

One story in a collection of world travel stories

Graham Crackers and Red Wine

"Bigger than Woodstock!"

Those three words heard from a fellow backpacker in the summer of 1973 set me off on a frantic 5-day hitchhiking journey across America. A Grateful Dead concert in upstate New York was expected to attract 600,000 festival-goers. Although I was in California at the time, I was determined not to miss such a historical event. Missing Woodstock in 1969 was a big disappointment in my young life. While Jimi Hendrix was rocking the music world in New York, I was rolling in a US destroyer off the coast of Vietnam. I wouldn't miss this second chance to be part of a great musical event. I immediately abandoned my beach-bumming in Malibu, stuck out my thumb, and headed east.

My first day on the road was not encouraging. Setbacks from a Winnemucca sheriff who escorted me to the city limits and a gold prospector who dumped me on a rural road in the high desert of Nevada left me 200 miles short of my goal for the day.

On the second morning, when I finally reached a freeway ramp in a small town near the Utah border, I found another hitchhiker had beaten me there.

As I drew closer, I saw that he was an old Indian. He looked like Geronimo, a wrinkled face shaded by a Stetson cowboy hat with a feather. Trying to escape the scorching heat, he stood in the shade of a signpost that read, "No Pedestrians."

I greeted him with a cheerful "Hi, Chief."

I know that wouldn't be politically correct in today's world. But to a kid who watched cowboys and Indians on TV in the 1950s, every Native American was an Indian, every Indian was an Injun, and every Injun was a chief. The chief smiled back at me.

It is an unwritten rule of hitchhikers that the first person to arrive at a location is entitled to stand in front of all others. Before I took my place in line, I wanted to look closer at the road sign the chief was leaning against. A signpost can tell much about how long you will wait for a ride. You can expect a short wait if nothing is written on it. If it is covered with initials, poems, stories, or phone numbers "for a good time," you are in trouble.

I was in trouble. "War and Peace" would be considered a short story compared to the writings on that signpost. I asked the chief how long he had been there. "Since daybreak," he responded. My worst fears were confirmed.

The chief and I sweltered together in the hot sun as we spent hours waiting for a ride. During that time, two trains pulled into a freight yard below an embankment near us. I watched them briefly stop, switch crew, and proceed eastward toward Salt Lake City. After the second one departed, I decided to abandon hitchhiking and hop the next train that came through. I had never jumped a train before, but decided to try in desperation.

I approached the chief and said, "Just wanted to say goodbye. This real estate is all yours now. I'm catching the next freight that comes along."

With a horrified look on his face, he said, "No! No! No! You don't want to do that. You will be in real trouble if you end up on a Union Pacific train. They stop those trains in the middle of the flats, and the bulls break your legs, take your water, and leave you for the vultures."

I respected his concern and thanked him, but I considered his warning an old wives' tale from the 1920s and proceeded down the hill to await the next freight.

I could feel the hot Nevada sun burning through my backpack as I hid in the sagebrush near the railroad tracks. While lying on my stomach, with my head slightly raised like a rattlesnake poised to strike, I peered back and forth through the silvery-grey foliage. I looked back at the old Indian chief who had warned me of the dangers of hopping freights. He was gone.

I soon heard the hissing brakes of a train. I watched it pull in, idle for a few minutes, swap engineers, and slowly pull out. It wasn't a Union Pacific train. My chance had come. I sprinted to the first open boxcar. After tripping over roots, rocks, and rubbish, I reached the train and tossed my backpack into the boxcar as it gathered speed.

With sweat on my brow, dust in my lungs, and flying gravel ripping into my shins, I struggled to boost myself inside. Holding my elbows high against my chest and my hands touching fingers to fingers, I supported my weight on the outer edge of the car floor as I ran. My feet continued to flap like flags in the wind. I didn't know if I was running or being dragged. As the shaking and rattling of the train grew faster, so did the beating of my heart and the stumbling of my feet. Unable to pull myself up, I panicked at the thought of losing all my belongings.

Just as I was about to relinquish my hold, two scrawny arms reached out from the dark corners of the car. They grabbed my hands and gave a quick, powerful jerk. I rolled inside, ending up on my back with my arms outstretched as if crucified to the floor. I opened my eyes to a grinning, nearly toothless, old hobo who chuckled and said, "Lad. You put on a great show. I got on when the train stopped."

Sheepishly, still out of breath, I responded, "Thank you. --- This is the first time----- I've ever caught a freight train."

"You're lucky the train didn't catch you," he replied. "Pete's the name. Welcome aboard."

As I propped myself up against a wall, I glanced around the boxcar and noticed a box of graham crackers and a bottle of red wine squirreled away inside a small bedroll.

"You travel light, Pete. Where you headed?" I asked.

"I'm going to the East Coast somewhere. Doesn't matter much where on the East Coast."

"And where is this train going?"

"This is a Burlington Northern train, so it may carry us to Colorado. You never know about freight trains, however. It's not like they give you a schedule. We could end up in New Mexico. "How about you? Where are you traveling to?"

"I'm on my way to a Grateful Dead concert in upstate New York," I excitedly replied. "Do you like their music?"

"Don't know them, but I'm grateful to be alive," he answered, smiling to himself with the cleverness of his answer. "You have much to learn if you expect to cross this country on freights."

"Would you teach me?" I asked, pleading.

"I can help," Pete answered, taking a swig out of the wine bottle. "Want to start with some wine and crackers?"

I turned down Pete's offer of wine and graham crackers, and he turned down my offer of peanut butter and orange juice, but a friendship formed. When two people are stuck in a box together for hundreds of miles, they bond or break. As the hours went by, our bond grew.

When going through train crossings, we would jump up, stand side by side in the open doorway, laugh, and enthusiastically wave and smile at the stunned drivers waiting to cross the road. We shouted encouragement to little leaguers playing baseball as our train roared alongside their field. And we saved our biggest smiles for the railroad crews working along the tracks who were powerless to kick us off as our train sped by.

Neither of us asked personal questions. We held to the rule of the road that all personal information should be voluntarily offered. Deep down inside, we were the same person, only a generation apart. We had destinations but no goals. We lived day to day without keys of responsibility in our pockets.

Pete was a beatnik from the '50s who lost his way when the reality of an unchangeable world smothered his youthful idealism. Many beatniks assimilated into the hippie movement of the '60s, but not him. He gave up his bongos, poetry, and goatee only to replace them with wine.

Pete had no money, but his knowledge of trains was priceless. He mentored me in every aspect of hopping freights. He focused on my safety, teaching me which boxcars would bounce me around like Jello in a can. He warned me about getting into a boxcar with only one open door that could suddenly shut and trap me inside. He instructed me on how to jump from a moving train, avoid the railroad bulls, and tell the difference between a milk run and an express train.

He also educated me on where America's freight yards were located and which train lines used them.

Between lessons, Pete would crawl back into his corner of the car, grab a shot of wine, nibble on a graham cracker, and finish each meal with an expertly rolled cigarette. He would then curl up in his thin flannel bedroll and fall asleep. I once offered him the use of my down sleeping bag, but he had too much pride to accept it.

While Pete slept, I sometimes sat on the floor's edge in the boxcar's open door and let my feet dangle outside. With the sun shining on my face and the wind blowing through my hair, I had never felt so free and unencumbered in all my life. The beautiful landscape of America rolled before me like the background of an old cartoon show. The train chugging was a faint heartbeat, adding a soothing rhythm to the serenity.

However, that serenity was shattered as the train slowed and entered a rail yard outside Salt Lake City. With a terrified look, Pete jumped up, looked both ways out the door, and hollered, "Union Pacific yard!" Without a "goodbye," he leaped from the train, landed on the gravel, and darted into the bushes with the grace of a gazelle. I never saw Pete again.

I rode the train into the yard and got off it when it stopped. It wasn't a Union Pacific yard. Although I stood alone among the freight cars, I didn't feel abandoned. Pete had taught me well. I knew I was ready to ride the rails on my own. I reached into the boxcar and retrieved my backpack. I left Pete's bedroll, Graham crackers, and red wine untouched. I never made it to New York in time for the concert.

I don't know if I bonded with Pete out of love, gratitude, or necessity, or if he bonded with me out of love, pity, or charity. But for a short time in our lives, we traveled the world together, and at that stage in my life, he was "Bigger than Woodstock" to me.

I don't ride freight trains anymore. But every time a boxcar rolls by me at a railroad crossing, I search for Pete and imagine two scrawny arms reaching out to help me. If I ever met him again, I know what I would do. I would run up to him, hug him, and say, "Old man. You put on a great show. I got off when the train stopped."