

# A tale of two Americas



MATT HENRY

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

It was the summer of 1978; I was a 24-year-old vital male and I was doing what many young men my age did after going to college: I was taking my “Grand Tour” of the country. In my case, I was hitchhiking, following the national parks and monuments chain starting in Colorado. I was the quintessential footloose and fancy free traveler; I had no car, no girlfriend, no commitments.

I had worked hard at a factory in my home state of Ohio for a few years and had saved every penny for my great excursion. I bought a small pup tent, a small camping stove, a sleeping bag and a backpack, arranged for my mother to wire me money from my account to general P.O. boxes periodically as I needed it for food and camping fees, and like Kerouac and many other pilgrims before me, I hit the open road.

I had spent almost a month in Colorado and was hitching north to the Tetons and Yellowstone. At an expressway entrance in Wyoming, I was accosted by two of that state’s “welcome to Wyoming!” hospitality committee — meaning overweight, bored highway patrol officers badly needing something to do to stave off the boredom of sitting in a car on the freeway all day. At this point, you probably think I’m

J.D. Smith regaling you with another yet “impossible to believe” yarn, but you need to understand something about this social justice-minded Libra: After months on the road, my hair (yes, I had some) and my beard length met at about the same place on my chest, which is to say I looked like a mellow Charles Manson.

After unceremoniously dumping the contents of my life on the freeway shoulder, they warned me not to hitchhike in Wyoming. After they drove away, I talked a Christian truck driver into giving me a lift north toward South Dakota. (Whenever you’re in a jam, hit up a Christian!)

America #1 — It was 1 a.m. when he let me off at a small country crossroad near the border. It was a surreal scene out of the Twilight Zone: I was in the middle of a dark nowhere, surrounded by standing wheat fields and a small concrete block building with a large neon sign flashing in alternate hot pink and electric blue “Steaks! Liquor!” — two things that were of obvious importance to Wyomingans.

The joint was rocking with country jukebox and loud laughter. I needed some water to fill my canteen and went inside to get some. It’s at this point that Dave Barry declares, “I swear I’m not making this up.” Every cowboy-hatted head including the bartender’s swiveled; the entire room froze as billiard balls and the juke slowed down in time. In the stillness of Tammy Wynette singing “Stand By Your Man,” I asked for a glass of water. Receiving only the type of stare that John

Lennon declares “It would have been us instead of him,” I quickly retreated back outside, wandered into the wheat field behind the tavern, unrolled my bag in the wet grass and got lost in the stars.

A minute later, not surprisingly, a sheriff’s patrol car crunched over the parking lot gravel and a large, overweight officer briefly ran inside and then, grabbing a huge flashlight from his car, started walking toward the wet, waist-high grass. I laid low, watching him, betting on the fact I wasn’t worth wet trousers. Sure enough, he climbed into his vehicle and drove off. It was 20 years later and a haircut before I would make the attempt again.

America #2 — After exploring South Dakota, I headed to Montana. By this time, it was mid-September and it was getting cold in the evening. I had my thumb out just outside of Billings, headed to Missoula. It was about 5 p.m., the chill was coming on, and I already had on every piece of clothing I had in my pack. Not feeling too confident of getting a lift after standing there for a few hours, I was about to huddle up in an off-road field when a local farmer suddenly drove up in his little Mazda pickup, asked me where I was headed, and bade me get in.

After hearing that my destination was a few hundred miles away, and stating that he was only going 20 miles up the road, he invited me to spend the night with him and his family. He had a detached guest shed with a bunk and heat. It would be the first bed and warmth I’d had

in months.

Now let me stage this scene. It’s evening and this Christian farmer and parent of two small children picks up Charles Manson, brings him unannounced to his home where his wife and kids are soon having supper. Not expecting a visitor, I was fully expecting his young Christian wife and mother to freak out, but she smiled warmly and gently asked me, now wouldn’t I like to take a nice hot bath while she threw my clothes in a washing machine and finished preparing the meal? Her husband had been too shy to tell me how I must have smelled.

After the first hot water and meal I’d had in months, I spent an un-accosted night’s rest in my own warm, heated room. The next morning, I received a fine breakfast, clean clothes, a fresh body aroma, and another 20-mile lift from the farmer past his farm to help make it to Missoula by nightfall.

Forty years later, these two Americas — one seeking to jail the stranger, one offering the traveler respite from the road — still coexist, uncomfortably side by side, hospitality and harassment for the stranger, fighting for dominance, Christians straddling the line.

As both Jack Kerouac and Paul Simon write, “All come to look for America,” whatever that may be.

*The Rev. Dr. Matt Henry is a retired American Baptist/United Methodist pastor, who pastored the Pendleton First United Church and now joyfully makes “hippie food” for the houseless at the Warming Station.*

## COMMUNITY BRIEFING

### Wildhorse to celebrate anniversary

PENDLETON — Wildhorse Resort & Casino’s 26th anniversary celebration kicks off with a fireworks display at the casino grounds on Saturday, March 6, at 8 p.m. The show is free and open to the public.

Viewers are encouraged to enjoy the fireworks from the comfort of their vehicles or to stay in close proximity to their vehicles. Interested parties should arrive early for best viewing, and watch for signs and traffic officers for parking directions.

Wildhorse Priority One health and safety protocols are to be observed — wear a mask and maintain safe distances from those not living in your household.

Musical accompaniment to the fireworks is provided by KCUW radio at 104.3 FM.

For those who would like to watch the fireworks display through the casino’s collectible prism viewers, visit Mission Market or Arrowhead Travel Plaza and, with a minimum \$10 purchase, get a free 4-pack, one pack per customer while supplies last.

Visit [www.wildhorseresort.com](http://www.wildhorseresort.com) for more information.

### Umatilla earns third Tree City USA designation

UMATILLA — For the third year in a row, the city of Umatilla received national designation as a Tree City USA Community from the nonprofit Arbor

Day Foundation. This is a demonstration of a city’s commitment to providing urban forestry in the community.

In response to this recognition, the Umatilla City Council encourages the entire community to “join us in celebrating our trees. They enrich our lives in innumerable ways by providing cooling shade, attracting wildlife, purifying our air and water, preventing soil erosion and beautifying our homes and community.”

This year, city of Umatilla will celebrate Arbor Day with the planting of Bowhall red maple and pyramidal hornbeam trees along Sixth Street. The community is welcome to join the event on March 13 at 8:30 a.m. Umatilla has partnered with Terra Verde Landscapers to assist the city with the project.

Volunteers will meet at Village Square Park (next to the library) at 8:30 a.m., where city staff and local tree experts will provide guidance. Free coffee and donuts will be provided to anyone in attendance. City staff and volunteers will be provided masks, sanitizer, shovels, gloves and a safety vest. Social distancing will be practiced. Anyone who arrives and wishes to participate will be provided all they need to do so.

Those wishing to volunteer are encouraged to help plan for the event by registering online prior to March 4 at [www.Umatilla-city.org/ParksRec](http://www.Umatilla-city.org/ParksRec).

For more information, contact Esmeralda Horn at 541-922-3226, ext. 108.

—EO Media Group

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## ANNIVERSARY FIREWORKS SHOW

We’re celebrating 26 years!

### SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 8pm

We encourage you to safely watch show from the comfort of your vehicle. Tune into KCUW 104.3FM for pyromusical!

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