I was impressed. I thought at first that this was a modern contrivance, but the 70s were a strange time, so it's hard to rule out a dog church.

Aside from his own dog church, Tom took us to Venice Beach for a look at LA culture. The beach was crowded with all sorts of people, many sporting tattoos and numerous piercings. It was enthralling. I felt like I was walking through a parade. The warm sun and bikini clad women improved my view of LA further. Every other mile we drove, we'd see a scene from a movie, like Griffith Observatory or the bridge Keanu Reeves jumps in *Speed*, creating the sense that we were in some sort of massive movie land. That was even before we saw the Hollywood sign. Later, he took us to his grown daughter's apartment in an old Pabst Blue Ribbon brewery. She and her boyfriend are both in the television industry. She works with the producer of Grey's Anatomy, and he is a second director on CSI: New York (which is oddly shot in LA). From a few picnic tables on the roof, one can see the whole skyline of LA. I fell in love with the city at this point and, if I had the money, would've started renting right then. Perhaps some other time. At night we went to Little Tokyo to eat and stumbled across a Japanese parade. People in traditional garb chanted things and carried elaborate religious sculptures. It was a perfect ending.

Getting in and out of LA outside of rush hour is essential. The freeway system there is extensive and extensively used. We arrived in LA with the help of our GPS so that we not only missed the traffic and easily found where we were staying, but we did it all without seeing a single landmark.

Leaving LA at 5 am the next morning to avoid the next rush hour we set off not on Route 66, but on I-40, a faster highway that parallels, for the Grand Canyon and eventually Winslow, AZ. Historic route 66 is largely rerouted now and is mostly seen through gift shops bearing its name.

We stopped at a Ludlow, CA, gas station. The attendant, a girl who was far too pretty and nice to be in such a nowhere place, explained that the cheese sticks my father had bought were the best in the world. We left without inquiring as to how many of the world's cheese sticks she'd tasted before making that judgment. I merged onto the freeway, clicked the cruise control to 75, put on my aviators, set in for miles of wide open nothing, and drove.

We saw the Mojave National Preserve. The difference between the unprotected Mojave and the protected Mojave is not noticeable. Both seem to contain nothing. Many miles passed.

At the Grand Canyon, we anteed up for an Imax movie, made for those who want to see the Grand Canyon without all of the nature. It was the main difference between the canyon in '76 and now and it was really awful. Had I wanted a movie I would've stayed home. Then, we finally drove up to the first look out. These heights and breadths are on a scale all their own. Amid people speaking any number of languages we walked up to the edge, which has no guard rail, and peered down and down and down. Finally our eyes met the spindly Colorado River which crafted it all. There is no

doubt that anyone who sees this wonder will be impressed. As massive as LA is in its urban landscape, the Grand Canyon is in its natural landscape.

Some hours later we were standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona, taking it easy. Over a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken in our motel room I silently determined that this all was to be stored in that part of my brain labeled "days to remember."

Not that the rest of the days weren't memorable. Our next stop was at Ghost Ranch, a huge religious oriented retreat center a couple hours north of Santa Fe. The mesas and rock formations are those stereotyped in movies and scenes taking place in the Southwest. It turned out that this familiarity wasn't just a coincidence, a number of movies have been filmed around there, most recently, *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull*. But it is not that film or any other piece of cinema that Ghost Ranch is known for; instead it is for being the inspiration for most of the famed painter Georgia O'Keefe's work. My dad did a story on how the Christian retreat center struggles to stay open amidst the harsh economy. I hiked some of the many miles of trails and imagined myself a young Lewis or Clark.

The next leg of the trip brought us through San Antonio, a stop my father made, to see the Alamo. It is a sight worthy of its fame. The signs all tell the tale of the heroic defense of the fort. I began to wonder about whether or not the Mexican army had a legitimate claim to the area. The signs had no information on this subject. We slept in a Motel 6 surrounded by semi trucks.

We then pulled into New Orleans. Our hotel, a jazz-themed nice looking establishment, was right in the French Quarter. This seems nice until you realize that on the other side of the block was an area that appeared to be a sort of slums. I'm quite sure I saw a drug deal. Luckily, American cities are designed to get you off from the expressway in the nicer part of town, so our drive through the slums was brief.

The French Quarter was quite important in my dad's trip. It is where he stayed for about a week to finish off the novel he was writing. The area was a bit different that day. The streets are now almost entirely souvenir shops and bars. Walking down Bourbon street at night, when the streets are filled with drunken happy looking people, I wished I had some time without my dad to experience the city in a way more suited to someone my age. Instead I just took in the bustling foot traffic and cheers from inside neon lit bars.

After a rest we set out to an area of New Orleans that is less fun than the bars of Bourbon Street. We went over to the neighborhoods worst hit by Hurricane Katrina. Five years after the poorly handled disaster relief effort the "ground zero" of the flooding looked awful. The random neighborhood we drove around in was overrun with five foot tall weeds and abandoned houses in different states of disrepair. Every now and then we would drive past a newly renovated dwelling owned by some urban pioneer, but otherwise the place was eerily void of life.

We drove closer to the silhouette of the now abandoned Six Flags theme park, which was actually already structurally unstable before the hurricane. We were looking

for a contact my dad had found called Tony Tran. He is a Vietnamese Catholic living in the Versailles (pronounced Ver-sail-es) neighborhood. The shops have signs in Vietnamese and the yards have banana trees. The story of the community that Tony Tran told us, in a thankfully air-conditioned room at their church, was quite powerful and is worth recounting.

The Vietnamese who populate Versailles, Louisiana were originally fishermen in northern Vietnam. After the start of the Vietnam War they were forced to move to southern Vietnam. Once the war started going poorly for South Vietnam they were again forced to move, this time to America. Most of the community was broken up amongst refugee centers. Toni found himself alone at a Catholic refugee center. He learned English by comparing his own Vietnamese bible to an English one. After a bit of a wait they found a government owned apartment complex outside of New Orleans and the community began moving back together. They all started becoming shrimpers and set about making money. The shrimpers already in the area, like those in the Bruce Springsteen song "Galveston Bay", got upset at their new competitors, who went out earlier and stayed out longer. Fights broke out. Crosses were burned. At least one person died. Eventually this problem subsided, with the story ending well enough to spawn a couple of movies on the subject. Once they thought they were in the clear, Hurricane Katrina came along, destroying their neighborhood. The Vietnamese were the first ones back into the city after the storm. Their first church service they had to paddle in by canoe. They then started rebuilding using scrap metal they found. Quickly they were back in business. However, the ailments of Hurricane Katrina were not yet done.

The neighborhood of Versailles is so far on the edge of New Orleans that on the city planning map it is just a green square. So, seeing this empty area the city decided to dump cleanup trash and toxic waste right next to the community. The Vietnamese were forced to organize protests and candlelight vigils to make the government stop. It wasn't until PBS made a documentary on the issue that the city actually did stop. After this there was a brief period of calm, until the BP oil spill. Being mostly shrimpers the community's livelihood was temporarily halted. Luckily, they have a tradition of saving 1/3 of their income so there was some money to live on. When we got there the first boats had just been allowed to go out. The first catch was something they called a miracle, their nets were full of some of the biggest shrimp they had ever caught. Still, the price of shrimp is low and they are not making as much as they used too. We asked Toni if any of this made him despair. He looked at us strangely and said "how could it? This is America, the land of opportunity. In my old country we had no chance to be anything but fishermen. Now we can be anything." Truly, their neighborhood shows the American dream. On one end are the now condemned apartments that they first moved into. On the other are the new mansions that the luckiest of the community can afford.

We stopped at Café Du Monde for some morning lattes. On the way out of New Orleans we stopped for a phone interview. Pulling off into a Lowe's parking lot we stopped near a number of Hispanics who all approached our van believing we had work for them. We drove off to a different area and finished the interview. It was interesting to think about how those new immigrants might one day have the same stories to tell as the Vietnamese did.

We had to pass through most of the south to reach our stop of Peach Tree City, Georgia in time. Alabama and Mississippi both passed by as only signs on the side of the freeway. Interestingly, at one point my father realized we had been driving in the wrong direction for about 30 miles, having missed an exit. Even with a GPS one can apparently become lost; we backtracked. Having been inspired by a Bill Bryson travel book, I wanted to visit Warm Springs, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's summer home and where he spent the last days of his life. I got quite excited about it. Our GPS took us to a random spot in the woods, but luckily there was a sign nearby. I couldn't wait. Then it was closed. I remembered that it was Sunday. It was quite the letdown. On the plus side our new route took us through Gay, Georgia, which gave us some laughs with signs like "Gay Baptist."

We arrived at Peach Tree City a bit late, due to the failed stop earlier. Our hosts, Susan and Evan Stitt, were old family friends who had recently moved away when Evan got a promotion. They're nice people and staunch Republicans. I mention this because it describes the population of Peach Tree City. A newer community PTC was meticulously planned out by its founders. Encompassing multiple golf courses and dozens of miles of golf cart paths a driver can barely tell anything is built anywhere from the main roads. Even the Wal-Marts and Targets are turned sideways and set behind trees. It's really a beautiful place. Although, with the next stop on the freeway, Union City, being predominately African American and also much more run down there was a distinct feeling that you are in The Stepford Wives. While driving around in a golf cart (every family owns one) we got to see PTC's most famous sight, the golf cart parking lot at the

high school. They were packed in tightly and arrayed in various colors, the overflow spilling out into the streets. Suddenly, my high school seemed lame.

Our guests took us to Atlanta to see the sights and also to meet with some Christian radio station operators who claimed to be the only moderate Christian radio station. While they were somewhat interesting I wanted to move on to lunch at the Varsity. Labeling itself the world's biggest drive through, the Varsity has a long line of cash registers and a short list of menu items. The workers, being trained to do so, shout "What'll ya have?" as you stand there. It made me a bit anxious over which combo to pick. I settled on two burgers, fries and a drink. They were good. My Dad, not viewing the Varsity as a cultural landmark, wasn't impressed and nearly had to be pushed to get his picture taken with a mural on the wall while wearing these free paper hats they give out. We then did another stop for my Dad to meet an author named Benjamin Cohen at some massive office building downtown. Our GPS took us to a random parking lot, which apparently happens frequently enough that there is a billboard up with directions to the actual building. It was kind of ridiculous. When my Dad told Benjamin where we had eaten lunch his face lit up and he got excited. "The Varsity? That place is amazing! We had them cater my wedding." Only then did my father begin to understand that we had in fact gone to a famous place. Our hosts and I felt vindicated. We had dinner with some of their friends, and then left again.

We drove on into the mountains of North Carolina to stay with a musician named Fran McKendree and his wife. Fran's band McKendree Spring is most famous for

the first popular use of the electric violin and apparently holds a small display case at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Being just a one night stop we could only listen to some of Fran's music and get a tour of his recording studio. His folk style music seemed perfectly natural in the tree covered mountains covered in fog. Onwards we went.

Our next stop was a bit controversial amongst those in the car. A friend I had met in England went to school at a place called Ladywood in Farmville, Virginia. I wanted to visit her. My Dad wanted to press on to have more time with our next host. I said no. After a few moments of me taking a sharp stare, my Dad agreed, as long as I was willing to drive most of the day. I agreed. Five hours later this backfired when I made a decision of exhaustion to drive as fast as possible on the highway with a 55mph speed limit. A no-nonsense police officer pulled me over and wrote me a 90 dollar ticket. I made a pact with my father that I would deal with the ticket if he didn't tell my mother. Having gotten to see my friend made it all worth it though.

Our next home stay was with Benjamin Pratt, another of my Dad's author friends. It was a quick overnight before we headed out to our last grand stop of the trip, Tangier Island. 34 years ago my Dad landed on this remote island in the Chesapeake Bay. Tangier Island is rumored to have been discovered by John Smith of Pocahontas fame. While this theory is doubted by the island's resident historian, it still is what's set in metal on the island's historical marker. Since then the island has mainly been a crabbing community with five different families moving in at various times up until the war of 1812, when the British docked their fleet there. The minister at the time stood

before the British officers and delivered an hour long sermon concerning their futile efforts against America and God. The ending to that story is recorded in the Star Spangled Banner. When my father got there, doctors had just diagnosed a disease called Tangier's disease, caused by the small gene pool on the island. There are a number of differences between '76 and now, including a small airstrip and the posting of a speed limit for the island's nearly ten cars. The most notable change, though, is that the island is significantly smaller now than it once was. It is estimated that it loses 35 acres a year, some to rising water levels and some to erosion. My Dad wanted to take me out to the end of the beach to see a man he had interviewed on his trip. We walked out there and all we found were some wooden pilings in the water and a rusted out boat. At the small museum we asked around to see if anyone had heard of this man, named Mr. Sinclair. With the help of the map we found where he used to live, now named Sinclair's beach. No one really remembered him. Aside from a couple of old newspaper clippings there was nothing else about him. When my Dad first came here Mr. Sinclair was the future. He was operating a seaweed processing factory, had opened a souvenir shop and was planning on selling lots for tourists to build hunting lodges on. Having lived there for only ten years, he was known as the "newcomer." Now almost all evidence of him has been washed away, while the traditional crabbing families still remained. My Dad likes to call him the man who built his house upon the sand. The idea that a man's life works could all disappear and be forgotten that quickly astounded me.

We did a number of while there. The residents' being a bit closed mouthed when it comes to talking to outsiders, we first had to befriend the pastor of the main church

on the island, a Methodist establishment standing since 1835. She was a 40-something woman, who solely because she was a woman was known as a reformer of the church. The conservative nature of these people was astounding.

Our first interview involved the oldest crab fisherman on the island, Preston Dize and his wife Norma. At 84, Pres, as he has been known since his schools days, gets up at three am to go out by himself on his boat and pull up a 70lb iron scoop from the water, hoping to find enough crabs to afford to live. Every day for the past 65 years, his wife has also woken up and worried and prayed for her husband. We asked Pres if he had considered retiring. He answered that crabbers don't retire; they just fish until one day they die. While not my ideal career, the image of this man working that hard all the time to support his family was very powerful.

Our next interview was with Duane Crockett, the history teacher at the local school. Each grade has, during a good year, over ten students. Duane was an interesting character, who detailed how every year when he teaches the Revolutionary War he always tears up. It was a bit odd, but we had a nice discussion about what teaching history is like and whether or not it was a good choice for myself. He viewed his job as trying to teach children to learn to live with their traditions while also modernizing for the 21st century. He led us to our next interview, Ooker.

Ooker is the mayor of Tangier Island. He got the name Ooker at the age of 3 when he called a rooster an ooker. Since then he's been called nothing else. A hardworking man, who sees himself as nothing more, Ooker has Christian tattoos up

and down his arms. His crab shack and house are easily recognizable by the Israeli flags flying out front; he is a firm supporter of the state of Israel. His goal as mayor has been to preserve the way of life that the island is familiar with. While being a mayor, he is still a crab fisherman first and goes out every morning with the rest of the men. Like the other two people we interviewed, Ooker doesn't see himself as something special, just another crabber who is working hard to get by.

On our final day on Tangier Island we discovered that there was to be a celebration for the opening of a new clinic. For the past decade or so the healthcare on the island had been provided by Dr. David Nichols, who would regularly helicopter in to provide treatment. This simply wasn't ideal however, as the clinic he worked in was falling apart and there was no full time medical staff for emergencies. On an island of 500 people, there were over 70 med-evac flights a year. With the help of a medical administrator, Jimmie Carter (no relation), Dr. Nichols set about getting the funding together for a new state of the art facility. In that time period it turned out that Dr. Nichols, by all accounts a saintly man, was dying of cancer. At the time he was given six months to live. Every eye in the crowd teared up at some point, especially when his assistant, a single mother who originally had no GED and was now a full nurse thanks to Dr. Nichols, gave a speech about how he was like a father to her. The governor had flown in to help with the ribbon cutting, a clear political move as the state hadn't assisted at all. I can now say I've seen the governor of Virginia, but never that of Michigan.

Before leaving Tangier I must describe the crab served there. Being the self-proclaimed soft shell crab capital, I was of course bound to eat some of these crabs. The crab cakes served at the family style dining restaurant had barely any cake and lots of crab. They were delicious, especially eaten with the fresh iced tea served from what appeared to be a trash can. I also had to try a soft shell crab sandwich; this went less positively. Served between two pieces of bread the crab is served fully intact with its legs sticking out the sides. I ate it, but the whole time I could only think about eating flying termites in Kenya and not about sandwiches. It was an experience.

After the island, we spent the next night with my sister in Washington D.C. where she goes to seminary with her fiancée. They took us on a tour of some of the sights, including the National Archives building to see the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. For a trip about America seeing those documents seemed the natural thing to do. In what could be taken for some sort of metaphor, a line always forms in front of the hallowed pages, however the signage and guards are quick to point out that there is no order to the documents and the line can be cut. So, we went ahead of those in line and took our places in front of the documents. The glowing cases at the front of the stone room made them seem like religious artifacts on an altar. I suppose to some they are. The impact those pieces of paper had on the country and on the world are immense. They weren't as breathtaking as the Grand Canyon but were just as powerful.

We also visited the Smithsonian American Art Gallery to see a Norman Rockwell exhibition I had heard about. It was an interesting show chronicling Rockwell's pursuit of showing Americans how they wanted to see themselves as simple endearing characters. Most of the art was loaned from the collections of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, two famed creators of American icons. There was a video of the two men talking about why it is that they collect Norman Rockwell works. George Lucas admitted it was at first just because he found himself with large amounts of money and nothing to spend it on. However, both filmmakers stress that the magic of Rockwell is not just the nostalgia for the past, but also the artist's ability to tell the American story through simple still images. The most memorable of the paintings were the *Four Freedoms* series that Rockwell painted after hearing FDR's speech of the same name. His paintings were quickly borrowed by the US Department of the Treasury for a bond tour and raised over $130,000,000. It is interesting to think of Americans as striving to be picturesque. The people of Tangier wanted to be seen as simple crabbing folk, even though they now had high speed internet. The young people we met in LA came off as cool TV people, even though they weren't actors and had hard unglamorous jobs. Mr. Rockwell apparently had a deeper understanding of the world than one might think at first glance.

Our final drive away from home took us through New Jersey, past the many signs for New York City which we had to skip for a lack of time, and went north to Vermont. We stayed with Rabbi Bob Alpert, who no longer does normal services and is a full time rabbinical comedian. I had seen him before when he performed with a Muslim counterpart at Eastern Michigan University. He lives in a custom built home that

resembles a barn in East Dorset, Vermont. It was the perfect place to end the trip. The lush forests and cool air easily gave way to looking back fondly on the 9000 some miles we had just covered. We went to the headquarters of the Vermont Country Store and perused various woolen creations as well as saw bottles of every type of maple syrup imaginable. That part of Vermont is like some strange escape from the rest of the country. Everyone appears wealthy and happy and the small cities show no signs of decay. My theory was that the thing that made it that way was the lack of jobs in the area. You could only afford to live there if you were a writer, traveling performer like Bob or had some other career that didn't require large office buildings or factories.

We didn't just relax though. Nearby was the birthplace of Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. This spot, a hotel that once contained a bar, is now a volunteer run hotel that caters to those members of AA who want to learn more about the organization. Touring the building felt like walking through someone else's place of worship. The people sitting around treated it like hallowed ground. In the "meeting room" where they have AA meetings hangs the giant solid oak bar top that Bill W once drank on. We learned the interesting story about how Bill and his friends had nearly given up after the first year. Most of the people they tried to help had gone back to alcohol. Luckily for millions of Americans he did not give up and 75 years later his organization is still around. Down the road we visited his grave where AA participants leave their sobriety tokens in honor of Bill.

We drove over to a place called the Weston Priory to meet with some monks. I was expecting Friar Tuck looking fellows and instead got absurdly nice old men dressed in blue jeans and t-shirts. They fed us a read lunch, which we at first thought meant the food was red. Instead it meant that everyone was silent, save for one old man in the corner who read from a long text on the history of Christianity. The whole time me and Bob silently wondered whether his new iPhone ringtone of "I'm not wearing underpants today" would go off. Thankfully it did not. I hear he know uses that bit in his stand-up routine.

That stop became our last of the trip after we received a phone call telling us that a longtime family friend had died and the funeral was the next day. Quickly our daily lives started to come back to us as we took the long road back to Michigan. We were mostly silent on this final stretch, all conversation topics having been chosen and our minds wandering around across the path we'd just taken. Over the 10,000 miles we travelled I saw my country that I had never fully seen before and will probably never see like this again. As I write this new high speed rail lines are being put in that might be the future of interstate travel. Even if cars stay supreme, I will never see the country with the same youthful filter from this trip. Over the course of my journey I had talked to Americans all over the country, most were optimistic about the future, but all were worried. In a recent values study by the University of Michigan it was found that the number one common value that Americans share is a worry for the financial security of themselves and their families. The economy was still at one of its worst points in a long time as was the unemployment rate. It would be an incorrect picture of America if I said

the country is only positive. Still, I could not help but travel the country and see what many before me had seen, opportunity. The wide open spaces of the West are like blank canvases and the cities we traveled through all had brand new developments amongst them. Being at an age where my future lies open before me I was overwhelmed with the options and pathways that my country has. I learned that America is going through radical changes, just as it has been throughout its history. A medicine man in Montana is struggling to balance ancient tradition with modern times, a city in Washington is redefining itself in new ways and an island in the Chesapeake is trying to avoid becoming irrelevant and at the same time avoid literally disappearing. As these changes are taking place around the country there are also being born great opportunities. Morris is becoming a pillar of his community, leading classes for local youth where they learn about their heritage. Seattle has birthed both Amazon.com and Microsoft in recent years, something no one could have foreseen in 1976. The Governor of Virginia flew into Tangier Island while we were there to cut the ribbon on a brand new state of the art medical facility, funded in large part through charity. I saw our country as it is right now, and it is amazing. As far as predicting where it will head in the next 30 years, I can only say that it will look far different than it does right now.