

Backroads

In search of the ordinary

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PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

I love the way we come into a town.

Some towns are like medieval walled cities, dense right up to the edge — then suddenly you're in the country, in farmland. Towns in Lane County aren't like that. We enter them gradually. If you're driving you might not notice *how* gradually, but if you're *walking* you can sense a small town a half hour away.

You watch the size of properties along the road get smaller: from open farmland down to 15-acre plots, maybe some orchards, houses as far apart as possible; then down to 10-, and five-, and then two-acre "estates," an occasional decaying barn, then a gated community; then the first edge-of-town businesses — an auto repair, a dog kennel, a church that looks a lot like a house; then a trailer park, across from a mini-mansion with an RV garage.

You still have a ways to go before you get to a gas station where you might buy a Coke or sit down, and it's been a couple of hours since the last country store. Those are about halfway between towns — like halfway between Creswell and Cottage Grove, or halfway between Springfield and Marcola. The one between Springfield and Walterville closed down recently, which for a walker is a pretty big deal. Then again, there aren't too many walkers!

I like to walk the roads from town to town in Lane County. These are the kinds of things you see — and you have *so much time* on your hands that you can't help thinking about them. They sink in so deep that you can't forget them.

Because I always start my walks at my house — at 18th and Olive, right downtown — the conclusions I draw are based entirely on our little corner of America, places with names like Lorane, Crow, Harrisburg and Peoria, or like Creswell, Walker, Saginaw and Cottage Grove; places like Mohawk, Marcola, and Mabel; places like Walterville, Deerhorn, Leaburg and Vida — and of course, right at the center of it all, Eugene and Springfield, our bustling twin cities with their strange balance of opposites.

As a professor, I don't usually write like this. It actually feels *daring* for me to write about being a normal human being walking down the road, instead of big ideas. Maybe that's why I walk the roads, to get my nose out of a book, to get back in touch with the world, to get back to the surface of things.

A few months ago, back in October, I decided to walk out to my friend Russ's house on Goodpasture Road, up the McKenzie. If you start at 18th and Olive and avoid Route 126 as much as possible, taking the scenic route out Camp Creek Road, and then Deerhorn, it's about 40 miles. At a leisurely pace of a little under three miles an hour, it takes about 14 hours.

Do you know it takes three hours just to walk from my house out to Hayden Bridge? That's the nearest point where you can walk east out into the country-

side. Three hours just to get out of town! I can drive it in 12 minutes.

Russ said, "I can't stand the idea of you trudging all that way on asphalt. Why not just *drive* out to the house, and we'll go for a world-class hike to the top of Black Crater?"

"Trudging? I see myself strolling along the American Highway, in touch with the earth and my country. Me and Walt Whitman. Don't take the romance out of it for me."

It was before sunrise, with a light rain in the air.

Most of those first nine miles in town were along bike paths. First along the river: It's quite another world out there on those deserted paths between the two towns before sunrise. And the funniest thing happened. At the darkest spot along the trail, somewhere between Alton Baker Park and Island Park, in that darkest hour before dawn, suddenly two bikes with bouncing lights appeared from opposite directions, and raced past each other just where I was standing. I had to jump off the path! *Whish! Whish!* Like Grand Central Station out here!

A total coincidence. Doesn't mean a damn thing, but how could it happen that the only three people on the trail that morning converged on each other at the same time in the same place? Walking gives you a lot of unfor-



gettable but totally meaningless memories like that.

It's grown light by the time I step onto the bike path that runs up the middle of Pioneer Parkway. Traffic is picking up for the morning rush, but I'm the first customer when I stop for coffee at Shari's. What a beautiful line of great trees out there along Pioneer Parkway — I never saw them before. The things I don't know about Springfield, even after living in Eugene for 16 years!

After Q Street I turn east along another bike path that unwinds ahead of me between two streets for 35 blocks, between the back yards of hundreds of nicely kept, ordinary houses. Kids are walking to school along the path, or riding their bikes. Way up ahead I see a couple of women standing with their dogs at the edge of a field, talking. Ten minutes later they're still talking — that's the time it takes to reach them, pass them, and disappear again heading east.

I like walking along the backs of houses. I've walked all the alleyways of my neighborhood, College Hill. I recommend alleys to everyone. People keep the *fronts* of their houses repaired, remodeled and stylish, to present something of a face to the public; property values face forward. But the *backs* of houses change more slowly; back yards have a more personal feel to them, a little intimate and disheveled; back fences, if they're made of wood, are as often as not broken, or rotting away.

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