

The Road to Carthage

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I was scared to death as we swerved back and forth across US Highway 79 between LaTex and Carthage Texas. The guy's appearance was nothing out of the ordinary but the way he was talking and driving had me wishing I was somewhere else. It was 1949, I was 15, and hitchhiking my way to Carthage to play an American Legion baseball game when this guy picked me up. After I got in the car and we took off he told me he was going to Rusk to commit himself to the insane asylum. Now that got my attention, but then the fun started.

It had all started when the junior high principal helped me get my schedule changed so I could practice and stay after school to play on the high school baseball team. Since I participated in four sports this was the start of hitchhiking home every day after school until I graduated.

Most of my hitchhiking trips home were routine but some were memorable. One night after a baseball game when I was a sophomore, I caught a ride with a couple of guys who were going to Shreveport to get a new supply of liquor. Panola County where we lived was dry. I think they had already had plenty. Between puffs on a cigarette and sipping more whiskey, they lectured on the evils of liquor and cigarettes. I would say they had considerable experience with both.

My basketball coach didn't like for me to hitchhike home at night after an away game. After he found out what I was doing, he would make me spend the night with him and his wife who was the school nurse. Since I had really rather go home, I found out that I could lie and say, "Oh, my folks came to town to see a movie. They'll be waiting for me." Then I would go hitchhike home.

One night after a game a big white Cadillac stopped to pick me up. We hadn't heard much about Black Muslims in the early fifties, but I was in a car with four of them that night. The next day after school a guy who was one of the few people in Carthage who openly admitted to being gay picked me up. When I told some friends about these two trips, they asked if I were afraid. I was not.

Then there was the time with the girls. Another boy and I were dating sisters. One weekend their older sister said we could use her car if we could get to their house, so we hitchhiked to see the girls. We were standing there with our thumbs out when a truck stopped to pick us up. Just as we were about to hop in the back of the pickup, a car with three girls in it stopped right behind the truck. One of the girls leaned out the window and asked if we wanted a ride. Faced with a choice of riding in the bed of a pickup or in a car with three girls we did what any 18 year-old boy would do. Grinning like a couple of dummies we took off set out to impress these girls. Then I made a mistake. When asked where we were going I said, "We're going to pick up our dates." Shortly thereafter the car was stopped and the driver informed us they were turning around and going back where they came from and that we should get out. Folks, there is nothing between where we started and where we were going but pine trees.

But now here I am with this guy who tells me he is insane as his car swerves all over the road. He drives real fast then real slow, always on the wrong side of the road until we meet a car. Every now and then he looks at me and asks, "Do you think I am crazy?" Then he says, "Everyone says I am." How do you answer that? I am not sure if the guy is really crazy or is just trying to scare me. I think about telling him to stop and let me out, but I already told him I am going to Carthage and don't know what he will do if I tell him something different. As soon as

we get to the edge of town, I say, “This is where I need to get out.” When he stops I bail out and take a long sigh of relief as he drives away.

Some would say it was athletic ability and participating in sports that gave me confidence to do the things I did. However, as I walked away from the crazy guy I realized that I couldn't let fear stop me from hitchhiking. If it had, a shy, naïve country boy living in LaTeX could not have participated in sports and all kinds of other things in Carthage. So after the game my thumb was out again.