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# THE BACKBONE OF AMERICA

**By Nancy Gibbs**

America didn't invent the road as an art form, but each generation of pilgrims has helped perfect it, and every road has a story to tell. This story belongs to Highway 50. It's a cautionary tale, slipping through proud towns that died slowly, and a success story, widened and paved through the towns that were born again. It is a history book, surveyed by George Washington, planted by Johnny Appleseed, portaged by Daniel Boone. It is a tragedy in a mountain pass, winding round a curve at 11,000 ft. where the bus carrying the high school football team went over the edge in 1971. The road gossips down Main Street and dresses up for the cities and, when it reaches the desert, stretches to the horizon and falls fast asleep.

When TIME decided to take a trip and ask some questions about what is holding us together as a country and what is pulling us apart, we took to Highway 50 because it would let us take our time. As transcontinental roads go, it is more like a street than a highway, a long, lazy course that skips the Beltway and heads right downtown through the clutter of our lives, with plot twists and cattle crossings and slow, shaggy climbs through the mountains with warnings to stay in low gear for the next 17 miles. The road begins in Ocean City, Maryland, and by the time it runs out in California, it has crossed 12 states, the Great Plains, the Great Basin, passed Pancake Summit and the Confusion Range in Utah and Starve Hollow in Indiana, gone through towns like Strong City and Stagecoach and Hasty and at least three Salems.  A few years ago, a man named Skip walked across it--backward.

All along the road are laid out in miniature the four enormous changes this country is living through, all at the same time. The shift to a single-superpower world plays out not only in summits and treaties but also in the Utah desert, where patriotic citizens who once loved the Pentagon now distrust it enough to wonder about all the chemical-weapons stockpiles

waiting to be incinerated in their backyard. The NORAD installation in Cheyenne Mountain, Colo., built to track Soviet missiles, now scans the skies for space junk.

Second, the reality of a multicolored society is outrunning the debate over it. At the very moment that some of the tenets of the civil rights movements are being closely questioned, America is more diverse than ever. We are living through a period in which 1 of 10 Americans is born abroad and the Lutheran church in St. Louis, Missouri, helps pay its utility bills by sharing its sanctuary with Haitian Baptists. More than half the schoolchildren in Garden City, Kansas, speak English as a second language, not just the children of Mexican and Vietnamese meat-packers but those of German Mennonites from Argentina as well.

Third, as the machine defers to the modem, we become more efficient, more flexible and more vulnerable all at once. The nation's wiring stretches everywhere, and the jobs chase the circuits. Just as big manufacturers have declared that it is every bit as reasonable to build cars in Marysville, Ohio, as in Detroit, it's O.K. to manage a portfolio out of your ranch in Gunnison, Colorado. Every Chamber of Commerce is wooing a software company, beguiled by the vision of a growth industry with no need for loading docks or pollution controls. And yet each new story about Internet predators and database snoopers makes us wonder at what point information becomes a weapon as well as a tool, and at what point the invasion we most fear will be the invasion of our privacy.  A divorce lawyer in Missouri says a leading cause of divorce in his area is E-mail.

Finally, the most visible change of all is the prosperity that is seeping even into places where hope and confidence have rarely abided in this generation. The joke in West Virginia is that the state flower is the satellite dish, a dark gray Primestar pansy pulling reruns of Julia Child down into Quiet Dell.  In Hutchinson, Kansas, where land values are soaring, the homeowners who worry about "drive-bys" aren't talking about shootings; they are frightened of tax assessments performed without actual inspections. The most common road sign coast to coast seems to be NOW HIRING.

Judging by the numbers alone, the economy is buoyant enough to make the country light-headed, and it is easy to find giddy new millionaires--800,000 newly minted in 1996--paying cash for $3 million homes on the waterfront in Tahoe, Nevada, and then knocking them down to build bigger ones. The mayor of Belpre, Ohio, refers to his town as "the Beverly Hills of Appalachia" and boasts that there are so many good new jobs in the plastics

industry inflating his tax base that his city just annexed 500 acres, becoming, instantly, 40% bigger. It's getting hard to find a town where you can't buy a latte.

These happy economies are born of a brutal efficiency. American business has downsized, outsourced, re-engineered and simply worked harder, reaping huge productivity gains that economists just 10 years ago thought impossible. Even mercy can be cutthroat: in Bedford, Indiana, where rival hospitals would rather fight than merge, the police department at times has to step in to ensure that one institution does not drive off with a patient who's supposed to go to the other. A West Virginia coal mine that was producing 3 million tons a year shuts down, costing hundreds of the best union jobs in the county because it lost a bidding war to a nonunion company by cents on the ton. "The fact is, people here are going to have to change or die," says David Rubenstein, a local businessman who witnessed the competition, "and they don't want to change."

It would be a lot to ask people to calmly ride out one or two of these revolutions without getting anxious; we are facing four at once, and so maybe it's a natural reflex to change the locks or build a fence, to sort through values and valuables for the ones most worth hanging on to. The evidence suggests that all this change is making Americans more conservative, not so much politically as psychically, sending them back to church or into bookstores looking for volumes about how to live an authentic life--making them garden and recycle and learn yoga and search for steadiness and security and a little peace.

And yet somehow that instinct to crouch down in the face of change runs right into the urge to sit up straight and ride it out. The inverse of the maxim that hard times pull communities together is that good times let people stray, start their own business, move to a new town not because their job requires it but for a better life, a better school, a better view of the mountains. Our shared national luxury is elbow room, the blessing of wealth and space that allows congregations to split off and build huge, sprawling new churches along the highway, unaffiliated with any denomination, equipped like a high school, catering to a niche in the soul. It accounts for the blinding growth of exurban enclaves, filled with people fleeing not just the big cities but also the small ones--setting off from Dayton, Ohio, to settle in Hillsboro, even if it means an hour's drive to work.

While change makes people uneasy, prosperity makes them adventurous. Highway 50's towns are settled and unsettled by the heirs of the Forty-Niners, the newly liberated telecommuters and mutual-fund-toting retirees and boat people homesteading in Garden

City, Kansas, writing a Vietnamese-language instruction manual for Windows 95 and declaring with a smile, "We are searching for freedom"--delighted by both the cliche and the profound truth behind it.

Sometimes it takes only a few people with the right sense of timing to revive a dying town. But prosperity doesn't make every choice easy: there are still arguments all along the road. Particularly in towns that began to totter after losing a factory or military base, you can hear the debate over the price worth paying for survival: What kind of industry, what kind of zoning, how many prisons? In Rising Sun, Indiana, they ask if it is worth inviting in the riverboat casino, with all the cars and all-night grocery stores and Gamblers Anonymous meetings that come with it, if that means people will no longer have to drive two towns over to see a dentist. In Hutchinson, Kansas, they wonder whether the job security that comes with two new prisons is worth it when the relocated relatives of inmates are wearing gang colors to school.

One alternative is to take a lesson from Disney and an army of developers, who are betting fortunes on the idea that everyone from young families to retirees wants to eat in a theme restaurant and live in a Frank Capra set, where the paint never peels and families gather after dinner to play Parcheesi. And so contractors are carving a 430-acre town out of cornfields north of Washington, replete with sidewalks and gazebos and town squares and the transplanted totems of an easier age. The deep American nostalgia for rural life may owe more to fantasy than memory, but it is a theme that has grown more powerful as the pace of change picks up. At a time when the search for Real Life is becoming a marketing tool, when Coors promotes itself as the Last Real Beer and cotton is the Fabric of Our Lives, a lot of towns are realizing themselves, deciding it is easier to restore an evocative Main Street than to build one from scratch.

Eight years ago, Peabody, Kansas, had a 30% vacancy rate downtown. Young people fled after high school in search of jobs, the tax base shrank, businesses left, and people had to drive to the next town to buy shoes. An entire building on Main Street sold in 1985 for $425. So town leaders put window shades in the upper stories of all the buildings on Main Street to make it look as if someone lived there, and began marketing the town to tourists and entrepreneurs and a wave of urban refugees.

Now Main Street looks authentically cute, attracting house hunters from Wichita fleeing traffic and gangs and drive-by shootings. At the senior center, the ladies are sewing a

memorial quilt made of a late father's old dress shirts. "People from large cities find it charming," says Pam Lamborn, owner of the Jackrabbit Hollow Bookstore, gazing up at a pretty frieze of stylized Kansas sunflowers running across the top of the bowling alley. "But you know what's going to happen? The small towns are going to become the big cities all over again." Already nostalgia may have been oversold in some places. Says a resident of Sedalia, Missouri; "We had so many people putting on a cantata for Easter that we didn't have people to listen to it."

It is worth noting that all this creative energy--people re-engineering their careers, towns rebuilding their Main Streets, churches rethinking their missions--occurs well out of earshot of the nation's capital. Rarely does a town council think that Washington will provide any protection from or solution for its problems, a feeling confirmed by the spectacle of politicians bickering over flood relief and subpoena power. Even if they could get federal or state aid, Americans are wary of the baggage that would inevitably come with it. If you can't help us, goes the message to government, at least stay out of the way.

And it's not just militiamen wearing fatigues who are disgusted with it; alienation has joined the mainstream, fueling tax revolts and home schooling and the growth of private-security forces. Joanna Daub, mother of two and a nurse assistant in Grand Junction, Colorado, still can't get over the time the inspector from the bureau of weights and measures wouldn't let her sell her extra peaches at the farmers' market because she didn't have a regulation scale. "I had this old postal scale, you know, which was working fine. I wasn't trying to cheat anybody or anything," she says. "But he told me I had to go, and I couldn't come back until I had the right kind of scale."

This conflict sits atop something ancient. "We are a nation of individuals and a nation of cooperators," notes Irwin Miller, the 87-year-old patriarch of Columbus, Indiana, who used to run Cummins Engine Co. "Both are in our culture. The adversarial and the cooperative need to be kept in balance, and they are a little out of whack." Two centuries ago, the colonists wondered whether they had enough in common to become a united nation at all. Ever since, each generation has struggled with the uniquely American faith that community and freedom must be compatible. It may be that the greater glory of the place is that we are able to be so divided over so many things yet still keep discovering ways to link ourselves and express those differences without flying apart. The telegraph. A love song. A protest march. The voting booth. And if all else fails, there's always the road.

--With reporting by David Van Biema, Adam Cohen, Michael Duffy, Aisha Labi, Eric Pooley and Barrett Seaman/Highway 50

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