

# Signs of Life on the Road

A Canadian finds that American highways are cluttered with information



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By LARRY O'CONNOR

**A**LONG the road from Chicago to New Mexico there were signs to announce motels, signs to honor past presidents, obscure astronauts and movie stars. There were signs of history and destiny, industry and commerce, of candor and folly. Signs of urgency. In Chenoa, Ill., I'd seen a sign that said "Happy Easter" on one side and "Chenoa Needs a Doctor, Can You Help?" on the other. I knew a doctor from Canada who was looking to start a new life and I thought to give the clerk at the counter her name.

In the end I didn't. As a Canadian who had recently moved south, I remained somewhat unsure of America. Left behind were friends, family, a common way of being. I knew adjustments at first would be difficult, so I planned to enter America by car, my preferred method of travel.

In Canada, roads can beckon like Oz. At one time in my life it seemed I was always on the road north, staying awake by counting the beer bottles that had been tossed in the snow. I had lived in northern places, in part,

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so that I could drive alone on sweeping curves, the window rolled down in summer, a russet sunset with rows of trees in silhouette my only company.

The glove-compartment guide to America's Interstates that I'd bought in Chicago actually encouraged sign reading. The guide said the only side effect of driving along the 42,500 miles of Interstate that crisscross America was something called highway hypnosis. Highway hypnosis is the sheer boredom and debilitating fatigue that overtakes motorists on the wide lanes, easy curves and gradual grades to higher and lower elevations that engineers designed for the Interstates. To keep from falling asleep at the wheel and avoid collisions, the guide said drivers should focus upon near and far objects, look in the rear-view mirror, read highway signs.

I'd read highway signs in Canada and felt informed, guided. The first sign for a common pick-your-own orchard or a water slide alerts motorists to an appropriate exit number where another sign directs them in.

Literally hundreds of signs on Interstate 90 tout the virtues of the Wall Drug shopping complex in the middle of South Dakota. Smiling young employees, children of farming families, told me the more signs that go up the better the business, the more jobs for

their brothers and sisters. Motorists are warned in Ozark Country that they will miss the adventure of a lifetime if they drive past the exit for Meramec Caverns. Clines Corners, N.M., is hailed as a national treasure.

I was learning that freedom of expression and enterprise overtakes integrity of information in America. Sign clutter is virtuous.

And so, trying better to understand, I decided to set aside my preference for informative, necessary signs and become willing to be entertained. I had heard of this distinction. When Canadian free-trade negotiators talk of industries of culture — television, radio, books, magazines — Americans talk of entertainment. I realized then that was what the guidebook was getting at when it recommended reading highway signs to keep from falling asleep. Signs in America entertain.

Secure in this new knowledge, I veered off the Interstate for the first time upon seeing the sign for Memoryville near Rolla, Mo. I'd picked up a national magazine called Memories that printed nothing but old, recycled news, heard cable networks in America make bags of money broadcasting nothing but period TV shows, had seen hundreds of signs for Elvis souvenirs. I drove in search of Memoryville, but I couldn't find it on the exit I took. I thought the sign must have been the county supervisor's idea of a joke, not a real

place, imagined it would have been built in the shape of a wallet, have displays of keys lost in the 50's.

On my last sweep looking for Memoryville, I stopped at the Rolla public library. A notice on the bulletin board read, "Wanted: Pen Pals for Prison Committee of Pen Pals International, Rolla. Please Do Not Take This Card."

That set me off on an American trajectory, a search for entertainment. At Springfield, Mo., I turned on the radio to hear that a caller had won a box of baseball cards for correctly identifying Dan Seals, the artist singing "I Put My Life on the Center Line." I saw the largest American flag I'd ever seen in my life. Fond greetings appeared on my meal checks ("Fella! Have a Terrific Tuesday, Shirley").

In the rear-view mirror appeared an alternating line of bright white and red lights like some celestial string of beads. I bought two flawed wooden butterflies at a Walnut Bowls factory outlet to dangle from the mirror and a postcard that hadn't moved from its stand in 40 years.

I asked travelers at road stops for their favorite signs. One told of a sign he'd seen for an auto wrecker and divorce service in Kayenta, Ariz. Others included "Go Forth Tractor Sales" in the Bible Belt, "Hungry

Mother State Park," "Bull's Gap," "Frozen Head State Park." Down the road I'd see "Your Last Rest Area." "While They Snore, We Pour," the motto of a concrete company.

At the well-signed Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, I learned that cowboys undress upward, that John Wayne read Joseph Conrad. In Texas, signs were telltale. "Hitchhikers Could Be Escaping Inmates." "Unmarked Patrol Cars — You've Been Warned."

I'd come from the north, first appalled by the signs I'd seen, certain that they were an assault on my sensibility. But on the road I'd loosened up enough to think that perhaps this was not the case. I was beginning to see that signs on their own could be an invitation to culture, a human voice for the landscape.

Halfway between Joplin, Mo., and Tulsa, Okla., I followed a sign that said ahead was the largest McDonald's in North America. From a distance it appeared that golden arches spanned both eastbound and westbound roadways.

I paused in the parking lot and watched as the sun set over the darkening arches, the thundering sound of interstate traffic rooting me to the ground. And for a moment, before the lighted sign blinked on, had no way of knowing how many billions of hamburgers had been sold.