

SO WHEN IS A TOWN NOT A TOWN?

There are two buildings in Bingham, New Mexico, and neither of them is a gas station.

So it was obviously a mistake to not to have filled up the tank before setting off across the *Jornada Del Muerto*. “Dead Man’s Journey”: the Spanish settlers who named that stretch of desert couldn’t have spelled it out more clearly.

And it was plain to see why the American Government chose this particular part of the Southwest to detonate the first atomic bomb. It’s bleak, barren, desolate, and an awful long way from the nearest town – which is called Socorro, or “Help”. The map may have shown another town up ahead, but west of the hundredth meridian a “town” doesn’t always add up to much. Thank God the natives were friendly.

“Course, this ain’t strictly legal,” the gnarled old-timer said as he measured us out a couple of gallons from a battered, unmarked drum in his front yard. And he was dead right. At \$1.75 a gallon it was daylight robbery. In Albuquerque we’d paid \$1.15.

It could have been worse. And out West it frequently is. The maps tell you plenty about the terrain, the roads, the elevation, the population. But they simply can’t keep abreast of the continual closure of cafes, grocery stores, gas stations... even entire towns.

In north-western Nebraska, heading for the Black Hills, we checked the AAA map and decided to rest up at Ardmore, on the South Dakota state line. It was a pleasant enough spot: the town was shaded by huge cottonwoods; there was a gas station, a café, several houses, and a laundromat. Unfortunately they were all boarded up, every single one of them. Weeds were sprouting through the cracks in the main street.

In Wyoming, it’s somehow less of a surprise to find the odd ghost town. Outside of Alaska, it’s the most thinly populated state in the Union: half a million people in an area the size of the U.K. Five inhabitants to the square mile. You get the idea from the place-names: Lonetree, Lost Cabin, Recluse, Dead Swede. Why someone would establish a trading post named Bill in the middle of the Thunder Basin National Grasslands, along an utterly deserted 72-mile stretch of Highway 59, is anyone’s guess. No real surprise that both its buildings – the Post Office and the General Store - were shut. Permanently.

Thirty-seven miles north, however, another one-horse town turned out to be a fair imitation of a southern California suburb. The broad, winding streets of Wright are lined with detached four-and five-bedroomed houses. Glen, the Highway Patrolman we met in the diner, shoved his paperwork aside and invited us to eat lunch with him.

He had plenty of time to chat. Okay, so two of his buddies had the day off, leaving him three counties - ten thousand square miles - to patrol on his own, but he wasn’t in a hurry. “It won’t get busy until after dark. Then I’ll mostly be chasing kids. DWIs. Driving while intoxicated. Ain’t a great deal else to do, these parts.” He

remembered when Wright hardly existed. “Then they discovered coal. They reckon there’s forty-five years’ worth in the hills round here. And soon as they’ve dug it all out, this town’ll be dead. Just like Bill and Hanna and Spotted Horse.”

It happens. We’d seen it already, just twenty-five miles west of Cheyenne, the state capital. Buford has its own Interstate exit. And a big green sign: Elevation 8000; Population 2 – both of whom are there to greet you in the town’s solitary building, the Buford Trading Post and Towing Service. Don Sammons runs the shop, Naomi Heitzman is in the café. You pump your own gas. And when Naomi takes your order she excuses herself: “I might be a while, `cos I do the cooking around here too.” Hard to imagine that back in the early 1900s Buford was a thriving railroad centre with a population of 3000. “Then the railroad went – and took the town with it.”

So how can you tell when a town on the map is still there, and whether it has any facilities? It was while I was cycling across the Great Plains five years ago that I came up with a helpful rule of thumb: if a place has 100 inhabitants it’ll probably support at least a bar. Question is, will they serve you? The morning I left Table Rock (pop. 308) without stopping for breakfast, I cycled 16 miles to Lewiston: population 91, but nowhere to eat. 5 miles down the road Virginia, pop. 94, did have a café. But by now it was mid-morning. They were through with breakfast, and they weren’t prepared to do lunch. By the time I’d made the 14 miles to Beatrice (pop. 13,000) I had quite an appetite.

Some towns enjoy their isolation. Ainsworth, Nebraska, exploits it, proudly advertising itself as “The Middle Of Nowhere”. But that’s just a little joke. It’s actually something of a metropolis. It has two cinemas, eight restaurants, eleven churches, a hospital, an airport – and twenty-four horse-shoe pitching courts. All for a population of 1,870.

There’s simply no way of telling what you’re in for until you show up, and my vague attempts to come up with a formula finally went out of the window when I picnicked at Nenzel, Nebraska. At the last Census it mustered eight inhabitants. But it turned out to be a regular little oasis in what early explorers knew as The Great American Desert. On the well-watered grass of its Bicentennial Park I was able to spread out my food on a picnic table, draw clean water from a pump, brew coffee on a barbecue stand, and freshen up in a commodious restroom. There was even a shade tree, under which I took a brief nap.

I’d like to have used the café in Nenzel, but of course it had closed down. In any case, stumbling across hostelrys in cattle country can be a mixed blessing. In Atlantic City, Wyoming, just down the road from South Pass, where the old Oregon Trail cuts through the mountains, we were served the worst burger you’re likely to find this side of the Rockies. But at least we could entertain ourselves identifying the foreign objects preserved in lacquer on the table-top. They included a used toothpick.

But what Westerners lacks in culinary sophistication they make up for in the lengths they’ll go to to help a stranger. Camping in the Laramie Mountains, we were starting to run low on essentials. It takes nerve to walk into a bar in Wyoming and ask for a carton of milk, but in Esterbrook (pop. 15) they can’t afford to turn a paying customer away. “We don’t have much use for that stuff - but hey, Ma should be outa bed by

now.” They got on the radio. Ma ran the trading-post three miles down the road. It was her day off, but twenty minutes later she was waiting in her pick-up to open the store and turn an honest penny.

My opinion, for what it’s worth, is that in western towns size simply doesn’t matter. And as for the link between Census returns and available facilities there is no rule of thumb. There is a golden rule, however: always take as much fuel, food and water as you can carry. Then be prepared. For anything.

(1230 ww)
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October 2001