No Car, No Money, No Problem

By Hon. David E. Cain

One form of cheap transportation has sadly disappeared from the highways and byways over the past 50 years. This method of getting around was prominent when I began college. No reservations were required. And what it lacked in reliability, it made up in adventure.

Actually, it was not a different means of transportation, just a way of not paying for it. And it wasn’t just cheap. It was free.

The practice of hitchhiking – also known as thumbing or bumming a ride – left me with many memories (some good and some not so good) from my two years at a small college in Michigan.

Hitching probably reached the height of its popularity during WWII. Lloyd Fisher, local attorney and frequent writer for Lawyers Quarterly, said he easily traveled around the country during the 1940s by riding his thumb while wearing his Army outfit. “Nobody in uniform ever had a problem getting a ride. People would go out of their way to pick you up,” he recalled. Fisher returned to the states in 1945 after a tour in Europe and had no difficulty hitchhiking to Southern California to see a girlfriend.

My first memory of hitchhiking also came from the mid-1940s when I was three years old and my sister was four. We stood in front of our parents on Rt. 21 somewhere around Newcomerstown. My dad’s Model A Ford couldn’t have made it from Akron (where my grandparents lived) to Byesville (in southern Guernsey County). Only a short time passed before a man picked us all up in a fairly new coupe.

Byesville (in southern Guernsey County). Only a short time before a man picked us all up in a fairly new coupe. I was fascinated by the cigarette lighter on his dashboard.

As if on cue from the Almighty, a former scoutmaster from the Great Eastern Shopping Center. “You’ll die here,” a young fellow in an Air Force uniform warned us. He said he had picked up the bus at the corner of Hamilton and Main Streets at the edge of the rising sun. One ride got us to Ann Arbor. That worked fine. And getting rides was fairly easy until I got to Jackson town in Licking County. I was carrying two large suitcases.

However, it was to find someone heading home – in the direction of Detroit – and get dropped off along Rt. 23 as it passes north-south through Ann Arbor. That worked fine. And getting rides was fairly easy until I got to Jackson town in Licking County. I was carrying two large suitcases.

Along snow banks several feet high at the edge of the roadway and it was near midnight. Discouragement began to set in. As if on cue from the Almighty, a former scoutmaster from Byesville – commuting from a second shift job in Newark – picked me up and dropped me within a block of my final destination.

Going back about two weeks later presented a greater challenge. My starting spot was enhanced by a northbound traveler who dropped me on Rt. 224 near Lodi as it looked like a good place to head west. After several rides covering many miles, I was hoping I was near Toledo. But when I went into a gas station to ask directions, I discovered my location to be in Elyria, barely west of Cleveland. That’s when I saw two or three guys filling a gas tank on a car with a Valparaiso College sticker on the back window. As suspected, they were heading back to school, same as me, and they agreed to get me to somewhere in Northwest Ohio. First, they had to go back home to pick up luggage. I got some funny looks when they introduced me to their parents, but soon I was mobile and headed in the right direction again.

They left me at the intersection of two highways in an area so rural there was no sign of any life in any direction. The next few hours were spent wondering if I’d ever see another vehicle. I made it back to Spring Arbor sometime the next day, but I don’t remember how.

A couple months later, in March 1962, I needed to get away from the mental and physical confines of the fundamentalist Spring Arbor College. So, I made arrangements by mail to visit my lifelong friend from Byesville, Francis C. Francis, who was a freshman at the University of Dayton. Hitchhiked on a Friday evening and made it to Dayton fairly quickly. Walked a couple miles to his apartment building. Soon, he insisted on running me through the Dayton nightclub circuit, featuring such musical greats as H-Bomb Ferguson at the piano.

Back in his apartment about 3 a.m., Francis noted that a big parade would be occurring in New Concord (about 15 miles from Byesville) that afternoon to honor its native son, John Glenn, who had just become the latest American hero by being the first person to orbit the earth. One of Francis’s roommates took us to a highway shortly after dawn and we thumbed in the direction of the rising sun. One ride got us to the corner of Hamilton and Main Streets at the edge of the Great Eastern Shopping Center. “You’ll die here,” a young fellow in an Air Force uniform warned us. He said he had been on the corner for two hours without the slightest hope for a pick up. Unspoken courtesy among hitchhikers, like hookers, caused us to walk about a block eastward so we wouldn’t be working the same spot. Just a few minutes later, we saw a big, new school bus stop in front of the airman. We watched him board it. Then, the bus pulled up and stopped in front of us. The driver said he had picked up the bus at the factory in Lima and was delivering it to the East Coast.

But he began swearing when we told him we were going to a John Glenn parade in New Concord. “I was in New York City when they had a ticker tape parade for John Glenn. It held me up for two hours. I was in Washington, D.C. when they had a parade for John Glenn. Held me up another two hours. And now it is happening again.”
By the time we got a mile or two from New Concord, the National Road, i.e. Rt. 40 (there was no I-70), became a parking lot. Cars had been abandoned on the berms, the shoulders, the roadway itself. New Concord is a long narrow town stretched along Rt. 40 with the Muskingum/Guernsey County line dissecting it near its eastern edge. We walked to the middle of town in plenty of time to wave at John and Annie who were riding in a convertible behind a band continuously playing “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” to the cheers of the large crowd lining both sides of the four-lane street. The band was from New Concord High School, soon to be renamed John Glenn High School.

Later, we were walking — about the same speed as the traffic — well east of the village when Francis implored: “Hey, look at that.” It was the big yellow school bus towering over the mass of cars creeping toward us. The driver was still cussing when he dropped us off at 11th Street and Wheeling Avenue in Cambridge where a high school friend spotted us and said he’d take us to Byesville after dropping off some groceries. Nobody was home at my house, but my mother soon returned and I hid in a closet where I knew she would hang her coat. I wanted to surprise her. It worked.

The next morning was a warm and sunny Sunday and we hitched out of Byesville with our coats hanging over our arms. Before we got to I-75 (one of the few stretches of freeway in the state) snow began to fall. Francis headed south on I-75 and I headed north. But before long, the snow was so heavy the traffic became quite sparse. I didn’t make it back to Spring Arbor until Tuesday. I knew a Spring Arbor student who lived in Lima. He answered my phone call, came to pick me up and gave me a bed until we could drive back together.

After Glenn returned to space as a senior citizen in 1998, a parade in his honor went down High Street in Columbus at noon on a weekday and held me up on my way to a meeting in the Short North. I found comfort in thinking about that school bus driver.

In the fall of 1962, I set my personal record for speed when I needed to make a special trip home for the weekend and traveled from Detroit to Byesville in six hours. My first driver said he hadn’t picked up a hitchhiker in five years. “You’ve got a good, honest face,” he explained. He zoomed across the Ohio Turnpike in a flash and let me out in Massillon, all the while offering a friendly lecture on basic politics. “There’s no such animal as a Democrat or Republican,” he declared. “You’re either a liberal or a conservative.” The man was a multi-state sales manager for Chrysler and the son of the Honorable Frank T. Bow, longtime Republican congressman from Canton.

Probably the most frustrating experience came in February 1963. The temperature had warmed up to 10 degrees below zero during an especially cold winter and I decided to hitchhike to Oxford, Ohio, to see a friend at Miami University. I spent most of the night alongside a highway somewhere in Defiance County. That’s as far as I made it.

My last hitchhiking memory from the sixties involved my friends, Steve Kuhnash and Jim Woodward, who like me had immigrated here from Guernsey County. They made a sign: “OSU to San Francisco.” I “enhanced their start” by driving them to New Rome. They made it to “the city by the bay” in 46 hours, not counting an overnight at a motel in Tucuman, New Mexico. “Our most memorable rides were with a rodeo cowboy from Oklahoma and a female impersonator from San Francisco,” Steve recalled. It wasn’t his first hitchhiking adventure. Shortly after graduating from high school, he heard of a shortage of cherry pickers in northern Michigan and hitchhiked to Traverse City. After two days of cherry picking, with $12 in his pocket and an ache in his stomach from eating too many cherries, Kuhnash hitched across Canada to West Point, New York, to see his sister and her cadet husband.

Other memories involve being picked up by a taxi on a dry run, a tractor-trailer rig with a pistol on the dash, a priest who counseled me on career choices and a middle aged woman who drove me from Ann Arbor to Cambridge. She said she was from Texas and in Michigan waiting for a visa to clear so she could spend some time in Canada. I had some time to kill and hadn’t seen this part of the country.

For years, I picked up hitchhikers myself. It was almost guaranteed they would have good stories. But now nearly everyone has some kind of a car. We have many freeways and laws against entering them on foot. Truckers are legally prohibited from picking up hitchers. And most people would be afraid to pick one up. But hitching was good to me during my college years. It taught me to never give up and it strengthened my faith in humanity.