

Lighting Out for the Territories

At the end of the War Between the States, thousands of men returned to their homes in the South and didn't like what they found. Many of them lit out for the territories.

During the Great Depression of the 1930's, scores of men rode the rails across America looking for work. They would hop a freight train and join that brotherhood of men traveling, questing, looking for something better than what they were leaving behind.

In the 1950's, Jack Kerouac's novel, *On the Road*, described a life on the road that motivated young men to turn their backs on the workaday world and head out for parts unknown.

I did some hitchhiking in the 1960's, and for me, the Sixties were when the pages of the calendars folded themselves into paper airplanes and had dog fights that sent them crashing to the ground in flames.

Thousands of people hitchhiked in the Sixties: men, women, couples. I once saw a couple with a Collie, and a 4-year-old kid hitching West on Route 66 through Kingman, Arizona.

In the Sixties, hitchhiking was a national pastime. Guys would thumb cross country just to see how fast they could do it. I met a young man at an on-ramp in California who said he had just made it from New Jersey in 5 rides, and 38 hours.

Men would sometimes be lined up on an onramp and the unwritten rule was that drivers would stop and pick up the last man in the line, the person closest to the Interstate. I saw lines of over a dozen people with their thumbs out or holding signs that said everything you can think of, for example; Gas Money, North, Your Way, I Can Drive, Good Talker, Going to Grandma's, Anywhere but Here, and more.

I had family in Tampa and in Las Vegas, so I hitched back and forth between them many times, and sometimes took the long way home. For example, I left Vegas one time and hitched to LA, then up the coast to San Francisco, then East to Cheyenne, and South back to Tampa.

If you stood there with your thumb out wearing neat, clean clothes, with your hair cut short, and with a wholesome demeanor, it might take forever to get a ride. However, if you looked like you just got high and stumbled out a hippy commune you'd get a ride in no time. Although there were billboards across America that featured a picture of a young man with long

hair, and the caption, “Make America beautiful, get a haircut”, people were intrigued by hippies. And no matter how old the driver was he always claimed that in his youth he had smoked what he called, “wacky weed”.

I refer to the drivers as “he” although I was picked up by females a couple of times. Once when I was 17, a beautiful, 25-year-old female picked me up in the middle of the night, and started telling me she had broken up with her boyfriend, and that she missed being intimate with him. The more she talked about her personal life the more physically uncomfortable I got; I didn’t know what to do. She was driving, the console was between us, and she was way too good looking to be interested in me. Just before completely losing my mind, I told her to let me out at the intersection we were approaching. Today, I realize she was probably just toying with me, but at the time I wanted to cry. (Lordy, I hope no one reads this.)

More than once I was picked up by a Holy Roller who wanted to let me know how favored he was in God’s eyes. When asked if I was a believer, I would start singing loud and off-key, *Shall We Meet Beyond the River*. I wasn’t really telling a lie, and it made them happy.

I once got a long ride through the night in a semi and was asleep in the passenger seat when the driver pulled over, and said, “This is where you get out.” It was early morning and bright, the sun was glaring off fresh snow as he drove away. I had my hand up shielding my eyes like a visor and was stumbling around trying to figure out where I was when a pickup truck slid to a stop beside me and the cowboy who was driving said, “Want a ride?”

I got in and said, “Where are we?”

Turned out we were in Nevada where today hitchhiking is illegal, but back then it was only illegal within certain city limits. If you got dropped off at the beginning of town, you had to walk all the way through town to the city limit sign on the other side of town.

Shortly after leaving, for example, Reno, you would come to a sign that said, “Drive at your own speed.” So, it was too dangerous to hitchhike in town but once clear of the city you could drive 150 mph across the desert if you wanted to.

I was in the desert, in the middle of the night, when a convoy of about 10 semi-trucks came roaring past, bumper to bumper, going at least 100 mph. Like a big ass freight train, they blew me right off the side of the road.

Obviously, things have changed a lot since then. You hardly ever see a hitchhiker, and the roads are much cleaner. Up until Lady Bird Johnson's Beautify America initiative in the mid-sixties, America's roadsides were littered with trash. And the trucking industry has cleaned up its act, trucks are cleaner and quieter, and the drivers are more carefully monitored. Back then it seemed as if every other truck driver was drinking beer, or popping pills. Not that there were any more traffic fatalities involving trucks back then, there weren't, but trucking has a much better image now. Years later, when I was driving big rigs I never heard of a driver getting high.

One of the best trips cross country I had back then was one time when I had a supply of Orange Hearts, a popular diet pill. When I saw a truck approaching, I'd hold one up between my thumb and forefinger, then watch the smoke rise from the tires as the driver hit the brakes.

In all those rides and all those miles, I never had anything unfortunate happen, and I got to hear some fascinating stories. Often, it was a heartfelt story about a long-distance trucker driving across the county alone, at night, listening to the radio, and thinking about some woman.

More than once, just as I was getting out of a car or truck, the driver would get wistful, and say something like, “You’re lucky, I wish I could just park this thing and hit the road myself.”

In the past, there have been historic events (war, depression, societal upheaval) that spurred men to hat up. However, there have always been young men of a certain temperament who didn’t need a catalyst, they were born ready to light out for the territories.

I was one of those young men, but so much has changed... I’ve gone from bellbottom jeans to pants with drawstrings.