

Hitchhiking Out West (and back)

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

In the summer of 1958 I was 16, had just completed my sophomore year of high school, and so embarked on a six-week, cross-continental hitchhiking trip to the West Coast and back. I did this with parental permission—indeed, my father dropped me off at my first jumping-off spot.

I did not just rely on my thumb, but also used an 11" x 17" piece of cardboard (from folded shirts returned from the laundry) on which, using a liquid shoe polish wand, I wrote the name of the next big city. That cut out the short rides that only leave you in poor pickup locations.

The first part of the trip was uneventful because my first ride went to Omaha; subsequent legs were usually at least 200 miles. If I had to wait more than 45 minutes for a ride, it was a bad sign; therefore, I'd look for a better location with slower traffic or easier pull-over areas. I can't remember where I stayed at night, but I presume I must have used cheap motels.

I was headed first for Phoenix where my Uncle Gene Hoeschler (my dad's older brother) and his family lived. The last leg into Phoenix was from Albuquerque, New Mexico through the Salt River Canyon ↷ with temperatures well above 90 degrees. The driver on this leg was a 20-year-old in a brown Studebaker with no air conditioning. We left the windows



open but dared not rest our arms on the windowsill lest we burn our skin on the hot metal. My driver was clearly suffering from heat exhaustion, so I drove part of the way, especially through the very dramatic Salt River Canyon.

When we reached Phoenix, we were both pretty shot. He dropped me at a commercial corner, and I called Uncle Gene; either he or Terry (my first cousin) picked me up. I stayed at Gene's house in Paradise Valley for about a week or 10

days before we all left in Gene's car for Newport Beach, California. Uncle Gene and his wife, Aunt Mugs (Margaret—and a beautiful woman, despite her nickname!) had a summer home there to escape the Phoenix heat.

While in Phoenix I also visited my mother's younger brother, Jack Bowe, and his wife, Lou. They lived in Scottsdale where she was a nurse and he a postal carrier. They had left the Bowe farm in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin some years before, seeking a better future in the West. They were right to do so, even though my Grandma Bowe was always bitter about their leaving the farm. Later I learned that it was Grandma's refusal to let Jack and Lou buy out any of Grandma's farm ownership that drove them to leave. Grandma Bowe was not a happy person.

On our drive to California, I apparently asked so many questions about what I was seeing that I acquired a long-lived reputation with them for having a million questions about everything. I don't think it was always said as a compliment!

The Hoeschlers had a nice bungalow in Newport Beach, a short distance south of Long Beach and Los Angeles. It was a few blocks from the beach and we all (Terry, his brother Frank and sister Lonnie) had a great time.

After about a week I struck out again for San Francisco where my father's other brother, Bob, lived. I initially made the mistake of following the coastal highway but soon realized that the beautiful and dramatic Highway 1 was only used by the locals, and, for short distances. Finally, I got to the inland highway (this was before the interstates) that was hotter but used by folks going long distances.

One of my rides on this leg was with a trio of Mexican men who were headed north to work in the fields. Their car was a real beater with lousy brakes that you had to pump several times to engage. I drove for one leg until we needed gas, and so drove the car into a filling station located on the edge of a cliff. As I pulled up to a parking space, I forgot to pump the brakes and almost failed to stop the car—it would have broken through the fence and we would have sailed over the cliff. After that misjudgment and a lot of swearing in Spanish, the trio reclaimed the wheel and wouldn't let me drive again.

The trip to San Francisco was otherwise uneventful, and by means I can't remember, I got to Uncle Bob and Aunt Gert's home in San Rafael, north of the Golden Gate Bridge.

The lovely Hoeschler home in San Rafael was noteworthy for its spotless garage and carefully manicured lawn that Bob maintained and protected. I realized the significance of this the first day of my visit when a delivery truck pulled into the driveway. Bob rushed out to ensure that the truck was not leaking any fluids on the driveway. Bob was similarly concerned about footprints on his grass. Bob told me how upsetting it was to have his own father visit with his dachshund, Schnappsie. Grandpa would let the wiener dog run in the backyard and that caused unimaginable damage to the pristine lawn!

After some time in Marin county, where Bob, Gert and my cousins Parki (Barbara) and Susan, showed me the Bay Area sights with grace and energy, I headed up the coast to Seattle. From there I hitchhiked to Yakima, where my dad's first cousin, Fr. Phil Leinfelder was the chancellor of the Yakima diocese. Phil, a brilliant but not always politic man, had gotten the job through the efforts of Uncle Frank Hoeschler (my great uncle), a friend of the Yakima Bishop, Joseph Patrick Dougherty. Evidently, Father Phil had been banished to Wausau, the hinterlands of the La Crosse diocese, by Bishop Treacy. According to family lore, Phil had written a letter to all the prominent Protestants in La Crosse (including Gert Peterson Hoeschler's father) that outside the Catholic church there is no salvation—so they were destined for Hell. Hence, the banishment and need for a better assignment.

Phil served the Yakima bishop for many years, but when the Bishop Dougherty died in 1969, Phil had to return to La Crosse. Bishop Treacy's successor, Bishop Frederick Freking, sent Phil to Ellsworth, Wisconsin, not a mission but still a fair distance (105 miles) from La Crosse.

After a few days in Yakima, Fr. Phil insisted on giving me a bus ticket, at least to Spokane, because he was uncomfortable with the thought of my hitchhiking. It was then back toward home on US 2, just south of the Canadian border.

On the last leg of the trip, I had two additional experiences that still stick with me. One involved an older guy who picked me and, in the course of our talking, told me he had a pistol in the driver's door pocket which he was ready to use if I made any false moves! I was on good behavior anyway, but now I took extra care.

Outside of Sauk Center, Minnesota, I was picked up by an 18-year-old kid who told me he was headed for the Marines the next day. He had gotten drunk a few weeks before and, with two buddies, had signed up for the Marines. Apparently, the

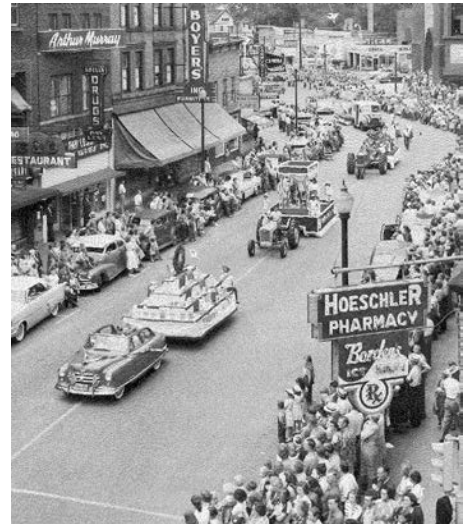
recruiter did not regard his drunken state as grounds for rejection. He told me he had made a serious mistake but couldn't see any way out of this pickle. I remember thinking at the time that he lacked officer-class intelligence, both by getting into this, and then by not using his drunkenness as a reason to get out of it. Such are the centuries-old ways of military recruiters!

When I finally got home, there were the usual questions about my adventures. But after a day it was life as usual, and no one talked more about my trip, or the possibility of any dangers associated with it. Such, however, were the times and no one was really very nervous about such a trip taken by a young kid.

Working for the Family

By Papa Jack Hoeschler

My father Jake (your great grandfather) was a pharmacist by trade who owned a large drug store at 5th and Main Streets in La Crosse, Wisconsin when I was a boy. He sometimes had to work on Saturday evenings and would often take me with him to help at the store; I was about 12 years old when this routine started. Jake taught me how to make change so that I could sell greeting cards, cigarettes, and other small items at the front cash register. I also had to keep an eye out for shoplifters.



There usually wasn't that much business on Saturday nights, and often a small group of town characters would come in to talk with my father since he could be very entertaining (and so could they). This clutch of characters would congregate at the chairs provided near the drug counter for people who were waiting to have prescriptions filled. My father would get them all talking about the latest town issues or their pet peeves. It did not take much to get some of them riled up and he would invariably "fan the flames" by baiting them with questions, as well as urging them on some quixotic quest before the night was over.



Interior of Hoeschler Drug store on the southeast corner of Fifth and Main, pictured in 1947. Dentist-turned-developer Frank Hoeschler owned the building and ran the pharmacy with his brothers. Photo

One of my favorites in the group was Wesley Nelson, a flamboyant man who lived near some property Jake owned in the coulee north of Grandad's Bluff, an area we called "The Ranch." We sometimes kept our horses at this "ranch" and would have family picnics there. Wesley would make sure the horses had plenty of water.

Another Saturday night regular was a fellow who played trumpet in the Salvation Army band. There were also several City Hall gadflies who were vigilantly watching the circus of our City Council with 23 members (all for a town of 50,000!). Saturday night at Hoeschler's Drug when Jake was working was a virtual convention for these folks and much "social capital" was amassed on these occasions.

This kind of small-town meeting/debating place doesn't exist in our current world of Wal-Mart and Target superstores. It died in La Crosse by the early 1960's, when my father shifted his interests from drug stores and the demands of a retail store to his growing real estate brokerage and development business.

We had a brief and unique melding of the drug store and real estate cultures at a second pharmacy my father, Jake, owned on Fourth Street next to the Rivoli movie theater. The Rivoli Pharmacy had a soda fountain in the front and the real estate brokerage business was in the basement. When the real estate business got more important than the drug store, Jake announced that he would close the drug store and move the real estate office onto the main floor space as well. But the soda fountain regulars objected so loudly that, for the next two years, the Hoeschler Realty business had a soda fountain in the front of its offices. Such was life in a small town.

While the drugstores lived, however, it was fun for me to see Jake sell goofy patent medicines, such as *Sloan's Liniment*, *Carter's Little Liver Pills*, and *Lydia Pinkham's*. My father also sold his fair share of 190 proof alcohol (for medicinal and scientific purposes only!) to Norwegian bachelor farmers who lived in the dry counties of northern Iowa, about 30 miles away. I can remember his selling a second bottle to one fellow on the grounds that the appearance of Sputnik and the space race was going to cause a spike in the price of alcohol because it was needed for rocket fuel.

Jake was always a superb salesman and a very big personality. He liked to say, "The party is what you make it." When he was around, the party was always great.

One way he would make the party livelier was to sell a bottle of wine to Evelyn, the Hoeschler's Drug Store third floor tenant who believed the Communists had killed her canary. She was continually upset that President Eisenhower would not answer her warning letters, nor visit her to discuss her insights. Jake would, on several occasions, tell Evelyn that President Eisenhower was actually in the back of the

store behind the pharmacy area where the pharmacists were hiding him from her. With that, Jake would leave to go to the Rivoli pharmacy!

Evelyn would go back to press the pharmacists to let her talk with President Eisenhower about her concerns about the Communist conspiracy that she was vigilantly fighting at great personal cost. The pharmacists knew that Jake had put her up to this and they were irritated that it would take them half an hour to convince her that the President was no longer in the building. But that was the cost of being his employee.

One summer during high school, I worked repainting the second apartment on the third floor of the store, next to the one occupied by Evelyn, our Communist-fighting tenant. What was interesting was to observe her mental deterioration throughout the day as she consumed her daily bottle of wine. She would write notes to me throughout the day. Those written in the morning were fairly lucid and penned in a clear hand. But as the day progressed, her diction, thought lines, and penmanship would deteriorate until it was hard to guess what was bothering her. Since she never hurt anyone, she was merely regarded as one of the town characters who was tolerated as simply being crazy.

The last time I heard about Evelyn was when I was a junior in college. Apparently, the building had been recently re-roofed with a new pitch and gravel roof. One Saturday evening, as the druggists were locking up the store, they could hear her screaming from up on the roof. Knowing what was in store and not wishing to again get involved, they merely called the police to check it out and help her.

Apparently, she had gone up the fire escape to the roof to fight the Communists and had somehow sat down in some tar where she got stuck – thus her cries for help. With that, the forces of Christian concern and social control took over, and Evelyn was transferred to some professionally run institution where, I am sure, she had much less freedom to carry on her battles with the Communists.

When I told this story to Linda, my future wife, whom I was dating in Washington, she somehow got the idea that my poor, but honest father had recently been able to reroof his humble drug store in La Crosse – more about this later.

1939: Downtown La Crosse



Powered by a steam locomotive, a Burlington Railroad passenger train heads south on Second Street at Cameron Avenue on March 7, 1939. Burlington passenger trains were a regular sight on Second Street (with a passenger depot at Second and Pearl streets) from 1886 to 1940, when they began to travel the eastern edge of the city after a passenger depot was completed at the foot of Grandad Bluff. The railroad tracks shown here were removed and replaced with pavement in 1980, according to Tribune files. Anyone with more information about this photo or wishing

Other family enterprises I worked for included the Peoples Ice and Fuel Company. Peoples Ice and Fuel was a totally obsolete and poorly managed business that my father bought to get control of its property on Pettibone Island in the middle of the Mississippi across from downtown.

The icehouse and business was located on Front and Division Street near the Heileman brewery. There large (5' x 1' x 8") blocks of ice were made in trays of 10 in a refrigeration

building that reeked of ammonia that was used as a cooling fluid. Once frozen, the trays of ten blocks were dumped onto a shoot that ran into the cold storage room where the blocks raced across the floor until they hit the opposite wall with inconsistent winners that allowed us to bet while working in the storage room. We would then pull the blocks to other storage locations before they were either cut into cubes and sold retail or sold wholesale to the railroads for old style refrigerator cars or to the Army at Camp McCoy in Tomah for use by the troops training there in the summer. As one might expect, the busiest time was summer, and this provided reliable summer work with a fair amount of time to screw around.

Besides the ice business, Peoples also manufactured lightweight concrete blocks from steel slag at its former river ice cutting and storage location on Pettibone Island. The block business was so poorly run that they still used chain driven trucks with hard rubber tires to deliver loads of blocks to customers.

One day I drove a load of patio blocks into an alley, only to have the right rear wheel bounce into a big pothole by the alley gutter. This caused the truck to jerk sharply to the right and down, causing half the load of pavers to slide suddenly into a big pile of broken blocks next to the truck. It provided great entertainment for the neighborhood kids to watch me pick up and try to reload all the broken blocks onto the flatbed truck.

More dangerous was my dad’s experience driving a big load of blocks over the bluff to Coon Valley; he lost his brakes on the downhill run and nearly crashed. Luckily, Jake was able to revive the business sufficiently that the competition, Hemstock Blocks, bought him out before someone got killed.



NEW MARINA—This is the site of La Crosse Marina, Inc. The marina is on the West Channel and its vehicle entrance is across from Pettibone Park. Crews are working to get the marina in full operation soon and when finished it will provide dockage for 400 boats.—Tribune Photo.

Work Progressing In Development Of La Crosse Marina Project

<p>The wheels of progress are rapidly turning at La Crosse Marina Inc. as tree cutting crews, pile drivers, bulldozer operators and fill haulers respond to the enthusiasm of Jake Hoeschler.</p>	<p>tors from their boats to facilitate repair. One of the big features of the marina will be the 150-foot ramp beginning at the water's edge and extending gradually up towards</p>	<p>ter from getting under the ramp. A heavy winch will pull all size boats out of the water and up the ramp. Hoeschler has submitted a for-</p>
---	---	---

That left the former natural ice/former block production property on Pettibone Island without a use. Thus arose the marina and boat sales operation at that location where I also worked for a summer. I had thought that this job would give me plenty of time and opportunity to be on the river – but just the opposite happened.

Whenever the weather was most conducive to boating, we were, of course, the busiest. We worked in the marina gassing and otherwise supplying boats, cleaning boats on the shore and generally moving things around. One lesson I learned is that

you should not use a brush to clean a Plexiglas windshield because it leaves permanent scratches that ruin the windshield. Were I not the owner’s son, I would have been lynched for that mistake!

Other summer jobs included mowing various real estate subdivisions. For that we had an old Fordson tractor with a big rotary cutter in the back. It was fairly uneventful work except when you had to jump on the brake and the clutch to avoid hitting and throwing out from the rotary mower a surveyor’s stake that was not driven flush to the ground. Because the rotary cutter acted as a big fly wheel, it took significant effort to stop in time.



The next summer I worked at the Mormon Coulee Memorial Cemetery, a little side enterprise my dad had developed adjacent to the eponymous Hoeschler Hills housing development in Mormon Coulee, on Highway 14 southeast of La Crosse.



Three things need to be known about the cemetery business:

- 1.) A regular grave is 40" wide and therefore a regular backhoe tractor can easily dig such a grave. But a baby grave must be dug by hand – my job because the hole is impossibly narrow for a big guy;
- 2.) The guys who work at cemeteries are not very smart; and
- 3.) In winter, properly locating a grave site can be difficult under the snow.

My job was to mow grass, pick deadheads off petunias, and dig any baby graves required. The grass mowing was easy enough because a memorial cemetery has no headstones, only brass markers that lie flush to the ground and the grass. The petunia plucking seemed endless. The baby grave digging was a welcome relief until you got down to 3 feet where the really hard clay started, and the hole was too narrow and short to move around in. Thus, our babies were often buried well short of the usual six-foot depth of a regular grave.

This short-sheeting of the grave was not apparent to the mourners because we covered the hole with planks and artificial grass. The undertakers merely placed the little coffin over the indicated place and, after the grave-site service, just left it there for the cemetery crew to place it in the concrete vault in the hole. We cemetery workers would lurk in the bushes until the service had ended, the mourners had departed, and, then, we would finish the job. I always thought that if the grieving parents knew what low-lives were now handling their child, they would be horrified. Nevertheless, nothing untoward happened during my summer working there.

I did, however, hear from the guys about their occasional mishap locating a winter grave. The surveyor's marks were, of course, buried by snow and it was necessary to use gas heaters to thaw the selected site to allow excavation. Sometimes they would hit an existing burial vault and know that they were in the wrong spot. But if

they merely found an unoccupied site, they would dig merrily along, and the deceased would be dutifully buried. Only in the spring might the crew realize an error; they would then quietly dig up and re-inter, in the right spot, the dearly departed. Sometimes upon their return to the grave site, the family would be surprised at its location; but if they asked, they were assured that the winter snows had merely left them confused about where their loved one was actually buried.

When I was in college, I did not work summers in the drug store. I was nevertheless aware of a period when there was a major liquor price war between Hoeschler's and the Soell pharmacies located across the street from each other. My father, Jake, had hired a young guy who had formerly run the liquor department for Art Soell. Jake and Art were actually friends, and I would periodically meet and talk with Art at parties in La Crosse when I was home.

But with the advent of Jake's new hire and Art's managerial loss, the two stores embarked on a major price war so famous that it garnered an article in the Wall Street Journal. The fight was characterized by big butcher-paper signs in the window of each store listing the latest low prices. The staff in each store would carefully watch the signs in the store across the street and more often than not, would match or exceed each other's price cuts, even doing so on an hourly basis.

This went on for about a year until both Jake and Art got tired of a fight that neither could win, and which was costing each a lot of money. I can't remember if the protagonist manager left on his own or was let go. I can remember Art Soell telling me that such price wars are never good business and Jake should never have let that guy talk him into the fight.