

Way Off the Road: Discovering the Peculiar Charms of Small Town America

by Bill Geist

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EXCERPT

Standstill Parade

Whalan, Minnesota, Pop: 62

Whalan, Minnesota, is a bucolic little town. But you know what? Things can get a little too bucolic sometimes. The unlocked front doors, the peace and quiet, and the down-home neighborliness are all well and good, but from time to time folks want a little excitement for a change.

"Let's have a parade!" proposed the young, vivacious, ponytailed local businessman and fairly new guy in town David Harrenstein. Hmmm. Nice idea, but next to impossible in a town where the population is sixty-two and dropping fast, numerically and quite literally.

Whalan has none of your essential parade elements, according to town council member Buddy Olson. A marching band? "No." Fire truck? "No." Police car? "No." A queen of any kind? "No." Buddy isn't going negative on us, just stating the facts. All of this is not to mention the biggest problem of all, parade-wise: the whole town's only, at the most, two blocks long. A parade would be over before it began.

"Everybody loves a parade," David says. "We're just geographically challenged." He admits to an ulterior motive. David owns the Overland Inn, one of the only buildings in town. It's no longer an inn, but a small restaurant of sorts that serves ice cream and "world-famous pie"—world famous around here at least. He wanted to attract some people to town, people who like pie a la mode. Since purchasing the inn two years earlier, he'd found doing business without people around to be extremely challenging.

Townfolk were skeptical, as small-town folk often are when it comes to new ideas. "We've never had a parade," says Harley Olson, Buddy's father. "At least not since '43, when I got here. About, oooh, forty years ago we did have a carnival, but it's been pretty quiet since." Adeline Larson backed him up on that, saying she could not recollect a parade in her eighty-eight years here.

Then David came up with a breakthrough idea—maybe even a concept. To solve the paramount problem of a parade being too long for their short town, why not have the parade stand still—stay with him on this—and have the crowd walk around it? A standstill parade!

"We were gonna lock him up when he said that," Buddy scoffs. But the more Buddy and others in town got to thinking about it, the more they thought: You know, it just might work.

Not to bring up a sore subject, but what would be *in* the parade?

You need a cop car with a siren and flashing lights, for openers. The Fillmore County sheriff had one and said he supposed he could send it over, since there really ought to be a police presence at a major public event like this.

You need a color guard. Old-timer Marvin Severson, commander of the local American Legion post, had to be convinced to deploy his forces. He said he was a little out of practice: "The last parade I was in was up in Black River Falls in '52." But Marvin came around. The flag-bearing Legionnaires would lead the parade, right behind the police car. They're old, but they could still stand, which was all that would be required.

David named Adeline, the town's oldest living resident, as grand marshal. She, too, resisted the honor. "I finally agreed after he told me I wouldn't have to do anything," she says. "I guess in this parade nobody does anything."

You need smiling, waving politicians in a parade, but that's never a problem. State Representative Greg Davids said sure, he'd be there. "I march in one or two parades every Saturday, and when I heard there was no walking involved in this one, I said, 'Now this is a good parade.' "

As mentioned, Whalan has no queen; nary a corn queen or a soybean queen or any other royalty for that matter. So David invited the Lanesboro Beef Queen, whom he described as "quite slender, actually."

Nearby Lanesboro, a major city in these parts (pop: 775), turned out to be a friendly neighbor in need, agreeing to send a fire truck, an ambulance, and the high school's marching band, which could possibly be deprogrammed to not march.

Now we're talking!

Word spread of this revolutionary new parade concept and David was besieged by entries: Boy Scouts, polka bands, dog groomers, you name it. The parade was becoming almost too big even to stand still within the Whalan city limits.

Locals began sprucing up the town, giving a small building on the main street a fresh coat of paint, mowing lawns, and sweeping sidewalks. Women began making lefse, a kind of a potato-dough tortilla, a Norwegian delicacy, not recommended by doctors, to sell at the parade. There are many Nordics in Minnesota. Many, many, many.

Parade day dawns a perfect, warm, sunny Saturday in May. Downtown Whalan is bustling with more people probably than had ever been here before—certainly at one time, and perhaps cumulatively (founded: 1876). David needs a walkie-talkie to coordinate the event. This being the worldwide premiere of the Concept, without a rehearsal, there are many questions: a fellow decked out in 1890s garb shows up riding one of those antique tall-wheeled unicycles. How is he supposed to ride it in the parade if he has to remain motionless?

"Does it have a kickstand?" David asks helpfully.

A theatrical troupe asks for an official ruling on this question: With this being a standstill parade, were they allowed to do song-and-dance numbers? David decrees

they can, so long as they stay within their designated space.

A barricade is set up in front of the parade. Then comes the sheriff's car, followed by an impressive ten-Legionnaire color guard. Way to go Marvin! After that it was first come, first served in the parade lineup.

Now, how does a standstill parade start? "I don't know," David replies. "We're breaking new ground. I think it just sort of happens."

And, sure enough, it does. The police car's siren wails. The well-disciplined color guard stands still. The car carrying Grand Marshal Adeline Larson remains in "Park," and she begins to wave, albeit to the same three people. And the fifteen-piece marching band becomes a band stand, striking up "It's a Grand Old Flag."

There are floats, not so much of the Rose Bowl Parade variety, but more in the tack-some-tinsel-to-the-edge-of-a-flatbed-truck style. There's a bluegrass band, a white poodle in a hat and sunglasses having her nails painted in the back of a dog groomer's truck, and seven Boy Scouts from—where else?—Lanesboro.

Two (not all that entertaining) people in the parade are just sitting on bales of hay, and complaining a little about their placement "over here by the septic system." And in a standstill parade, that is not about to change.

As usual, horses bring up the rear. "I guess they put us back here out of habit," says one rider. "But it's not necessary in this parade. No one's going to step in anything." The nature of the parade allows one participant, a professional masseuse, to set up her table and offer complimentary services.

Members of the unprecedented crowd have come from as far away as Wyzeta (150 miles) and now stand almost one deep all along the parade route. "We haven't had this many people in Whalan since the bank closed in '32," says one member of a polka band "riding" in a classic old red convertible and promoting Das Wurst Haus in Lanesboro. Lanesboro really has it all.

But the crowd doesn't quite *get* it. They're standing still or sitting in lawn chairs, the way you would at a normal parade. When the band plays "Anchors Aweigh" the crowd remains anchored to the curb.

Finally, after some prompting and explanation, they slowly begin to stroll around the parade. ("Norwegians are slow learners," quips a Swede.) A few stop to pet the horses or to chat with members of the parade, things you simply could not do within the old parade paradigm. Others actually meander among the parade units, going where no parade-goers have gone before. They're eating David's pie and ice cream. The lefse is selling like hotcakes, which they sort of are, as are copies of the best-selling book (here) *91 Ways to Serve Lefse*.

A woman from Wyzeta takes it all in and says, "This is America"; to which George Judy, a local resident wearing a plaid shirt and denim overalls, replies, "It is now. Everybody's getting goofy."

He's right about that, of course, and here everyone seems to be enjoying getting goofy and they're giving the parade rave reviews. "It's ecologically sound," says one viewer, "and it's easier to take pictures." A man named Ernie, driving a stunning '32

Packard—one of several antique cars in the lineup—notes that this is the first parade where he doesn't have to worry about running out of gas or having an overheated engine.

Even before it's over, David pronounces that there will definitely be a Second Annual Whalan Parade, and that it will be even better next year. "We need a reviewing stand. Maybe we could put it on a flatbed truck and drive it around the parade. Maybe put some of the audience on bleachers on a flatbed too." The man is a parade savant! He figures he'd better put a cap on the number of parade entries next year, too, or enlarge the town. And, order more Porta-Johns.

So, how do you know when a standstill parade is over? "I don't know," David admits. Apparently it's when things start moving. The horses are bored by all this standing around and break ranks. The sheriff's car pulls away, the color guard rolls up their American Legion banner, the masseuse folds up her table, the band marches, and everybody goes home. Happy. It's been an exciting day in Whalan, perhaps the first.

The Flying Paperboy

Loyalton, California, Pop: 817

A small plane, a red speck on the vast, blue western sky, flies lazily high above a rancher's house. Then suddenly it dips its left wing, makes a sharp turn, and dives nearly to the desert floor before leveling off and making a run straight at the house, rather menacingly, like a fighter plane on the attack.

Clearly, the pilot is on a mission, the house his target. And, indeed, as the plane buzzes over, it drops...something...small...that lands not fifty feet from the porch, a bull's-eye. "You want it close, but not *on* the house," the pilot and bombardier explains, looking back out his window to see someone scurry to pick it up and wave.

Another successful operation for veteran flying ace Hal Wright, who publishes the *Sierra Booster* newspaper in Loyalton, California, and delivers it by air drop—with smart-bomb accuracy—to subscribers living on far-flung ranches.

It's hard to believe that with some thirty-six million people now jammed into California, there can still be places as completely out of the way as the old mining town of Loyalton. It accounts for just a few hundred of those thirty-six million residents, and lies in a peaceful valley of the Sierra Nevada mountain range northwest of Reno, Nevada. It's surrounded by ranches that sprouted up back during the gold rush of the 1850s to provide dairy products and beef for the mine workers.

We found but one place that puts people up for the night, the Golden West Saloon, where you walk in and expect to see Miss Kitty and Marshal Dillon having a drink at the bar. The few rooms are on the second floor and their doors open out onto a walkway overlooking the bar, just like at the Longbranch on Gunsmoke. Pay phone's down the hall.

Next morning, we meet Hal, a fit and frisky ninety-two-year-old, who tells us he was once a local gold digger himself, until he fell down a mine shaft, and lived to pledge he'd never go back. He and his wife, who's named Allene, but whom he refers to only

as "Sweetie Pie," somehow got what he calls "this harebrained idea" to start a newspaper. The first edition of the *Sierra Booster* is dated October 21, 1949, and includes a front-page note to readers: "To be published fortnightly at Loyalton, California, until further notice." Hal never gave any such notice and has no plans to.

As publisher, he hired himself as editor, who hired himself as the reporter, columnist, and photographer, as well as the production and advertising staffs. I accompany Hal on his rounds, as he stops at a few of the few area businesses to sell advertising—and ask for news: maybe they'd heard something interesting. "We have a new plumbing room," offers the woman behind the counter at the hardware store, and Hal makes note of it. "You can't print anywhere near all the news that's going on," Hal explains to me, walking at his usual fast pace out of the store. "You just can't do it."

There are no headlines in his newspaper; Hal doesn't like to sensationalize. There are photographs of local cats and dogs, a popular feature, and columns bearing news from surrounding towns, such as "The Downieville Dragnet."

A big story in the current edition informs readers that the "animal control officer" no longer wants to be called the "dogcatcher," and perhaps never did. "We thought that was newsworthy," Hal explains, adding that the position of the newspaper on this issue is that "dogcatcher" is just fine.

Hal's column, which he gives prominent placement, attacks the Federal Aviation Administration for trying to "clip his wings," that is, for trying to deny him a renewal of his pilot's license. Ultimately, Hal won.

"That was strictly age discrimination," Hal says. "I had to hire three doctors and one attorney in order to get the job done."

Hal is the oldest licensed pilot in the nation. He joined the UFOs (United Flying Octogenarians)—although technically he's too old. Has he considered starting a club for nonagenarian pilots? "No," he answers, "I don't want to be the president, secretary, treasurer, and the board of directors."

In addition to his other duties at the *Sierra Booster*, Hal is also in charge of circulation and is its only paperboy. In this sparsely populated area, with subscribers scattered over six hundred square miles, he decided to deliver papers to the ranches in his airplane. Hal invites me along on his paper route. Driving out to the airstrip, he tells of his three (or is it five?) heart operations, at which point our cameraman, Gilbert, says that, although he'd love to come along, he'll be mounting a camera inside the cockpit and staying on the ground. It's a sunny day. I mention to Hal that his windshield wipers are on.

Hal has a small plane: a four-seater Aeronca, which was brand new in 1949. I strap myself in while Hal loads newspapers and starts the engine...no, wait, it's not starting. Won't start. A tow truck arrives twenty minutes later to jump-start the engine—although at this point I'm kind of hoping it won't. I ask if the tow truck provides aerial service should that become necessary.

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