

Street Photography Magazine

“Look for America”

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Look for America

KIP HARRIS

In 1993, my wife was working on a novel where a road trip across the Midwest was to be a central feature. She needed to get a feeling for what that would be like. It was a search for "...the Heart of the Heart of the Country," to borrow a title from William H. Gass, and what the color of the earth was and how it smelled.

Where that "heart" is depends a great deal on where you start. People living in Manhattan think the Midwest starts on the other side of the Hudson as so brilliantly depicted in Saul Steinberg's "View of the World from 9th Avenue." People living in Chicago think the Midwest begins just west of Pittsburgh and stretches to maybe Iowa City. For people who live in the Intermountain West, the Midwest begins a little east of Chicago and slowly peters out somewhere west of North Platte.

We decided to fly to Indianapolis after work on the Friday before Thanksgiving and to drive west in a rental car. Our previous individual and collective car trips had always been rushed because we had had places to go: off to college, off on vacation, off to different jobs. We had never taken the time to roam the blue roads across the country and instead had mostly seen freeways and service stations, missing what was life was really like out there.

We agreed that, in the great American tradition, we would handle this road trip as an adventure, allowing for decisions to be made in the moment and to have no particular agenda ahead of time. At an intersection in the road, we would select which way to turn but always tending westward. We wandered through Illinois, Missouri, Iowa, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming before arriving back home in Salt Lake City. The trip was part William Least Heat-Moon, part Robert Frank, part Jack Kerouac,

part *American Geography* by Matt Black although that book hadn't yet been written, and part Simon and Garfunkel: "They've all come to look for America."



Rockville, Indiana

This was the year of the Great Flood of 1993:

"The Great Flood of 1993... was a flood that occurred in the Midwestern United States, along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and their tributaries, from April to October 1993. The flood was among the most costly and devastating to ever occur in the United States, with \$15 billion in damages (approx. \$27 billion in 2021 dollars). The

hydrographic basin affected an area approximately 745 miles in length and 435 miles in width, totaling about 320,000 square miles. Within this zone, the flooded area totaled around 30,000 square miles (78,000 km²) and was the worst such U.S. disaster since the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927...”

—Wikipedia Entry



Hannibal, Missouri

One of the strangest aspects of the flooded area was that you could smell the saturated soil and rotting vegetation long before you saw the destruction. Most of the water had receded by the time we drove through but there were places where side roads just disappeared into rank standing water. Buildings/cars/signs were covered in mud. Even shacks built up on stilts showed water stains. One

place on the Mississippi that was untouched was Nauvoo, Illinois. Built on the bluff above the River, this village which once rivaled the population of Chicago remained a monument to the careful city planning of its Mormon founders.



Near the Mississippi

As we drove further west, the flooded land was left behind but we encountered another kind of death. The once thriving small farming towns where proud civic buildings

graced the main street were slowly dying. The regional Walmart was cheaper than the local grocer, the large high school which serviced several towns could have a real football team and maybe a chemistry class, farm equipment could no longer be repaired by the farmer himself but needed a special tool or part or computer to keep it running, the local theater, once the Friday and Saturday night hang out place, functioned only occasionally if at all. A few civic landmarks still existed: Federal prisons, shared grain elevators, and the local coffee shop or drugstore or sometimes a bowling alley. People still gathered before work or at lunch to talk hog belly futures and church events. These people were increasingly older and less rushed in the smaller towns; younger people were likely to be part of Rotary or the local school board in the larger ones.

This slow death of small town America was more and more obvious as we moved further west. Indiana had a kind of Norman Rockwell feeling of comfort and well being. The farms were well maintained, the buildings were painted, the "Welcome to Our Community" signs were hung with the meeting times for the civic clubs and churches. This became less true as we moved across Iowa.



Grinnel, Iowa

There we visited Louis Sullivan's Merchants National Bank in Grinnel, walked about the Amish Community in Kalona where horse pulled carriages waited patiently near parked school buses, spent time roaming around the very strange Shrine of the Grotto of Redemption in West Bend. We had a pizza so saturated with salt that my wife's face blew up like a balloon the following morning. We stayed mostly in the type of motel made famous or infamous by Nabokov. The ones with the two metal chairs outside each rented room and the telephone booth near the office. We called them Lolita Motels.



Newton, Iowa

The further west we went the harder it was to pick up NPR on the radio. There were now small town radio stations playing mostly country and western. The ads were for deals at the local truck repair shop and hairdresser. These stations served as a bulletin board for the locals announcing dances and funerals and weddings and bridge clubs. Mostly the kind of community news that used to be printed in the weekly newspapers heavy on scout clubs and high school events while avoiding politics all together.



Nebraska Boots



Nebraska Roadkill

Snow was accumulating by the time we made it into Nebraska. The Winnebago Indian Reservation was nearly snow bound so we missed the game between the Warriors and Lewis and Clark Middle School but did stumble upon perhaps the largest junk yard of farm vehicles anywhere. After a very grim Thanksgiving feast of sliced jellied turkey and canned gravy in the Cedar Bowl in North Platte and being stunned by a mountain of grain waiting for shipment east, we abandoned our plans for more blue highways and returned to the dreaded freeways. We did find Little America in the middle of Wyoming where ice cream cones were 15 cents and the featured lunch entry was liver and

onions. The waitresses were middle aged and called you “dear” or “honey” and always got the order correct.



Farm Equipment Junkyard, Nebraska

What we discovered during that trip was most succinctly stated by Mark Power: “America continues to enthrall and to disappoint in equal measure.”

The images from that trip were all captured on medium format film. I carried two cameras back then—a pair of Mamiya 6 rangefinders loaded with 400 ASA film. I hated to sell those cameras but at a certain point my back wouldn't allow me to keep working in the darkroom. I, like the country we had driven through, was no longer young.



North Platte, Nebraska



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Harris grew up in a small farming community in Idaho. He holds

degrees in English literature from Dartmouth College, in humanities from the University of Chicago, and architecture from the University of Utah. He was a principal of FFKR Architects in Salt Lake City for nearly 30 years. A serious photographer since the late 80s, he has exhibited in the United States, Canada, and Europe with four solo and over eighty group shows. He has been published in Shots Magazine, The Photo Review, Art Reveal, Smithsonian.com, and a number of on-line photographic sites. He now lives on the South Shore of Nova Scotia in an 1823 cottage overlooking the St. Margaret's Bay. He and his wife created Company X Puppets (a highly portable puppet, dance, theater group established to present intimate mixed media theater works).



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