COLUMN

On the road: Looking for America

// BY ALEXANDER MEDEL



ALEXANDER MEDEL / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

One defining trait of a Yale student is our knack for asking questions. Equally characteristic of us is our passion for going to great lengths to find answers. I suppose that is the reason why we go on to populate university faculties or newsrooms. I imagine that explains why we pay tens of thousands of dollars every year just to become professional seat warmers in Sterling. Yale students are inquisitive by nature, and we readily indulge our curiosities.

When sometime this spring I developed the urge to explore America, it should come as no surprise that I found it very hard to ignore and very easy to entertain. Curiosity alone is enough to enchant the mind. And that feeling, when combined with wanderlust, can only produce adventure.

I was born and raised in this country. I have called it home each of the 21 times I have journeyed around the sun. For the past four years, I have studied its history and its politics in great depth. My transcript and my lonely nighttime walks home from Marx are proof of my efforts.

And yet, like the multitude of thinkers and writers before me who have penned pages of wisdom far beyond my ability, I entertain the age-old contradiction that has beguiled them all: the more you learn about America, the more you discover you do not know it.

So I set out, one early morning in May, accompanied by my mother, father and a cooler full of Fanta with one item on the docket: looking for America.

My plan was to draw a giant lasso across the American West. Starting from the Bay Area, we would travel down the Central Valley and drive eastward on Route 66 from Barstow all the way to Chicago. After making it to the shores of Lake Michigan, we would return west by way of the northern Plains with stops at the Black Hills and the Great Basin before making it back home to California. To the statisticians out there, we would go on to cover 5,683 miles across 15 states in 15 days.

I must admit that making sense of America is an old and unoriginal business. Since the founding of our republic, everyone seems to have articulated an original idea or interpretation regarding our experiment, our ideas, our people. Don't believe me? Take a history seminar. Visit a bookstore. Browse CourseTable. If the concept of America were a baseball, it would burst at the seams, having seen too many pitches.

Many Americans will hear, at some point in their lives, an irresistible call to explore their country — to meet its people, to indulge in its stories, to enjoy its scenery. It's an essential call to answer.

Just a week before leaving for my road trip, TD's assistant dining hall manager said he was going on his own from California to Texas. He was celebrating a milestone. What struck me most from that conversation was his self-assessment. He relayed to me that he has spent the past few years going abroad but neglected to explore his own country. This summer, he sought to rectify this. He heard the call, and he answered.

As organically as this calling came, the timing could not have been more perfect. This year, the United States celebrates 250 years of independence. My objective was complicated by this fact. Yes, I was looking for America like many before me. However, I was looking for America in her current context — two-and-a-half centuries of nationhood later.

It would be foolish of me to claim here and at the end of this series that my conclusions and observations of America are definite, all-encompassing and true. I am no professional anthropologist. My travels have been limited to a generous portion of the western United States — I cannot speak for the coast of New England, the cuisine of the Gulf Coast or the communities of Appalachia. And there are certainly memories I've made that notes and words would fail to capture.

What I can claim is that these thoughts are mine. They are the ruminations of a 21-year-old Yale student who simply wants to better understand his country as best as he can.

John Steinbeck mentioned something along the lines of that in "Travels with Charley." His America, he told his readers, would be different from theirs. The same applies here. What is America to you will be different from the America I find on this journey. America can be interpreted in many different ways. But those interpretations — those truths — no matter how varied, can all be simultaneously real and true. And that, to me, is a beautiful thing.

Contact **ALEXANDER MEDEL** *at alexander.medel@yale.edu.*







WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

REINVENTING YOURSELF