



A leisurely stroll down the claustrophobic and somewhat muddy "streets" of Little Rock City. This is Wall Street, one of the longer passages.

When this road trip was first hatched, two things were obvious: We were going to Amish country, and we were getting there by way of one of my favorite roads, US Route 62. Stretching for nearly 2,300 miles from Niagara Falls to El Paso, Texas, 62 is one of America's great roads. At least it's great in my mind. Having grown up in a small town along Route 62, that road became my window to the outside world and excited my imagination. As if by magic, the road regularly produced Amish buggies, motorcycle gangs, farmers on great tractors, pre-fab houses on their way to becoming homes and, of course, freighter trucks, countless rumbling freighter trucks.

To some degree that's all changed. Fewer trucks use the old highways these days, unless it's for local deliveries. When Eisenhower passed the Interstate Highway Act in 1956 in the name of national defense, he fundamentally changed the way Americans travel. Now most folks tend to get around on nondescript superhighways, blazing across the countryside and never getting a feel for the places they are whizzing past.

That's what we desperately wanted to avoid on this trip, and 62 was the answer to our concrete-and-styrofoam blues. Though it may not have its former glory, 62 still holds as much magic as the stormy day in 1986 when a rain-swollen Thatcher Brook spilled over its banks, and an adventurous pair paddled a whitewater raft past my house on the flooded road.

Kazoo blues

And so we set out on a recent Saturday morning, with an unsure forecast and a less sure plan. All we knew was we wanted a rural exploration, and as such we passed up a smattering of otherwise worthwhile stops in South Buffalo, Lackawanna and Bladell: South Park's botanical gardens, the soaring copper domes of Our Lady of Victory Basilica and Ilio DiPaolo's Restaurant and Ringside Lounge, the eatery dedicated to the former wrestling champion. But these places had the smack of the familiar, and we wanted to look at the country with fresh eyes.

Hamburg is the last point south that can truly be considered a suburb of Buffalo, and as we rolled past the thinning houses of Water Valley,

roadtrip

Gowanda and points south

Americana at its best

> STORY & PHOTOS BY PETER KOCH

the land opened up into freshly planted cornfields that lined both sides of the road. This is corn country, to be sure: The Eden Valley Growers Co-op easily grows more than three million ears of corn each year, and Eden hosts a popular annual corn festival.

Eden is also home to the Original American Kazoo Company. Housed in an attractive Victorian house on South Main Street (Route 62), it's the only manufacturer of metal kazoo in the world. We, of course, pulled over without hesitation. The gift shop was pleasant, but we were surprised to find it didn't focus too much on kazoo heritage. But the back of the shop opens into a booming space that houses both a museum and an operational factory. The factory was a tangle of heavy machines, all connected to a single 10-horsepower engine by an impressive web of belts and pulleys. The museum was simply a fenced in area of the factory floor adorned with helpful and generally informative signs. We joined a silver-haired tour group, and listened to Karen Smith expound on some of the company's more interesting history. The first order of kazoo she filled out, Smith told us, was for a scientific expedition into the Amazon rain forest. The scientists use them to break down communication barriers with natives, and, according to Smith, "Apparently there's not a lot to do at night in the jungle."

Speaking of expeditions, we had to hit the road. On the way out, I purchased an original kazoo, fashioned, I'd like to think, after Alabama Vest's original 1840s design. It was a sleek model, the kind that would make a third grader proud—shiny copper on top and the bottom half painted with glossy red paint. Note to parents: Do not buy a kazoo for your kid(s), or they'll drive you insane. "If you don't put that kazoo away," you'll yell, "I'm gonna turn this car around!" And eventually you'll throw it out the window, as I did, and it'll be exactly like throwing \$1.99 out the window. Won't you feel bad then? I did.

Pioneer Daze

Though most of the small towns in Western New York aren't as old as Buffalo, they do have one interesting architectural timestamp that the city doesn't—one-room schoolhouses. These relics are mostly around because somebody turned them into houses, or simply because the land where they stood wasn't needed by anyone else. In North Collins, at a historical marker pointing the way to such a building, we took our first tentative side trip off of 62. It was to be short-lived.

Less than half a mile down School Street, we came upon #8 Schoolhouse, an attractively restored white building with a pump well and flagpole in front, and an equally attractive out-house in back. For the first time (and probably the last) I was prepared to immerse myself in the history of North Collins, to be regaled with the scholarly exploits of her founding fathers. But, alas, #8 Schoolhouse was closed. We had missed the three hours each week that it's open. To add to my disappointment, the pump wasn't really connected to a well. And the windows



#8 Schoolhouse in North Collins. The well in the foreground is purely for decoration. The bell probably doesn't work, either, who knows? It's pretty and pastoral, but is closed nearly all the time, save for three hours on Sunday. I'll let you guess which three.

girlfriend ordered a souvlaki wrap, and I had a half-pound burger and a vanilla milkshake. My decision was based on a craving for a big slab of cow. The milkshake, of course, came with the metal tumbler it was whipped in, "so you don't get gypped," the waitress said. I told you it was a great place. After a quick stop by my parents' house, we were on our way again.

I left my butter churn...

Past Gowanda, the road rises slowly out of the valley on a long, zig-zagging incline as it weaves its way along Thatcher Brook toward Amish country.

were too high to peek in. And, finally, the out-house was locked.

South of North Collins, Route 62 is all farmstands, u-pick berries and laundry on clotheslines. We drove hard under striking puffy gray and white clouds, through the crossroads of Lawtons and the village of Collins, former home of the World Pumpkin Weigh-off. Three years ago, fancy pants Clarence stole the thunder from this slowly diminishing town. And really, what is a place like Collins, without giant, malformed, 800-pound pumpkins? A shadow of its former self.

After Collins, Route 62 rides a two-mile-long plain alongside a sprawling medium security prison before dropping off dramatically into Gowanda's valley. Gowanda is a pretty little village of 2,700 people. Like most places down this way, its population is slowly, steadily declining. The manufacturing jobs, in the form of the Peter Cooper Glue Factory and the Moench Tannery, dried up long ago, along with most of the railroad business, and many of their buildings have crumbled and been hauled away, like so many loads of refuse.

Gowanda also happens to be my hometown. It's changed a lot since my childhood, but some things remain the same, like the annual Pioneer Days festival, which was going on this weekend. After parking the car to check out the festivities, we witnessed road magic, one of those weird, magical encounters that only seems to happen when you're traveling: Two Amish families strode out of Burger King to their buggies across the street, value meals in hand. Just another day...

The carnival was typical of a small town, with a midway featuring rickety-looking rides with names like Tilt-a-Whirl, Paratrooper and Rok 'n' Roll. It was still only noon, though, and there weren't too many people around. Even the volunteer fire department's beer tent was empty. Around town, the businesses were having sidewalk sales and everyone seemed upbeat now that the sun was assured of itself.

For lunch, we stopped into Gowanda's oldest, most established diner, the Olympia, located smack in the center of town. The fact that it stands alone in what's often considered a culinary one-horse town doesn't detract from the quality of food that the Olympia has to offer. In fact, for the many times I've been there, I've never had a bad meal. The restaurant is clean and friendly, with a bright mural of a Greek townscape painted across a back wall. Based on Olympia's reputation for Greek food, my

We blinked and missed the tiny crossroads of Dayton on our way into the Town of Leon on a long, flat stretch that is said to be an ancient lake bed. The gravel pit just off the road was further testament to that theory, and we pulled off there to watch some geese herd their goslings into a roadside pond.

There isn't a sign that welcomes you to Amish country, but there are telltale signs as you head south. First, it's just horse droppings on the shoulders of the road. Next, you notice the pale blue doors that mark the understated Amish houses. Finally you see the hand-painted signs posted in front of houses and along the road at intersections: "Leather, Harness & Saddle Repair Shop," "Nightcrawlers," "Blacksmith Shop," "Yoder's Rustic Log Furniture" and "Quilts and Jams." In all, there are about 250 Amish families in this community that encompasses Leon, Cherry Creek, New Albion and Conewango, and much of their income comes from the sale of crops and homemade goods.

Along the way, we passed many Amish in their traditional dress—the men wearing dark blue shirts, black trousers with suspenders and straw hats; the women in dark blue or green shirts and black skirts with a head covering. Many of their draft horses, mighty Percherons and Belgians, were grazing lazily in the pastures on an odd day off.

We stopped at the Valley View Cheese Factory, which produces cheese from Amish milk. The attached store sold many Amish goods, including jams, baked goods, cheeses and crafts. When I asked the helpful woman behind the

counter which cheeses were made at the factory, she pointed to two kinds. She then named about 15 other varieties in an afterthought sort of tone: "...and the Swiss, Muenster, Gouda, Romano, feta, Windsleydale are all Amish made." Hmm...Amish made, but apparently not at the factory. Looking at the cheeses produced there, we opted for the Swiss, and it was delicious.

We wanted to buy jam directly from the Amish, and the woman on duty kindly directed us to Malinda's Candy Shop on nearby Youngs Road. Malinda was a kind host, polite and quietly reserved. Her shop is tucked into a small building in front of a tidy house. Her daughter, barefooted, helped her make jams in a side room. Along with elderberry, raspberry, strawberry-rhubarb and blackberry jams, Malinda makes a variety of fudges and candies.

Eating up road

The hour was getting late, and we still had ground to cover, so we shifted into high gear after leaving Conewango. Into the hill country of the Southern Tier, the engine whined as our trusty Elantra hungrily ate up the miles. We stopped only once before reaching Ellicottville, at the Ellington General Store. "General" might be an overstatement, since most of the wares on-hand were antiques, including, perhaps, the stick candy—15 cents apiece/25 cents for two—arranged in glass jars on the front counter. But the store impressed me with its resilience in a country where many similar businesses have been shuttered for years.

We drove through Randolph and Little Valley, in what I'd like to call "Blank Hill country." Half the roads we passed were called something or another "Hill Rd."—Seager Hill Rd., North Hill Rd., Leach Hill Rd., Cemetery Hill Rd. and on and on. A couple of "Chew Mailpouch" advertisements, painted on the sides of barns, floated by us like messages in a bottle, sent from a distant past.



This is Earl's on Rte. 16 in Arcade. If you haven't been there, you really haven't been anywhere. Where have you been, after all? Earl wants to know, too, and I'll warn you, he doesn't look like a happy customer.

Home of the fruit jar drinkers

In Ellicottville, we caught wind of a jazz festival, but it was sparsely attended. We spent a brief layover there re-energizing with coffee and beer, and watched Buffalo gypsy jazz band Babik groove at Balloons Restaurant. But dark was quickly approaching, and I was bound by oath to finish out the night 15 miles away in Arcade.

We chose to take Route 242, which passes through a broad valley with expansive views that reminded me of the Western prairies. Part of that feeling probably had to do with the herds of bison and elk that dotted the valley floor. Yes, bison and elk. The B&B Buffalo Ranch, which is reportedly the largest buffalo ranch east of the Mississippi, calls this valley home. We dutifully pulled over and snapped a few photos, but there was no time to waste. Our stomachs were empty and Earl's was still miles up the road.

Onto Rte. 16, we turned north and cruised through Machias, Lime Lake and Delevan. Of note is Lime Lake, which I find to be an odd little place. It's similar to Chautauqua, in that it is mostly cute cottages perched on the lakeshore, many paired with formal boathouses. But the lake itself is a tiny 159 acres, only a speck compared to Chautauqua's 13,000 acres. It makes one wonder where they all go boating to. ("Gee, Helen, it seems like we've passed that same house three times in the last 10 minutes!")

Past Little Valley, we picked up Whig Street and followed it to Hungry Hollow Rd. That eventually faded into a gravel road as we entered Rock City State Forest.

Rock on

Little Rock City is the largest rock city in Western New York that's located on publicly owned land. A rock city is basically a rock formation made up of huge boulders arranged by nature in rows that have the appearance of city streets. In the end, they are simply fun hiking. After a few bumpy miles of gravel and dirt road, we arrived at the trail into Little Rock City. It was an easy, if a bit unsettling, hike of about a mile. There's something eerily fascinating about the labyrinths of stone. The light quality in some of the narrower streets—Wall Street and Broadway, as named by local naturalist Bruce Kershner—is singular. It's a unique place, and should be seen. Special note: Bring boots. These streets don't get a lot of sunlight, and as such are quite muddy.

When we finally reached Arcade, the puffy clouds had cleared off to the east, and the sun was sitting low in the west. Despite our hunger, we passed up the Pizza Hut and the Burger King. It wasn't long, however, before the 30'x90' American flag that marked our destination appeared, waving low on the horizon.

We were finally at Earl's Restaurant, "Home of the Original Fruit Jar Drinkers." I can't say enough about Earl's. It's like going to Grandma's house, only weirder. The place was established by Earl and Marilyn Northrup in 1956 as Earl's Drive-in. Earl, it turns out, was a voracious promoter of country and bluegrass music, and he used to put on huge concerts in the park behind the restaurant. A glass case inside the restaurant is filled with odd Nashville paraphernalia, including Tammy Wynette's dress, Bashful Brother Oswald's overalls and a letter from Patsy Cline written to Jimmy Dale. There are hat hooks on the walls, presumably for those wearing the wide-brimmed variety.

It also turns out that Earl has a sense of humor. The simple homestyle tables wear jeans and boots...they are, after all, called table "legs." There's a cinnamon roll on the menu that's "as big as Earl's hat," and that's not just cheap talk. I've had one before, along with five other family members, and we couldn't finish the whole thing. For reasons unclear to me, they serve up drinks in Ball wide-mouth jam jars.

The point is that it's the atmosphere that makes this place, not the food. The pies are huge and delicious, but the meatloaf that I couldn't resist ordering was regrettable. In fact, I regretted it for the whole ride home...

Critical numbers:

Miles traveled: 187.2
Amish buggies passed: 8
Kazoos thrown out the window: 1
Fruit jars used as glasses: 2
Satisfied travelers: 2

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