



Spiritually speaking

"I have a religion—but you will call it blasphemy."—Samuel Clemens

I've been giving religion a lot of thought lately, and there are two reasons for that. The first is that winter's hard upon us now and that's always a dangerous season for a biker as cold circumstance and long shadows strand him indoors where his mind, denied the rolling meditation and sensory immersion of the open road, begins to fold in on itself like a flag at a funeral, becoming perilously introspective.

There's that reason, and the second is that lately the media has been beating me over the head with the notion that as an aging Boomer I'm supposed to be seeking a "spiritual component" to my existence. I'm presumed to be feeling hollow after a life spent pursuing hollow things: money, status, dope, skirts, consumer electronics—things of that nature. I gather from this scolding that I'm supposed to be on some kind of "revision quest," looking to reconcile my Big Party with the Big Picture.

And I'm down with that, if only because this "spiritual component" is less tedious than the "estate planning" harangue that preceded it in the media analysis of my generation's shortcomings, though I will say I had little trouble ignoring that one since my change jar runneth over, and that's a fat nest egg for the average Boomer biker who, actuarially, never figured to see 60. So that whole matter's small beer, to my way of thinking.

The spiritual deal is a tougher nut, however, since what I've learned in my span about the commercially available religions is that they don't hold up well under questioning and tend to get people killed, so I determined to devise my own personal brand and be done with it. I cooked up my own religion, named it the Church of the American Road Experience, joined up, and immediately found that having the whole spiritual component weight off my plate cheered me mightily for awhile. It cheered for exactly as long as it took for the pint of Old Overholt to wear off, at which time I saw I had

more work ahead of me since my new religion was, I realized, a pretty thin ruse when it came to the shrines and parables and relics and such that you really need to make the thing stick. That's when, after further communion with the rye and a fitful night's sleep, I came up with some serviceable underpinnings for my new church, three in all. The Holy



Trinity of the Highway, I call it, and it's comprised of shoe trees, two-headed calves and mystery spots.

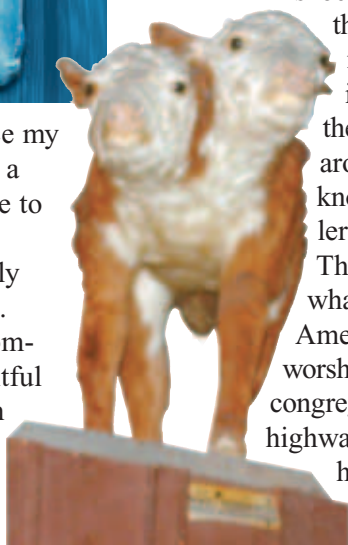
This epiphany came in the morning dark, while resisting the unholy impulse to get out of bed, and reflecting on my interlude last May at the Middle Gate shoe tree in the middle of



All fired up

My Buell Firebolt sadly went up in flames recently due to cooling fan overload. I called to report the incident to my insurance company (Progressive) and talked to Mike Charlson. It has now been 10 weeks since I reported the mishap and not one thing has been done. He does not even have the courtesy or professionalism to call me and keep me updated. I call

lonely Highway 50 in Nevada. There it stood, not just the biggest tree in view, but virtually the only tree in view, and from it dangled thousands of shoes; thousands more were spread on the ground around it and strewn up the wide desert gully where the cottonwood had rooted and thrived to a circumference of a good dozen feet. This



shoe tree is reputed to be the grandest and most isolated example of its species, though there are others spread around the country and known to the holy rollers of the back road. These are shrines, are what they are; uniquely American altars, where worshippers come but never congregate, pulling in off the highway alone or in small hammered groups to lose their shoes, slinging their soles heavenward for the pure frivolous humorous hell of it, loading up the limbs and creating what we of the Church of the American Road Experience refer to piously as "a hell of a damn thing."

And that contemplation led me, naturally, to the contemplation of two-headed calves, recalling in my fresh morning winter reverie the specimens I'd encountered as recently as August at both the Adams Museum and Saloon No. 10 in Deadwood, which had, at the time, recalled my first double-header encounter with a forlorn specimen in a dusty glass case at a derelict roadside museum in Orleans, California, a decade previous. Two-headed calves are one of those things you only find in weird

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weekly. He seems to always want to pass blame onto others for the lack of a timely response.

I went down to Quaid H-D and they told me they had faxed all the info to Mike (they showed me the report), so I know he's just blowing smoke up my a\$\$\$. Then, just to make me feel like shit, another rider was there with

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Blue Dog Diaries

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roadside museums, and they continue to hold the road-going public in thrall. You see a thing like that and good luck getting it out of your head. And what it reveals of our holy nature is deep, but I'll summarize it for you. Even in a time of 100 channels of cable and a billion websites, we're looking for more. We're searching for something real. And there is simply no substitute for the authentic religious experience of staring into the four eyes of a two-headed calf. It's another one of those "hell of a damn things," and gets you thinking about heavy shit, and asking fundamental questions. We all spend time contemplating the possibility of an afterlife, and what that might look like, and the beauty of the double-header is that it answers the question of what happens to you when you die. You get stuffed.

So far so good, I figured, lying abed as the winter sun tried to slip into the room unnoticed, but I needed a third thing if my new religion was to post a full trinity. A quick run-through of my road memories produced a natural, the mystery spot. Any true adherent to the tenets of the Church of the American Road Experience has spent time thinking—typically while perched on a bar stool—about the mystery spots of

America. These anomalies of the so-called "laws" of physics are nationwide, and go by a number of names, though "gravity hill" is a popular one among noncommercial sites and these spots tend to be littered with authentic relics—underwear and prophylactics, mostly. These holy sites have it over the shoe trees and two-headed calves in that they often are presaged by highway billboards spaced about every 10 feet apart for the 500 miles or so before you get to one, and we of the Church love a good kitschy billboard. What these spots bespeak of the American spirit is that, while we are obliged by our science to give short shrift to mystical phenomena, we fervently desire as a people to keep that possibility open. We just feel better knowing that there are places where water flows uphill.

So there you have it. A solid religion to get you off the spiritual component hook, and the beauty of the Holy Trinity of the Highway is that it gives the pilgrim some kick-ass road trip possibilities. Here's one to get you started: Check out the shoe tree in Nordman, Idaho, the two-headed calf at the Dalton Gang Hideout Museum in Meade, Kansas, and finish off with a stop at the Mystery Spot in St. Ignace, Michigan. You've got all winter to plan the trip.

Can I get an amen?

It's all right here in the diaries. ♦

HELMET CITY

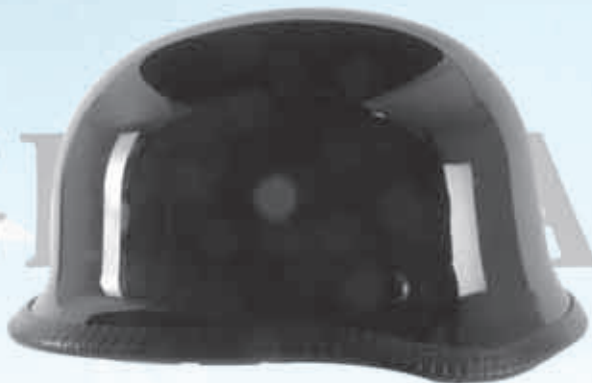
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