

Thumbing the Northwest

Hitchhiking used to be the travel method of choice for some; bringing it back can be one (illegal) adventure

By Evan A. Cael
Freelance Reporter

Saturday, March 20, 12:46 p.m. — the first day of spring. I ditched my bicycle, which had "FREE SPIRIT" facetiously scrolled on its crossbar, in some bushes near the Franklin Street entrance to Interstate 5 and walked the shoulder. I looked for a location that would offer ample pullover space for whoever was to be my mode of transportation down the fertile vein.

It was time to take a much-needed hiatus from Eugene for a week or so after a winter of routine classes and naked branches. South provided my direction, and the "BAY AREA" cardboard sign I held communicated my desired destination in general highway understandings. I received deliberate gestures of disregard, honks of timid encouragement and the occasional middle finger projecting scorn for my festive nerve as Cadillacs, RVs, flocks of choppers and semi after semi whizzed by.

I had spoken with a seasoned veteran of this hitchhiking game prior to my departure for words of advice. Sophomore political science major Joshua Gorman has hitchhiked up and down the West Coast as well as through Hawaii. The benefits of hitchhiking, he said, include free transportation and an opportunity to meet "crazy characters from different walks of life."

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

"In the Northwest, it's definitely safe, but you've got to use your intuition to feel out the situation," Gorman said.

I had heard somewhere that hitchhiking was a perfectly legal and legitimate form of transportation in Oregon, but after speaking with Eugene Police Department officer Donny Hollis, I discovered it is a Class D violation.

"No, I wouldn't recommend it," Hollis said. "The world is a lot different than the common person thinks, but it is a free way to go, I guess."

I stood hopeful in the gravel for 20 minutes.

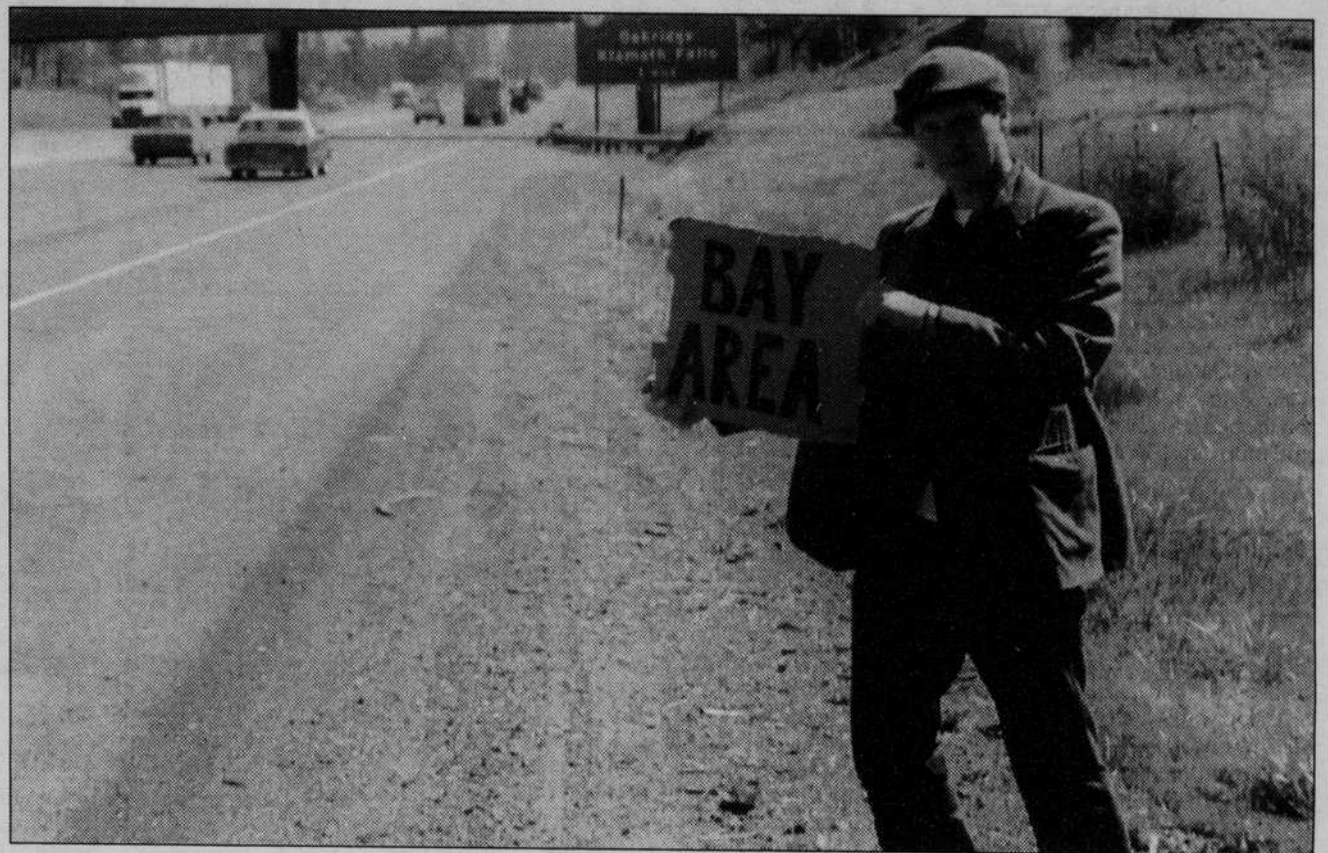
A monster chariot hissed and spat dust, so much so that I was forced to turn my back and squint my eyes as it halted before me. The passenger and driver consulted their map and engaged in a couple moments of private discussion before acknowledging my presence. Finally, the passenger leaned his head out the window and asked, "Where's the Bay Area?"

He continued examining his map.

"Oakland," I responded, not quite sure if he was putting me on or if the term "Bay Area" was truly unknown to him.

"Where are you guys going?" I asked, attempting to establish a dialogue, or at least a feeling-out, which is a crucial aspect of the preliminary entering-vehicle procedure.

This truck would be cruising well south of my requirements, so I hopped onto the first step, using the side-mirror bar for stability, closing the distance between me and my soon-to-be



Evan Cael Courtesy

Journalism major Evan Cael hitchhiked 554 miles from Eugene to a party at his friend's house in Oakland, Calif.

travel companions.

"Are you gay or straight?" the driver solemnly asked.

"Straight," I answered without internalizing the question, fully understanding that in this context there was a right answer that would make the ride possible.

That was enough to seal the deal, so the door was opened for me, and the passenger retreated to the back lounge portion of the cab.

With that, I was off. I exchanged introductions with both gentlemen. Erik, the driver, sported a glowing smile of several gold-capped teeth, and Darvel, the man in the back, was preparing for a nap.

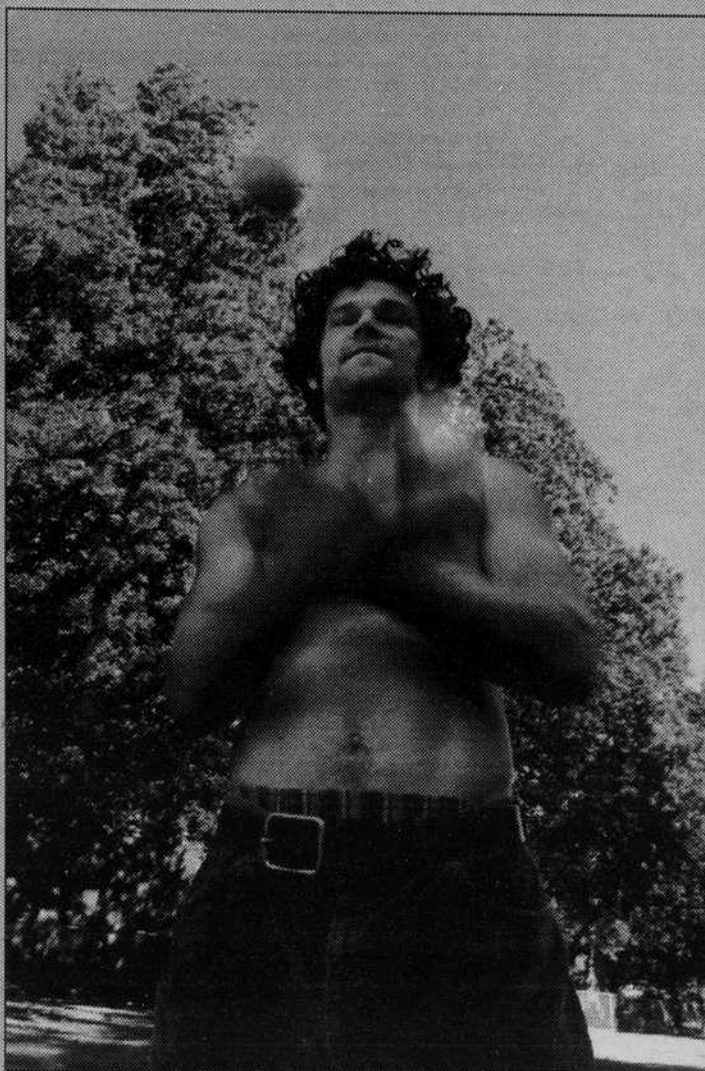
As Darvel slept, I sat alongside Erik and conversed with him, touching on topics of music, past girlfriends and our respective travel stories, just to name a few. He was a pleasant fellow to talk with. He had a fatherly spirit about him, and his mantra was "It's all good."

This went on for several hours until Darvel and I switched spots. I reclined on a bed for the remainder of my ride to Sacramento, where we had agreed they would drop me off. By this time it was 11 p.m., and I had traveled 473 miles for free.

I had to make it to my friend's birthday party in west Oakland that night, so I caught a Greyhound bus from Sacramento to Oakland, which cost me \$13. The 81-mile ride took about an hour and a half. A five-minute, \$5 dollar cab ride deposited me in front of my friend's house, where the party was overflowing onto the front porch. I had come 554 miles and change in less than 12 hours and spent a total of about \$25, including a couple of bucks on a truck-stop soda and bag of chips. A successful day, I thought, as I was abruptly engulfed by the roaring celebration.

Evan A. Cael is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

UP IN THE AIR



Tim Kupsick Photographer

Senior Spanish major David Clay juggles in the shade Monday.

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