



Way Off the Road: Discovering the Peculiar Charms of Small-Town America

by Bill Geist

Do you have a knack for watermelon speed-eating? You might want to go to Luling, Texas, and enter the annual competition. If you have a taste for roadkill, there is a town somewhere in Kansas that serves up a mean barbecued groundhog. If you pack up and go to Fruita, Colorado, to see Mike the Headless Chicken, I am sorry to report that he passed away after living for eighteen months without his head.

All of these stories and many more are reported by Bill Geist in a most unusual and entertaining travelogue called *Way Off the Road: Discovering the Peculiar Charms of Small-Town America*.

Best known as the roving Travel Correspondent on the *CBS News Sunday Morning* program, Geist serves up a very funny compendium of stories about the quirky people he's met in his travels across the country.

Geist is fascinated by eccentricities, and although he writes with a mocking tone, it is never without affection for the townspeople and their ways of life. You can almost see him raise an eyebrow when he writes about Wilson, North Carolina, the town that made it illegal to display ugly porch furniture, or the museum dedicated to tow trucks in Chattanooga, Tennessee. And Geist's deadpan humor shines through the pages when he says that Rachel, Nevada, is the only place in which he has ever had breakfast with a space alien. The Alien Highway runs through the town, and many people who live in or visit Rachel are convinced that they have had encounters with UFOs.

Geist is more than just an observer; he participates in festivals, he tastes the local food, and he even took a scary ride in a helicopter with a 93-year-old paperboy, who, as owner/editor/writer of the only

newspaper in Loyalton, California, delivers the papers himself via whirlybird.

No place is too small for Geist to visit. In fact, he visited Monowi, Nebraska—population, Elsie. Elsie is the only resident of Monowi, and is its mayor, librarian, police chief, and its only bartender.

Geist tracks down lost luggage in Scottsboro, Alabama, where some enterprising folks have opened the United Baggage Center, which buys and sells lost airline luggage, which cannot be traced to their owners after three months. Geist gleefully reports on odd items that have been lost in the skies: a kitchen faucet, a Las Vegas showgirl outfit, a bag of Egyptian artifacts, even a wheelchair.

As Geist jokes, "Who leaves behind their wheelchair? Was there a faith healer on board?"

There are plenty of other laugh-out-loud lines in this book, one of my favorites being: "Stopping for the night in rural Kansas, I ask the motel desk clerk if he can recommend the best place in town for dinner. He scratches his head, thinks about it for a while, and says slowly, 'Well ... I'd have to say the Texaco, 'cuz the Shell don't have no microwave.'"

Priceless.

For further proof that there is life outside Pittsburgh—and if you are compelled to see more of North America, pick up the latest edition of *1,000 Places to See in the USA and Canada Before You Die* by Patricia Schultz. Schultz's comprehensive guide points out the most interesting tourist destinations in each state and province, such as the Mummer's Parade in Philadelphia, Wrigley Field in Chicago, and other lesser-known places like the luxurious Salish Lodge and Spa in Snoqualmie, Washington, or the colonial town of Lunenburg in Nova Scotia.

Another good travel book is *Road Trip USA: Cross-Country Adventures on America's Two-Lane Highways* by Jamie Jensen. Jensen is king of the "off-the-beaten-path" way of travel, and his colorful guide is a great resource for those who want to hit the open roads.

And if you're an armchair traveler, *Greetings from the Lincoln Highway: America's First Coast-to-Coast Road* offers a wonderful historic look at the famous road, complete with old-time pictures and maps. Look for the rather comprehensive section on Pittsburgh's placement on Route 30 and a little bit of local history. □

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