



By Angus Love

“Some Men are Looking for
the Holy Grail, But There Ain’t Nothin’ Sweeter than
Ridin’ the Rails”, ‘Cold Water’ - Tom Waits

It was after law school when I decided I needed more education in life than academia had provided. I had seen enough to know there was much more going on in the world than what my middle-class upbringing, college and law school had provided. It was the 1960s and 1970s as the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-war movement and the countercultural revolution were in full swing. With these thoughts in mind, I hit the road, á la Jack Kerouac, and became a dharma bum. I had friends in California, so I hitchhiked cross-country to pay them a visit. I made pretty good progress during the first couple of days and got there in about a week. Having done this before, I was experienced at traveling light and moving along at low cost. I had a knapsack with cooking utensils, a tube tent, sleeping bag, poncho and my trusty Swiss Army knife. I had picked up the tricks of the hitchhiking trade quickly. For money, I would pick up odd jobs before, during or after these forays; everything from taxi driver, short-order cook, dishwasher and temporary labor from manpower, to the rock-and-roll business. I had crisscrossed the country a couple of times, once in an ACON drive-away car, other times hitchhiking the Southern I-10 route, the Midwestern route along I-70 and then the Northern route along I -90. For the return trip back to the East Coast, I figured it was time for something different, so I decided to try our northern neighbor, Canada.



The first couple of days were uneventful, crossing the border north of Seattle, picking up the major east-west highway and heading east. I met a fellow hitchhiker, Dave, along the way and we decided to travel together for some company. We arrived in Calgary just in time for the Calgary Stampede, a mid-summer plains extravaganza. Thousands flocked to Calgary for this annual event; part rodeo, part county fair and the event of the summer in these parts. That evening as we were heading out of town, we stopped at a roadside bar to grab a six-pack of beer. A couple of attractive young ladies, apparently dissatisfied with their dates, asked us to join them at their table. We gladly agreed, but after one beer, the tension between us and their male friends grew, so we decided to split the scene. I was stopped at the door by the bouncer who told me he had to confiscate the remaining beers as one cannot get a takeout order and consume some on the premises and then depart with the rest. Who knew? I took a major exception to this rule as money was short and beer was an important of our evening plans. The rather large bouncer escorted us into the now dark parking lot as tensions escalated and the threat of a violent confrontation grew. I was physically thrown off of the establishment grounds after continued protest. Much to my surprise, one of the young ladies followed us out, consoled me, expressed sympathy and invited us to her home for the evening. Things went very well that night as the girls rolled out the red carpet for us. Things went so well that I still wonder what our rush was to move on the next day. Nevertheless, move on we did.

It took almost the whole day to reach Medicine Hat as the plains traffic started to thin out. We were well into the prairie and very few cars were going any great distances. We heard that there was a youth hostel in town so we headed over there. It was filled with young folks such as ourselves from various

parts of the world. We were surprised to see some folks had been there for as long as a week. The consensus at the hostel was that hitchhiking was very difficult in this area. While the accommodations were pleasant, company good and the cost minimal, we wanted to keep moving. We thought about other options that didn't involve money that we didn't have.

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We could see the midnight train making a brief stop at the local station and then began pulling out of the yard. There were four engines pulling freight cars as far as the eye could see. We weren't sure if there would be open box cars so we decided to try the fourth engine. As the train was moving slowly out of the yard, we easily climbed onto the cab of the fourth engine and quickly fell fast asleep on the floor of the cab. I awoke the next morning staring at the well-polished boot of the engineer. Fear immediately took over as I assumed

we were not welcome. Much to my surprise, the engineer informed us that they were taking two engines off and we had to relocate. We thanked him for his concern and moved onto the second engine. We spent the day lounging around the engine watching the miles and miles of prairie roll by. It was a beautiful bright sunny day with mild temperatures.



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After a full day of travel, and as the sun was setting, the friendly engineer came back to talk with us. Midsummer days lasted well into the evening this far north. The engineer told us we would be busted by the railroad dicks if we road into the train yard with him. He suggested that we jump off before the yard. He said he would slow the train down to allow a safe exit. We thanked him for the trip and his concern for our wellbeing. The train slowed as it approached the Winnipeg station. I prepared my leap but made a huge mistake by jumping off with my back pack. The weight of the pack caused me to fall hard to the ground and do several somersaults. Fortunately I survived, as there was nothing in my path. My partner Dave wisely jumped without his pack and fared much better. It was close to 11 p.m. when the sun was setting in the Winnipeg

yard. We asked around and were directed to the local Salvation Army shelter. After checking in and paying a dollar, we slept well in the dorm cots. It was quite an adventurous day. We were rousted up at an early hour as residents were supposed to get out and find employment. We headed south, crossed the border back into the states and headed to Minneapolis. Canada had lived up to our expectations and it was time to head home.

At some point while traveling alone across British Columbia, I had an existential epiphany of sorts when I came to terms with my existence and myself. I had felt many influences in my life and was having difficulty figuring out who I was and what I was about. Parents, schools, friends and community were major influences. Now that I had gotten away from them for some time, I felt I knew myself better than I ever had. Stripping away all of those influences gave me a strange sort of comfort with myself.

Hopping a freight train was one of the most exciting methods of travel. I have flown, biked, drove, walked, ran, bused and trained around 46 states, Mexico and Canada, and Tom Waits is right. Another take-away from my days as a dharma bum which lasted a couple of years, was that there were good people everywhere I traveled. It isn't about red state/ blue state, urban/ rural, liberal/conservative, black/white, immigrant/domestic, young/old; but about being a decent human being under proper circumstances. I had some difficulty getting back into the legal world, starting out at as a VISTA Volunteer at \$60 per week. But all things concerned, those experiences meant more to me than any possibility additional degrees academia could offer as it was time well spent... Thanks to all the good folks that helped me along the way. ■

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