

Cover Story

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Crumms bond as son retraces steps of his father's journey 35 years ago

By Amy E. Whitesall



Eastern Michigan University senior Benjamin Crumm has been to Brazil, Kenya and Bulgaria. But until last summer, he'd never set foot west of the Mississippi River.

"I'd seen the world, but I hadn't seen my own country," said Crumm, 21, a history and area studies major.

Crumm's solution? A 38-day, 9,900-mile journey to meet America and gather the raw material for his senior thesis.

"Without going around the country, it's hard to understand how diverse the landscape is — how different parts of the country are," he said.

"I know Michigan pretty well. But, driving through some parts of the Dakotas or eastern Washington state, there are areas of farmland that go on forever. Even driving through Los Angeles, it's a huge, vibrant city. There's just not much like that around here."



A BREATH-TAKING VIEW: Benjamin Crumm, an EMU senior majoring in history and area studies, takes in the view at Ghost Ranch in Sante Fe, New Mexico. Crumm and his father, David, took a 38-day, 9,900-mile trip across America last summer to gather information for Benjamin's senior thesis.

The idea had been incubating for several years. His father, David Crumm, took a similar trip when was a student at the University of Michigan in 1976. David chronicled his adventure for the Flint Journal and captured the experience in his own senior thesis.

Benjamin began toying with the idea of re-creating the trip even before he started college. At first, it was going to be a solo endeavor — on a motorcycle. He probed David's memory for information about the 1976 venture and, at some point, David raised the possibility of making the trip together. Benjamin welcomed the idea.

So, on July 30, 2010, father and son loaded up the old Chevy minivan and left wife/mom Amy Crumm waving in the driveway of their Canton home.

They set an ambitious pace and kept to it, cranking through Bill Bryson audio books and Benjamin's mix CDs as they traveled counter-clockwise around America, generally retracing David's 1976 trip.

They headed north through Michigan and west across the northern edge of the country to Seattle. From there, they drove down the west coast to Los Angeles, followed Route 66 to Winslow, Arizona. Then it was on to San Antonio, New Orleans, Atlanta and tiny, sinking Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay. Up to Washington, D.C.; New Hampshire, Vermont and then back home.

"There were very distinct things about each section — different accents, landscapes, types of food, politics," Benjamin said. "It's fascinating to see it all but, at the same time, you could walk down the street and see the same

Starbucks, Panera and Rite Aid that you'd find anywhere."

David Crumm is a veteran journalist and former religion writer for the Detroit Free Press, which published their stories from the road. The series also is posted on ReadTheSpirit.com, the web magazine David edits. They published 46 pieces in 38 days. Summer, yes. Vacation? No.



Before the trip, the Crumms dialed up distant relatives and friends all over the country, just as David had done in '76. This set them up with a network of local knowledge that gave them both lodging and an invaluable set of local reference points.

MEDICINE MAN: During their journey, the Crumms spent some time with an Ojibwe healer in Minnesota. The man lives deep in the woods and tans hides and builds birch bark canoes.

"We told them, 'Here are the kind of stories we're looking for. You know your area. Surprise us.'" David said.

"Usually we didn't have a clue what we were going to be doing, other than who our host was. Usually they had been following along, writing back and forth to us and, in almost every case, they just nailed it."

At each stop, the Crumms asked people, "What does America mean to you? Are you worried about the future? Where do you find hope?" And they met the kind of people who make a trip a journey.

Their host in Minnesota introduced them to an Ojibwe healer who lives deep in the woods, determined to preserve his culture and his way of life.

"He's trying to preserve his heritage, which he's worried is disappearing," Benjamin said. "He tans hides and builds birch bark canoes. When we came in, he was stripping the bark off a tree branch. We asked him about it and he said, 'This is basswood. You turn it into a tea and drink it, and it cures poison ivy and poison oak rashes.'"

"Later, I looked it up and found out basswood is currently being researched to prevent rashes," Benjamin said.

In Virginia, they visited Tangier Island, a tiny community inhabited mainly by descendants of the five families that settled there 200 years ago.

"They had a fascinating outlook on life," Benjamin said. "The island is incredibly historic and, at the same time, the city is sinking into the ocean. The island loses 35 acres every year. They just want to live in peace the way they've always lived. But, at the same time, crab fishing is not what it used to be, and there are all of these assaults on their way of life."

In New Orleans, they met members of the Versailles community, an enclave of Vietnamese Americans who fled their homeland after the war. Despite a language barrier and hate crimes, they built a life for themselves as fishermen and their community prospered. Then they rebuilt their community after Hurricane Katrina, and fought the city when it began dumping toxic waste near their homes. And then the BP oil spill threatened their livelihoods.

"I think, of all the people we met, they may best embody the American spirit," Benjamin said. "Somehow, through all this, they keep building and improving their lives. When we were leaving they had begun to go out (shrimping) again. And the first time they went out after these horrible

things had happened, they rake in their nets and get one of the greatest catches they've ever had."

In their final post for ReadtheSpirit.com, David reflected that the America he experienced as a 21-year-old seemed to be blossoming, charged with optimism and a sense of almost limitless possibility. Thirty-four years later, the Crumms encountered a much more anxious nation, but one that's still hopeful — still "working, building, organizing, providing for families and dream about our future."