

WAY OFF THE ROAD

*Discovering the Peculiar Charms
of Small-Town America*

BILL GEIST

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Way Off the Road

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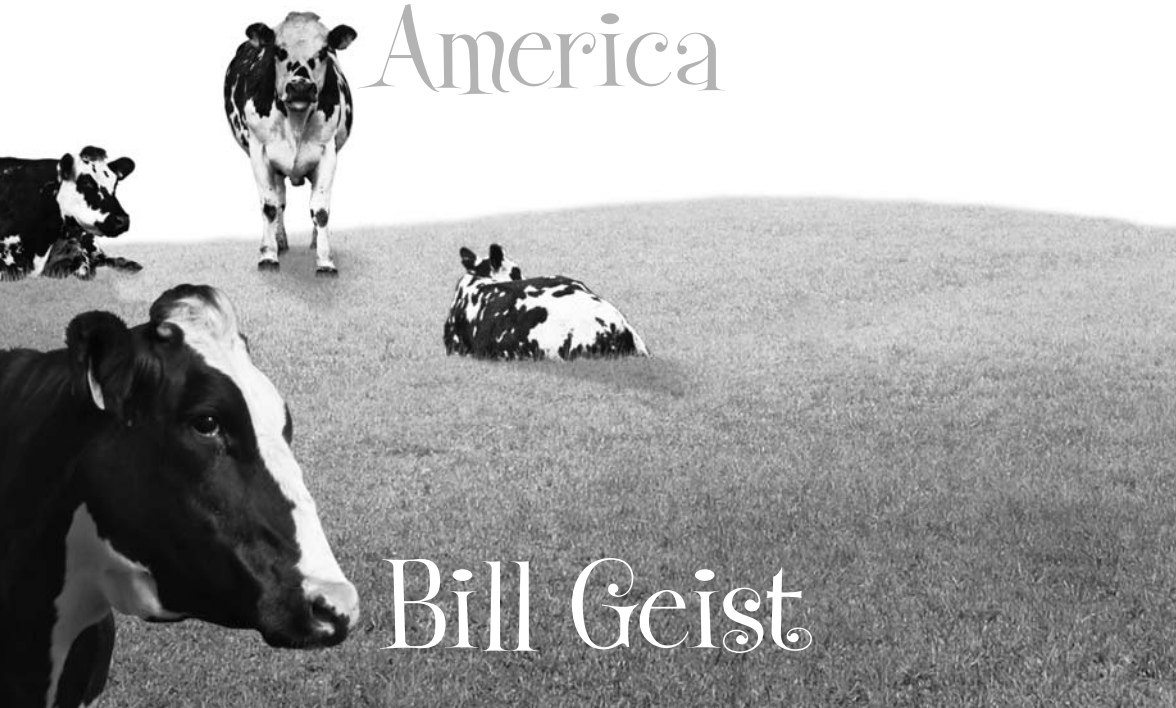
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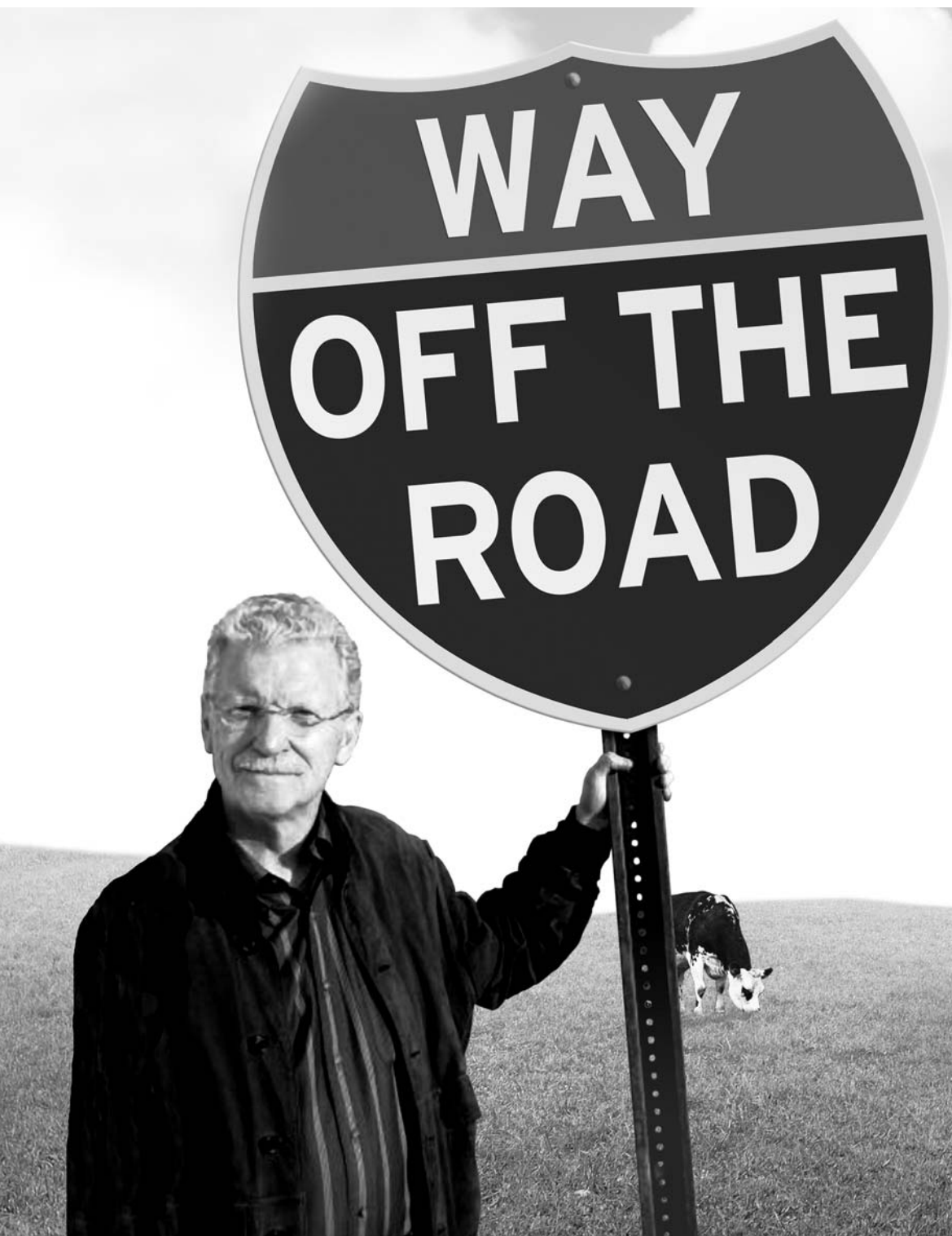
Fore! Play

Discovering the
Peculiar Charms
of
Small-Town
America



Bill Geist

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For Jody, Libby, Christina, Willie,
and little TBD

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Way Off the Road



Introduction

There is a world outside our own, out there and out of sight, between the coasts—between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Chicago and St. Louis, Kansas City and Denver—where people live slower, closer to nature, farther apart spatially, yet somehow more attached; a world where money, celebrity, and raw ambition don't always hold sway, and where people tend not to take themselves quite so seriously. This book is about that vanishing rural world from whence we all came at one time and place or another.

It is also about celebrating unique individuals who are resourceful, eccentric, idiosyncratic, and at times just plain batty—yet oddly inspiring: an entrepreneur who ingeniously sucks problematic prairie dogs out of the ground with a sewer vacuum; a ninety-two-year-old publisher-pilot who delivers his newspapers by plane; the sole resident of a town who, as mayor, must hold public hearings with herself.

The year 2007 marks twenty years that I've been on the road for CBS, and I've seen a lot of unusual things. This thought occurs to me while watching a thousand sword-wielding medieval soldiers in full battle regalia and battle cry come charging down the side of a piney ravine toward a rendezvous with an opposing army stampeding down the other side. The warriors slash, stab, and spear one another with rattan weapons all the way up to the lunch break. Boy, if the people just over the hill on I-59 could see this! I am the only audience to this epic battle, which takes place outside Lumberton, Mississippi (pop: 2,228), in the twenty-first century, but no one here seems to realize this, lost as they are in their weekend medieval personas, eating medieval fare, wearing authentic garb, and speaking in stilted medieval language. For the likes of King Alarek of the Kingdom of Ans Theora (Texas and Oklahoma) and Orm the Wanderer of Trimaris (Florida), indeed for all the viscounts, dukes, exchequers, and others, it's going to be tough to snap out of it back at the office on Monday morning. They refer to this as returning to the "Mundane World." Indeed.

There is nothing of the Mundane World here. The people in this book live in the Mundane World but are not of it.

Traveling to forty-nine states, I have learned much about this nation, but few overarching truths except to say that, truth is, there aren't many that hold true. I've learned that the Amish play a mean game of donkey basketball (a Midwestern thing, where basketball players ride donkeys). Who knew? I thought they were like Quaker pacifists, but the night I saw them play in Middlefield, Ohio (pop: 2,233) they were ferociously competitive and aggressive in overpowering the firemen's team. Fans packed the gym and filled the parking lot with their buggies. America is full of surprises.

We don't learn much about our country on the interstates, except that Americans are in a hell of a hurry and happily trade speed for wonder and discovery. Today Tocqueville would cross the country on I-80 from Jersey to Frisco, faithfully recording the exit numbers; Kerouac's *On the Road* would take place in an endlessly repeating pattern of Holiday Inns and Denny's; Least Heat-Moon would author *Green Interstate Highways*.

Flying, of course, is even worse. On a trip from Los Angeles to New York, crossing the Rockies on a clear day, I gaze down in awe, contemplating these majestic peaks when a flight attendant comes on the PA and orders us to pull down our window shades so that we can better enjoy today's in-flight movie, *Dude, Where's My Car?*

I don't mind saying that in twenty years I have gained a measure of fame. One Sunday morning outside Lebanon, Indiana (pop: 14,222), I rang a farmhouse doorbell to ask if our crew could get a shot of the basketball hoop on their barn. I could see through the sheer curtain on the door window that the family was watching television. A young boy of about ten opened the door and took a step backward, wide-eyed and in an apparent state of shock. "It's him!" he shouted. "It's the guy on TV!" I looked past him and saw that a segment of mine was at that moment showing on their screen. After explaining about the hoop, I told the family that we like to get out and personally thank each viewer for watching the show.

I didn't know when I started that this book was going to be about small towns. I began writing about my favorite experiences and, after I'd written eight, realized they'd all occurred in very small towns. Why, I'm not really sure.

A return to my roots? My parents ran a country newspaper, the *Fisher Reporter*, in Fisher, Illinois (pop: 1,647), with some cover-

age of news from other towns in the Greater Fisher Metro Area, towns with quirky names like Normal and Oblong. My father's favorite headline was OBLONG WOMAN MARRIES NORMAL MAN.

They moved to the big city, Champaign (pop: 60,000, then), where I grew up. It was still pretty provincial. I realized in flipping through an old yearbook recently that our foreign exchange student was from America. Hawaii. Who knew?

I made my way to Chicago, which my father had warned me was full of all manner of evil and badness: crime, filth, immorality, Democrats . . . It was a new world of subway trains and skyscrapers and somehow tolerated intolerables: unending traffic jams, cramped quarters, and everyday rudeness that would get you punched out back where I came from. The suburbs tried to pretend they were small towns, except there were two hundred of them cemented together, literally, and attached to the city.

If Chicago was to me a different world, New York was an entirely different planet, light-years from Normal. People lived in NASA nose-cone-size apartments, in threatening neighborhoods near nothing, with smelly trash on the sidewalks (somebody *forgot the alleys* when New York was built), and paid exorbitant prices for the privilege. There were people in Manhattan, which is legally part of America, who didn't own TV sets or cars!

You could read fellow passengers' watches and newspapers on the subway. Restaurant tables were so small and close together (two inches) you practically had to eat without using your arms, like it was a pie-eating or apple-bobbing contest. Fellow human beings came to be considered obstacles: in restaurants, on the roads, on the sidewalks. A cabdriver disclosed to me: "I've always considered courtesy a sign of weakness."

It was all endlessly fascinating, in a Jane Goodall sort of way,

and I loved the excitement of walking in New York, where energy seemed to be shooting from the sidewalks right up into my shoes. But subconsciously I needed relief from this Tasered rat race once in a while, needed to get back to where I came from, back in place and time.

People ask me: But aren't small towns boring? You betcha! And boredom has consequences, as you're about to see. Michael Carmichael, of Alexandria, Indiana (pop: 5,868), uses his extra time to continue expanding his world's largest paintball, a baseball he's painted over the past thirty years with 18,049 coats of paint at the time we visited (more than 20,000 coats by now), weighing about 1,300 pounds with a circumference of more than nine feet. Out in South Dakota, sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski decided in 1947 to carve a likeness of Chief Crazy Horse, one that dwarfs Mount Rushmore and is larger than the Sphinx, from a mountain out behind the house. His family continues the dynamite-sculpting and it should be finished in just a few more generations.

Let others report "Britney's Breakup"; let them spread today's truth from White House officials and countermand it tomorrow; and let them report "Are Terrorists Targeting Our Applebee's?"

My beat is finding seemingly ordinary people doing extraordinary things: a photographer who specializes exclusively in portraits of cows; a chef whose specialty is roadkill; a town too small for a traditional parade solves the problem by having the watchers walk around the standstill "marchers."

These people, places, and events are news to me.



Standstill Parade

Whalan, Minnesota, Pop: 62

Whalan, Minnesota, is a bucolic little town. But you know what? Things can get a little *too* bucolic sometimes. The unlocked front doors, the peace and quiet, and the down-home neighborliness are all well and good, but from time to time folks want a little excitement for a change.

“Let’s have a parade!” proposed the young, vivacious, pony-tailed local businessman and fairly new guy in town David Harrenstein. Hmmm. Nice idea, but next to impossible in a town where the population is sixty-two and dropping fast, numerically and quite literally.

Whalan has none of your essential parade elements, according to town council member Buddy Olson. A marching band? “No.” Fire truck? “No.” Police car? “No.” A queen of any kind? “No.”

Buddy isn't going negative on us, just stating the facts. All of this is not to mention the biggest problem of all, parade-wise: the whole town's only, at the most, two blocks long. A parade would be over before it began.

"Everybody loves a parade," David says. "We're just geographically challenged." He admits to an ulterior motive. David owns the Overland Inn, one of the only buildings in town. It's no longer an inn, but a small restaurant of sorts that serves ice cream and "world-famous pie"—world famous around here at least. He wanted to attract some people to town, people who like pie à la mode. Since purchasing the inn two years earlier, he'd found doing business without people around to be extremely challenging.

Townfolk were skeptical, as small-town folk often are when it comes to new ideas. "We've never had a parade," says Harley Olson, Buddy's father. "At least not since '43, when I got here. About, ooh, forty years ago we did have a carnival, but it's been pretty quiet since." Adeline Larson backed him up on that, saying she could not recollect a parade in her eighty-eight years here.

Then David came up with a breakthrough idea—maybe even a concept. To solve the paramount problem of a parade being too long for their short town, why not have the parade stand still—stay with him on this—and have the crowd walk around it? A standstill parade!

"We were gonna lock him up when he said that," Buddy scoffs. But the more Buddy and others in town got to thinking about it, the more they thought: You know, it just might work.

Not to bring up a sore subject, but what would be *in* the parade?

You need a cop car with a siren and flashing lights, for openers.

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