

"The kind of book Steinbeck might have written if he'd traveled with David Letterman instead of Charlie the poodle." —*New York* magazine

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*A WALK IN THE WOODS*

the lost continent



TRAVELS IN SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

Bill Bryson - The Lost Continent

Travels in Small-Town America

PART I EAST

CHAPTER 1

I COME FROM Des Moines. Somebody had to. When you come from Des Moines you either accept the fact without question and settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there forever and ever, or you spend your adolescence moaning at length about what a dump it is and how you can't wait to get out, and then you settle down with a local girl named Bobbi and get a job at the Firestone factory and live there forever and ever.

Hardly anyone ever leaves. This is because Des Moines is the most powerful hypnotic known to man. Outside town there is a big sign that says, WELCOME TO DES MOINES. THIS IS WHAT DEATH IS LIKE. There isn't really. I just made that up. But the place does get a grip on you. People who have nothing to do with Des Moines drive in off the interstate, looking for gas or hamburgers, and stay forever. There's a New Jersey couple up the street from my parents' house whom you see wandering around from time to time looking faintly puzzled but strangely serene. Everybody in Des Moines is strangely serene.

The only person I ever knew in Des Moines who wasn't serene was Mr. Piper. Mr. Piper was my parents' neighbor, a leering, cherry-faced idiot who was forever getting drunk and crashing his car into telephone poles. Everywhere you went you encountered telephone poles and road signs leaning dangerously in testimony to Mr. Piper's driving habits. He distributed them all over the west side of town rather in the way dogs mark trees. Mr. Piper was the nearest possible human equivalent to Fred Flintstone, but less charming. He was a Shriner and a Republican-a Nixon Republican-and he appeared to feel he had a mission in life to spread offense. His favorite pastime, apart from getting drunk and crashing his car, was to get drunk and insult the neighbors, particularly us because we were

Democrats, though he was prepared to insult Republicans when we weren't available.

Eventually, I grew up and moved to England. This irritated Mr. Piper almost beyond measure. It was worse than being a Democrat. Whenever I was in town, Mr. Piper would come over and chide me. "I don't know what you're doing over there with all those Limeys," he would say provocatively. "They're not clean people."

"Mr. Piper, you don't know what you're talking about," I would reply in my affected British accent. "You are a cretin." You could talk like that to Mr. Piper because (1.) he was a cretin and (2) he never listened to anything that was said to him.

"Bobbi and I went over to London two years ago and our hotel room didn't even have a bathroom in it," Mr. Piper would go on. "If you wanted to take a leak in the middle of the night you had to walk about a mile down the hallway. That isn't a clean way to live."

"Mr. Piper, the English are paragons of cleanliness. It is a well-known fact that they use more soap per capita than anyone else in Europe."

Mr. Piper would snort derisively at this. "That doesn't mean diddly-squat, boy, just because they're cleaner than a bunch of Krauts and Eye-ties. My God, a dog's cleaner than a bunch of Krauts and Eye-ties. And I'll tell you something else: If his daddy hadn't bought Illinois for him, John F. Kennedy would never have been elected president."

I had lived around Mr. Piper long enough not to be thrown by this abrupt change of tack. The theft of the 1960 presidential election was a longstanding plaint of his, one that he brought into the conversation every ten or twelve minutes regardless of the prevailing drift of the discussion. In 1963, during Kennedy's funeral, someone in the Waveland Tap punched Mr. Piper in the nose for making that remark. Mr. Piper was so furious that he went straight out and crashed his car into a telephone pole. Mr. Piper is dead now, which is of course one thing that Des Moines prepares you for.

When I was growing up I used to think that the best thing about coming from Des Moines was that it meant you didn't come from anywhere else in Iowa. By Iowa standards, Des Moines is a mecca of cosmopolitanism, a dynamic hub of wealth and education, where people wear three-piece suits and dark socks, often simultaneously. During the annual state high-school basketball tournament, when the hayseeds from out in the state would flood into the city for a week, we used to accost them downtown and snidely offer to show them how to ride an escalator or negotiate a revolving door. This wasn't always so far from reality. My friend Stan, when he was about sixteen, had to go and stay with his cousin in some remote, dusty hamlet called Dog Water or Duncesville or some such improbable spot-the kind of place where if a dog gets run over by a truck everybody goes out to have a look at it. By the second week, delirious with boredom, Stan insisted that he and his cousin drive the fifty miles into the county town, Hooterville, and find something to do. They went bowling at an alley with warped lanes and chipped balls and afterwards had a chocolate soda and looked at a Playboy in a drugstore, and on the way home the cousin sighed with immense satisfaction and said, "Gee thanks, Stan. That was the best time I ever had in my whole life!" It's true.

I had to drive to Minneapolis once, and I went on a back road just to see the country. But there was nothing to see. It's just flat and hot, and full of corn and soybeans and hogs. Every once in a while you come across a farm or some dead little town where the liveliest thing is the flies. I remember one long, shimmering stretch where I could see a couple of miles down the highway and there was a brown dot beside the road. As I got closer I saw it was a man sitting on a box by his front yard, in some six-house town with a name like Spigot or Urinal watching my approach with inordinate interest. He watched me zip past and in the rearview mirror I could see him still watching me going on down the road until at last I disappeared into a heat haze. The whole thing must have taken about five minutes. I wouldn't be surprised if even now he thinks of me from time to time.

He was wearing a baseball cap. You can always spot an Iowa man because he is wearing a baseball cap advertising John Deere or a feed company, and because the back of his neck has been lasered into deep crevices by years of driving a John Deere tractor back and forth in a blazing sun. (This does not

do his mind a whole lot of good either.) His other distinguishing feature is that he looks ridiculous when he takes off his shirt because his neck and arms are chocolate brown and his torso is as white as a sow's belly. In Iowa it is called a farmers tan and it is, I believe, a badge of distinction.

Iowa women are almost always sensationally overweight you see them at Merle Hay Mall in Des Moines on Saturdays, clammy and meaty in their shorts and halter tops, looking a little like elephants dressed in children's clothes, yelling at their kids, calling out names like Dwayne and Shauna. Jack Kerouac, of all people, thought that Iowa women were the prettiest in the country, but I don't think he ever went to Merle Hay Mall on a Saturday. I will say this, however-and it's a strange, strange thing-the teenaged daughters of these fat women are always utterly delectable, as soft and gloriously rounded and naturally fresh-smelling as a basket of fruit. I don't know what it is that happens to them, but it must be awful to marry one of those nubile cuties knowing that there is a time bomb ticking away in her that will at some unknown date make her bloat out into something huge and grotesque, presumably all of a sudden and without much notice, like a self-inflating raft from which the pin has been yanked.

Even without this inducement, I don't think I would have stayed in Iowa. I never felt altogether at home there, even when I was small. In about 1957, my grandparents gave me a View Master for my birthday and a packet of disks with the title "Iowa-Our Glorious State." I can remember thinking even then that the selection of glories was a trifle on the thin side. With no natural features of note, no national parks, no battlefields or famous birthplaces, the View-Master people had to stretch their creative 3-D talents to the full. Putting the View-Master to your eyes and clicking the white handle gave you, as I recall, a shot of Herbert Hoovers birthplace, impressively three-dimensional, followed by Iowa's other great treasure, the Little Brown Church in the Vale (which inspired the song whose tune nobody ever quite knows), the highway bridge over the Mississippi River at Davenport (all the cars seemed to be hurrying towards Illinois), a field of waving corn, the bridge over the Missouri River at Council Bluffs and the Little Brown Church in the Vale again, taken from another angle. I can remember thinking even then that there must be more to life than that.

Then one gray Sunday afternoon when I was about ten I was watching TV and there was a documentary on about moviemaking in Europe. One clip showed Anthony Perkins walking along some sloping city street at dusk. I don't remember now if it was Rome or Paris, but the street was cobbled and shiny with rain and Perkins was hunched deep in a trench coat and I thought: "Hey, c'est moi!" I began to read-no, I began to consume National Geographic, with their pictures of glowing Lapps and mist-shrouded castles and ancient cities of infinite charm. From that moment, I wanted to be a European boy. I wanted to live in an apartment across from a park in the heart of a city, and from my bedroom window look out on a crowded vista of hills and rooftops. I wanted to ride trams and understand strange languages. I wanted friends named Werner and Marco who wore short pants and played soccer in the street and owned toys made of wood. I cannot for the life of me think why. I wanted my mother to send me out to buy long loaves of bread from a shop with a wooden pretzel hanging above the entrance. I wanted to step outside my front door and be somewhere.

As soon as I was old enough I left. I left Des Moines and Iowa and the United States and the war in Vietnam and Watergate, and settled across the world. And now when I came home it was to

a foreign country, full of serial murderers and sports teams in the wrong towns (the Indianapolis Colts? the Phoenix Cardinals?) and a personable old fart who was president. My mother knew that personable old fart when he was a sportscaster called Dutch Reagan at WHO Radio in Des Moines. "He was just a nice, friendly, kind of dopey guy," my mother says.

Which, come to that, is a pretty fair description of most Iowans. Don't get me wrong. I am not for a moment suggesting that Iowans are mentally deficient. They are a decidedly intelligent and sensible people who, despite their natural conservatism, have always been prepared to elect a conscientious, clearthinking liberal in preference to some cretinous conservative. (This used to drive Mr. Piper practically insane.) And Iowans, I am proud to tell you, have the highest literacy rate in the nation: 99.5 percent of grownups there can read. When I say they are kind of dopey I mean that they are trusting and amiable and open. They are a tad slow, certainly-when you tell an Iowan a joke, you can see a kind of race going

on between his brain and his expression-but it's not because they're incapable of highspeed mental activity, it's only that there's not much call for it. Their wits are dulled by simple, wholesome faith in God and the soil and their fellow man.

Above all, Iowans are friendly. You go into a strange diner in the South and everything goes quiet, and you realize all the other customers are looking at you as if they are sizing up the risk involved in murdering you for your wallet and leaving your body in a shallow grave somewhere out in the swamps. In Iowa you are the center of attention, the most interesting thing to hit town since a tornado carried off old Frank Sprinkel and his tractor last May. Everybody you meet acts like he would gladly give you his last beer and let you sleep with his sister. Everyone is happy and friendly and strangely serene.

The last time I was home, I went to Kresge's downtown and bought a bunch of postcards to send back to England. I bought the most ridiculous ones I could find-a sunset over a feedlot, a picture of farmers bravely grasping a moving staircase beside the caption "We rode the escalator at Merle Hay Mall!" that sort of thing. They were so uniformly absurd that when I took them up to the checkout, I felt embarrassed by them, as if I were buying dirty magazines and hoped somehow to convey the impression that they weren't really for me. But the checkout lady regarded each of them with interest and deliberation-just as they always do with dirty magazines, come to that.

When she looked up at me she was almost misty-eyed. She wore butterfly eyeglasses and a beehive hairdo. "Those are real nice," she said. "You know, honey, I've bin in a lot of states and seen a lot of places, but I can tell you that this is just about the purtiest one I ever saw." She really said "purtiest." She really meant it. The poor woman was in a state of terminal hypnosis. I glanced at the cards and to my surprise I suddenly saw what she meant. I couldn't help but agree with her. They were purty. Together, we made a little pool of silent admiration. For one giddy, careless moment, I was almost serene myself. It was a strange sensation, and it soon passed.

My father liked Iowa. He lived his whole life in the state, and is even now

working his way through eternity there, in Glendale Cemetery in Des Moines. But every year he became seized with a quietly maniacal urge to get out of the state and go on vacation. Every summer, without a whole lot of notice, he would load the car to groaning, hurry us into it, take off for some distant point, return to get his wallet after having driven almost to the next state, and take off again for some distant point. Every year it was the same. Every year it was awful.

The big killer was the tedium. Iowa is in the middle of the biggest plain this side of Jupiter. Climb onto a rooftop almost anywhere in the state and you are confronted with a featureless sweep of corn for as far as the eye can see. It is a thousand miles from the sea in any direction, four hundred miles from the nearest mountain, three hundred miles from skyscrapers and muggers and things of interest, two hundred miles from people who do not habitually stick a finger in their ear and swivel it around as a preliminary to answering any question addressed to them by a stranger. To reach anywhere of even passing interest from Des Moines by car requires a journey that in other countries would be considered epic. It means days and days of unrelenting tedium, in a baking steel capsule on a ribbon of highway.

In my memory, our vacations were always taken in a big blue Rambler station wagon. It was a cruddy car-my dad always bought cruddy cars, until he got to the male menopause and started buying zippy red convertibles-but it had the great virtue of space. My brother, my sister and I in the back were miles away from my parents up front, in effect in another room. We quickly discovered during illicit forays into the picnic hamper that if you stuck a bunch of Ohio Blue Tip matches into an apple or hardboiled egg, so that it resembled a porcupine, and casually dropped it out the tailgate window, it was like a bomb. It would explode with a small bang and a surprisingly big flash of blue flame, causing cars following behind to veer in an amusing fashion.

My dad, miles away up front, never knew what was going on or could understand why all day long cars would zoom up alongside him with the driver gesticulating furiously, before tearing off into the distance. "What was that all about?" he would say to my mother in a wounded tone.

"I don't know, dear," my mother would answer mildly. My mother only ever said two things. She said, "I don't know, dear." And she said, "Can I get you a sandwich, honey?" Occasionally on our trips she would volunteer other pieces of intelligence like "Should that dashboard light be glowing like that, dear?" or "I think you hit that dog/man/blind person back there, honey," but mostly she wisely kept quiet. This was because on vacations my father was a man obsessed. His principal obsession was with trying to economize. He always took us to the crummiest hotels and motor lodges and to the kind of roadside eating houses where they only washed the dishes weekly. You always knew, with a sense of doom, that at some point before finishing you were going to discover someone else's congealed egg yolk lurking somewhere on your plate or plugged between the tines of your fork. This, of course, meant cooties and a long, painful death.

But even that was a relative treat. Usually we were forced to picnic by the side of the road. My father had an instinct for picking bad picnic sites-on the apron of a busy truck stop or in a little park that turned out to be in the heart of some seriously deprived ghetto, so that groups of children would come and stand silently by our table and watch us eating Hostess cupcakes and crinkle-cut potato chips-and it always became incredibly windy the moment we stopped, so that my mother spent the whole of lunchtime chasing paper plates over an area of about an acre.

In 1957 my father invested \$19.98 in a portable gas stove that took an hour to assemble before each use and was so wildly temperamental that we children were always ordered to stand well back when it was being lit. This always proved unnecessary, however, because the stove would flicker to life only for a few seconds before puttering out, and my father would spend many hours turning it this way and that to keep it out of the wind, simultaneously addressing it in a low, agitated tone normally associated with the chronically insane. All the while my brother, my sister and I would implore him to take us someplace with air-conditioning, linen tablecloths and ice cubes clinking in glasses of clear water. "Dad," we would beg, "you're a successful man. You make a good living. Take us to a Howard Johnson's." But he wouldn't have it. He was a child of the Depression and where capital outlays were involved he always wore the haunted look of a fugitive who has just heard bloodhounds in the distance.

Eventually, with the sun low in the sky, he would hand us hamburgers that were cold and raw and smelled of butane. We would take one bite and refuse to eat any more. So my father would lose his temper and throw everything into the car and drive us at high speed to some roadside diner where a sweaty man with a floppy hat would sling hash while grease fires danced on his grill. And afterwards, in a silent car filled with bitterness and unquenched basic needs, we would mistakenly turn off the main highway and get lost and end up in some no-hope hamlet with a name like Draino, Indiana, or Tapwater, Missouri, and get a room in the only hotel in town, the sort of run-down place where if you wanted to watch TV it meant you had to sit in the lobby and share a cracked leatherette sofa with an old man with big sweat circles under his arms. The old man would almost certainly have only one leg and probably one other truly arresting deficiency, like no nose or a caved-in forehead, which meant that although you were sincerely intent on watching "Laramie" or "Our Miss Brooks," you found your gaze being drawn, ineluctably and sneakily, to the amazing eaten-away body sitting beside you. You couldn't help yourself. Occasionally the man would turn out to have no tongue, in which case he would try to engage you in lively conversation. It was all most unsatisfying.

After a week or so of this kind of searing torment, we would fetch up at some blue and glinting sweep of lake or sea in a bowl of pine-clad mountains, a place full of swings and amusements and the gay shrieks of children splashing in water, and it would all almost be worth it. Dad would become funny and warm and even once or twice might take us out to the sort of restaurant where you didn't have to watch your food being cooked and where the glass of water they served you wasn't autographed with lipstick. This was living. This was heady opulence.

It was against this disturbed and erratic background that I became gripped with a curious urge to go back to the land of my youth and make what the blurb writers like to call a journey of discovery. On another continent, 4,000 miles away, I became quietly seized with that nostalgia that overcomes you when you have reached the middle of your life and your father has recently died and it dawns on you that when he went he took some of you with him. I wanted to go back to the magic places of my youth to Mackinac Island, the