



Under Fly-Over-Country



By John Loofbourow, MD

A quick flight to a 50th medical school reunion is followed by a 50-hour trip home.

PERHAPS MINNESOTA is fly-over-country, yet people there seem to feel it is home, and maybe the best of all possible worlds. It does have character, and a level of cultural attributes that are enviable. In part that is attributable to the long, cold winters, which tend to force individuals and society to turn inward, physically and intellectually. The "Twin Cities" are home to world-renowned institutions in business, the arts, and education, and the region ranks high in surveys that measure quality of living.

Minnesotans like to go their own way. In politics, for example, consider the fast-talking Senator Hubert Horatio Humphrey, the inimitable wrestler-Governor Jesse Ventura, and the late radical left Senator Paul Wellstone. As I write, a heavily Democrat legislature is drafting a bill that a Republican Governor plans to sign, allowing any citizen to carry a handgun after passing a security review and a gun handling course. They seem perilously close to balancing a budget.

The Mississippi River begins in the North Woods of Minnesota where lush birch and evergreens are washed and lashed by summer lightning and thunder-laden rain, and there are said to be 10,000 lakes carved by ice age glaciers. The 2,500-mile-long river's patient brown still waters seem unperturbed by thousands of transient buildings, businesses, and towns that stream lemming-like along its banks ever northward up from the Gulf of Mexico.

Among these is the University of Minnesota. I was among those graduates from the School of Medicine class of 1955 who gathered in May to remember, to mark and remark on our years, and to wonder together again what and who we are. For one thing, we are very diverse in age though time makes that disparity less significant. When we started out, world-wise and weary WWII veterans had competed with brash and nerdy youths, and only a tiny percent of applicants were admitted. I was one of the babies, graduating from med school at 21. Pre-med had been cutthroat, but in medicine itself I recall little friction or conflict in a personal or professional sense; perhaps we were too busy to fret over such things, too aware of the details of war and the frailty of life.

It was, I think, a time when many people were needy but needed little to feel whole; we hadn't the luxury to dwell on what we lacked. How our world has changed. The "U" has expanded in every direction: burrowing down into the earth, bridging roads, rising into the air, across the broad back of the Mississippi, into surrounding homes, and reaching around the globe, all evidence of growing national wealth and power. Every aspect of medicine has changed, as have those who graduated 50 years ago. Only the patient river was the same.

Our reunion consisted of several days of what could indelicately be called gossip with a chaser of CME. We spoke of each other's lives, families, and careers, discussed dead or absent classmates, gnawing on the marrow bones of memory. I had graduated from high

school completely directionless, and was able to spend many hours with my dearest old friend who plotted our course into medicine; and another classmate who showed me the way "over, under and through" medical school.

Like all things human, our gathering was soon over except for the institutional details of course; aging graduates, heavy with low-hanging endowment dollars, were (and will be) forever carefully and lovingly tended.

Marinated in memory, I was ready to return to my home of most of these past 50 years, Superior California. I had a return air ticket, but decided I should visit my son in South Dakota en route. Searching the airlines, I found that a quick trip to Rapid City and back to Minneapolis to catch my flight at this late date would run at least \$1,000. The train doesn't go there. What to do?

When time allows, I always prefer to travel by bus in the Southern Cone countries of South America, where one can travel on huge Brazilian Marco Polos; uniformed attendants serve snacks or drinks, and there are long stops for the best of local meals. However, I had misgivings about the U.S., considering our Sacramento bus facility and the bus station aura. But what could I lose except some sleep, and the return leg of my flight? The clincher was that a one-way bus fare to Sacramento was an incredible \$69. So on a quiet Sunday morning at 6:40 a.m., I began the 50-hour bus trip across the country, interrupted by a week in South Dakota.

The Minneapolis Greyhound station is new, clean, and uncrowded at that hour. There were many children, seniors, and a full spectrum of race and dress tending toward the uninhibited or even seedy. Foreign tongues abounded. When lines were long, as they were in a 1 p.m. Denver boarding lineup, passengers were well behaved, respectful and tolerant, conversing with good humor during the long wait. Many just parked their unpretentious pieces of baggage or parcels in long queues to hold their place. I was only once slightly irritated by loud and aggressive trash talk, and never felt threatened. Those with children were boarded first. (I once claimed the privilege of second childhood in vain.)

We left on Jefferson Lines, one of many small bus lines that Greyhound uses as subcontractor for out-of-the-way legs. I noticed experienced bus people with carry-on bags of comfort items and food, big pillows and blankets which I resolved to acquire later for the rest of my trip. The bus was completely filled. My first surprise was the announcement by the driver which went something like this:

"Welcome aboard. I am Mark, and will be your driver until Rapid City. We will make a 30 minute stop in Sioux Falls for lunch. Our other stops at A, B, C, and D will be brief, allowing us to off-load or pick up passengers, or a smoke. Me too! Watch me, though, and when I get back on the bus be sure you do too. Please note that there is no smoking or alcohol allowed aboard. Do not smoke in the restroom. If you decide to have a drink at lunch, that's your choice. But if I smell alcohol on your breath when you return you will wait for the next bus; the driver of that bus may do the same. No radios may be played aboard excepting with earphones. No passenger should ever be harassed or threatened, so if that happens let me know and I will take care of the problem. Any questions?"

There were never any replies of substance. The bus driver is captain of the ship, and has support from local law enforcement. What a welcome concept! A lady across the aisle noted that on her earlier bus there had been a disturbance from a passenger who did not respond to the driver's suggestions. Without further comment or discussion, the bus soon pulled over, a police car appeared, and the problem traveler and her bags were removed.

Small town bus stops were often gas stations, sometimes with a convenience store. Stations in larger towns like Rapid City were new, clean and uncongested. Most lunch or supper stops were (did you guess?) at McDonald's. At night the busses were generally only half full so that one could range freely back and forth, up and down over two seats and infringe upon the aisle space; pillows and blankets were put to use and I slept fitfully

but reasonably well. During the daytime, *in vivo* and cell phone conversations made it hard to read; the real drama was far more fleshy than the written page.

Fifty is a portly, round, resounding number. After some 50 hours bussing through fly-over-country, I had written a spate of fellow travelers into my notebook, wondering what Cervantes, Voltaire or Twain would think of them. The nurse returning from Phoenix where she had taken her boards in order to escape Elko, Nevada. The black rapper, traveling with a loud, buxom blond whose conversation is unsuitable for this magazine; when his girlfriend at last passed out, he pulled out his cell phone and morphed into an astute businessman; and again into a concerned and loving husband and father, who skillfully handled his other lives, taking on a completely new language and persona appropriate to each situation. I was astounded by three of his personalities.

Yet movement and time can cease on a long bus ride, as it can at a 50-year reunion when we may suspect that only history moves, while we are myopic and transient spectators, under the illusion that we are in motion. I had the curious feeling that our bus stood still as islands of Denny's and Sears, and Shell stations headed east along the antelope-inhabited plain. Utah passed us. Nevada; the Sierras.

I had to hop off before Sacramento left, too.

john@loofbourow.com

Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society
5380 Elvas Avenue #100 • Sacramento, CA 95819
916.452.2671 PH • 916.452.2690 FX • Email: info@ssvms.org

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