

Two More and a Dog: Folklore of the American Hitchhiker

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic paper examines the culture and folklore behind hitchhiking, focusing mainly on hitchhikers as a folk group. Much has been based upon an interview with 70 year old Sandra 'Sande' King, who along with her husband Don, spent a year living 'on the road' beginning in 1967. Sande reflects upon the good and the bad times, as well as her observations of how the culture has changed over the decades.

KEYWORDS: Counter-culture; Hitchhikers, Vagrants.

Many may not realize it, but there is a very distinct culture that surrounds the practice of hitchhiking. Though often stigmatized and misunderstood, there is a lot of folklore surrounding the practice, for both the hitchhikers as well as those who pick them up. Many states are cracking down on the practice, including recent laws in 21 cities (including Fort Lauderdale, Florida) making it illegal to feed homeless people (Barclay, 2014). While this is a practice long misunderstood and feared, it is very apparent that hitchhiking is far more than just a mode of transportation.

The concept of hitching a ride is as old as the automobile itself. From the time the first mass produced and affordable cars and trucks rolled off the assembly line, it was not far down the road that those who were 'just passing through' may have their thumbs stuck out, trying to get a ride from a

stranger. It is certainly a part of a much larger tradition of hitching rides on trains, and riding the rails, like those known as “hobos.” Drifters and vagrants and even those who just ran out of gas or had engine trouble have been relying on the kindness of strangers to give them a ride down the road, whether it be to get across the country, or a couple miles to the nearest service station. The term “hitchhiker” is attributed to the September 19, 1923 edition of *The Nation* (Wickman, 2012) referring to one trying to *hitch* a ride. Since this time, our nation's fascination with the person on the side of the road trying to thumb a ride took off and found references in movies, cartoons, and such. It just shows that we never lost our curiosity with the stranger on the side of the road.

Of course where there is fascination, we often see folklore bring about a new face. Hitchhikers have become something to fear, whether it is the Phantom Hitchhiker (American Folklore, 2014), who is chasing down your car, to the Vanishing Hitchhiker (Snopes, 2011), who thumbs a ride, and disappears from the car just before you stop to let them out only to find out they died many years earlier. Then there are the more believable urban legends (Snopes, 2011), like the psychotic serial killer who asks for a ride to the other side of the mall, with a hatchet in their bag and murder on their mind. In the latter, (variations known as the Hairy-Armed Hitchhiker or Shopping Mauled) the driver often shows wisdom refusing to give them a ride. After going to mall security or the police, a bloody hatchet is discovered.

These stories are not isolated. Before hitchhiking became popular, there has always been a fear of the unknown drifter coming into town. American society is terrified of strangers, especially when the stranger is identifiable as someone, well, strange. There are few things more foreign to mainstream culture than hitchhiking. After all, it goes against many of the basic values, tenants and unwritten rules of polite American society. The first of which is self reliance. From the early days of colonialism, the United States has always focused on the Protestant Work Ethic. This is one way in which we express

our independence, that we not only do not need help from others, we do not want it and refuse it.

There is of course no better symbol for this than with our automobiles. While other countries use cars for transportation, Americans have a long history of building relationships with our cars. We name them, customize them, use them to show our status, or who we are. Cars are the ultimate expression of freedom. Almost every American child looks forward to turning 16, when they can get their license and go places on their own, without asking parents or friends for a ride. Americans live to drive. It is no longer just a mode of transportation, but something much more.

So it makes perfect sense, that those who do not at least desire to have a car and the freedoms that go along with it, must be strange, or even have ulterior motives. After all, they are not following the true American way, right? They are asking for a ride. Have they have given up a portion of their independence? Well, not exactly. In the eyes of many hitchhikers, they are experiencing freedom from schedules, responsibilities, bills and the like. While the rest of us are chained down to a job or another means of acquiring money, the hitchhiker has no such bills, and thus no obligation to hold down a steady residence or job.

I spoke extensively with an informant about this matter. Sandra (Sande) King, aged 70 as of our interview (November 15, 2014). She is currently a resident of Tompkinsville, Kentucky, where she lives on a compound with two of her sons and their families (Sandra King, personal communication).

Sande's story of hitchhiking began on Morning Star Ranch in 1967. Morning Star Ranch is a commune in California where she and her husband (now deceased) lived for a few months. While doing some work on the commune, Sande's husband, Don, broke his back and was taken to the hospital. He contacted Sande to ask her to come see him. Though they had owned a car when they first arrived at Morning Star Ranch, soon after they made it the vehicle had fallen into disrepair and this

meant Sande was without transportation to the hospital which was about 30 miles away. None of the other residents at the commune would be able to take her at the time, either. Don (who was under the influence of pain killers as a result of his injury) suggested Sande to hitchhike to get a ride to come see him. This would be Sande's first experience hitchhiking and she would be alone (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

She recalled it being more difficult than she had previously thought it would be to get a ride. She stood by the road sticking her thumb out, and cars just drive past her. Eventually someone did stop and she was able to make it to see Don. On the way back, the ride did not go quite as smoothly. Sande thought she had gotten another good ride, until the male driver passed up the road to Morning Star Ranch and began “pawing” at her. This frightened her, but she thought there may have been a miscommunication, since this was the time when the idea of “free love” was going about. She informed him that she was not interested in this, that she was married and had just left the hospital to visit her husband. This did not deter the man, who continued to drive further from her destination while continuing to paw at her. Sande recalled being very frightened and out of desperation she exclaimed to the driver “Jesus is going to get you for this!” The driver stopped everything, and with a look of concern on his face, let her out of the car. Sande recalled that it was not even her intention to scare the man, as she did not think anything she said would dissuade him, but she spoke it with such conviction and certainty, that she believes that is what made the driver stop and let her out. She was now about 10 miles from her destination, but she felt safer and walked the rest of the way back. This was the first and last time she would go hitchhiking by herself (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

Shortly after, Sande and Don began to read the Bible, as Sande recalls, “Only reading the red words.” They read the words of Jesus as if he were speaking directly to them, and they took the command to live as Christ lived literally. Sande made two robes (one for each of them) and they would

begin their year long journey across the United States by wearing only robes, and going barefoot.

While it was not their intention to hitchhike, it proved itself many times to be a very helpful means of transportation (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

One instance in which it proved invaluable was when they were in Nevada. They had been dropped off in what seemed like a pretty good place, but had turned out to be less than hospitable to two robed hippie-types trying to share spiritual beliefs about Jesus. Instead of being welcomed, as they had been in many places, they were ridiculed, insulted and even had people throw shoes at them. Sande recalls it being two or three days before they could get a ride out of there, and they could not just walk out, as one cannot just march into the desert (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

Sande recalled her favorite story. She and Don were sitting on the side of the road in Iowa, still robed and barefoot. Don was playing a harmonica, and they were waiting for a ride to come along when a Highway Patrolman stopped. He got out of his car, looking very intimidating with a Stetson hat, a puffed out chest and one hand resting on his gun. "Who do you think you are?" the officer asked them in a very demanding voice. Sande recalled feeling scared, even though they were doing nothing wrong and breaking no laws. She was not sure how to react (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

"We are children of God," Don replied, breaking the silence. Sande could see a complete change in attitude come over the police officer's face, he took his hand off of his gun.

"Really?" the officer replied excitedly. He asked them if he were to get his camera if they would allow him to take some pictures with them. They of course complied and took pictures with the officer. Sande recalled that he did a favor for them, either giving them some money or pointing them to a better location (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

Another incident involving police was not as pleasant. The Kings were in Wyoming, and had

given up their robes for more modern clothing at this point. Again, they were on the roadside, with Don playing a drum he was taught how to make in Mexico. Some police officers showed up and were asking them what they were doing there, and made them come to the police station with them. The officers separated the couple, and were asking them each questions. Sande recalls the officer asking her “what are you doing with a guy like that?” with some underlying innuendo, and tried to convince her that she needed to stay in Wyoming with the officer rather than being with Don. She was of course, uncomfortable about this and said it was even worse than her experience hitchhiking by herself, trying to get back from the hospital. Eventually, the police asked them how much money they had, which was about twenty dollars. They then said they would take them to the bus station, and they would make them buy two bus tickets to get them as far away from their town as possible (which was not very far). Since they had to send it ahead, Don's drum was lost and they never recovered it again (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

There is an old joke about hitchhiking hippies. Sande explained it was reflective of the fad at the time of trying to see how many people could fit into a phone booth. The joke asks “How many hippies can you fit into a Volkswagen? Two more, and a dog.” It is a very accurate representation. Sande informed me that at the time, those most likely to pick you up if you were hitchhiking were other hippies, usually in a van or bus. More often than not, these vehicles would be crowded, with people having to stick arms and legs out the windows to make room for more, and there was usually at least one dog or someone “with a weasel on their shoulder.” This was of course before seatbelt laws or anything like that were in effect (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

Well, Sande and Don would soon find out what it was like traveling with a dog. When they left Morning Star, they had to leave behind their dog, Tripper. They had settled into a small shack behind a bar in Northern California, with a floorspace of about 20 feet by 10 feet. It was not much, but it was,

for a short time, home to the couple. Enter Lou, a man from Morning Star Ranch who had long black hair and a long black beard, and was never without the accompaniment of a few other hippie-types from the commune. He and his group came up to the door and told them “We brought your dog back to you.” The group stayed a night or two before heading back to Morning Star, but shortly after they left, the shack in which they had been living was condemned. Sande believes it was fear from the locals, that they would bring in more hippie-types. They were now on the road again, Sande, Don and Tripper. To make matters more difficult, Tripper was not an especially well trained dog, but they made the best of this situation (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

One would think that drivers would take extra pity on those who are trying to catch a ride when it is raining. Of course, one would be wrong. People as it turns out, were not very keen on accepting soaking wet people, with a soaking wet dog and drenched backpacks into their vehicle. Occasionally, the trio would get rides in the rain, but they tended to be in the back of a pickup truck, which one can imagine would be unpleasant since you are still exposed to the rain but now have 55 mile per hour winds to add to the chill (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

There exists between hitchhikers and those that would pick them up, some sort of a bond. While we often focus on the risk of the one who stops to pick up a complete stranger, we often forget about the inherit risk that is posed to the hitchhiker. I would speculate this is because we have a tendency to think about things in an ethnocentric way, we focus on the risk of those we relate to most. For the majority of us, that would be the motorist. However; if we think about it more objectively, we can see that the hitchhiker is as just as much, if not more of a potential risk. For example, one does not have control of the car, so there is an incredible amount of trust that must be placed on a complete stranger. There is also the less obvious fact that the hitchhiker is taking all of their possessions (or at least the ones they are living on) and entrusting the motorist not to steal them. Incidentally, study titled

“Who Picks up Whom: The Fleeting Encounter Between Hitchhiker & Motorist” found (unsurprisingly) that a motorist is more likely to pick up a hitchhiker who most closely resembles themselves, or at least their place in society (Alcorn and Condie 1975).

There is always the issue of being the victim of violence. Being a hitchhiker adds greatly to ones risk of violence, as they are not known or missed, which makes them an easy mark for predators. The risk of rape is very real for males and females who choose to live “on the road” and as a result, many choose to carry items for personal protection which may prove invaluable. A good instance of this would be with Caleb 'Kai' McGillvary, dubbed Kai the Hatchet-Wielding Hitchhiker after a news video of him describing the incident went viral. He was allegedly picked up by a person who was mentally unstable, and while driving the car claimed to be Jesus and was attempting to use his car to murder a utility worker (KMPH FOX 26, 2013). After this failed attempt, we was attempting to injure a woman who came to check on his well being, when Kai bludgeoned the attempted-murderer with a hatchet. The wounds were not fatal, but subdued the man long enough for police to arrest him.

Regarding these potential dangers, my informant mentioned a couple which involved alcohol. First, she told me a story about a group of two families in a bus, who Sande described as “Church people,” and recalled seeing their cross necklaces. These families had kids, but shortly after being picked up, Sande and Don found out that the adults in both families had been drinking. They rode with them all day, even stopping for a picnic with them. However; the consumption and intoxication grew until they eventually stopped at a house for the night. While they were invited to stay with the family, the level of intoxication had grown disturbing after one of the men picked up a bottle and looked at it, then turned to the Kings and stated, “guess you know who is in charge now.” Sande interpreted this as being something akin to a possession, that the nice people who picked them up were no longer in control. When the time was optimum, she and Don sneaked away that night from the group (Sandra

King, pers. comm.).

In another example of the risk becoming all too real, Sande mentioned catching a ride from a man who had his two children in the car with him. “We thought it would be a good ride, especially since he had the kids” she recalled, but it soon turned out to be an incorrect assumption when it became apparent that the man was drinking. They got the man to let them out when they could, but Sande said she still thinks about the kids, and hopes they made it home okay. “What do you do in a situation like that?” she questioned with a somber expression coming over her face. In a time without cell phones, what could someone do in this situation (Sandra King, pers. comm.)?

While someone potentially giving a ride is assessing the potential passenger, the exact same thing is going on in the mind of the person hitching a ride. It is not at all uncommon for a hitchhiker to tell something along the lines of, 'it's okay, I will wait for the next one.' As a means of self-preservation, the hitchhiker will often use their best judgment to ask themselves, could this person be intoxicated, do they seem to pose a threat, or do I get a bad feeling from them? If the answer is yes, the response to the offer will typically be no thanks (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

Sande discussed how the culture of hitchhiking and living on the road seems to have changed, as she has observed. She said they never asked for food, money, cigarettes or anything like that, but people typically gave those things away freely. However; she has noticed a shift in attitude. In her observations of seeing younger hitchhikers, picking them up, or meeting them, she has observed that now people are not only asking for those sorts of things, but saying things like 'you should give me money,' as if there is a sense of entitlement to the money or something along those lines. She recalled getting frustrated on occasion when times were desperate, noting that people would drive by without giving them a ride. Overall though, it was not really an issue, and that they felt no entitlement to such things (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

We also discussed the cultural shift and the increased homeless population. She recalls when this became an issue in the media around the 1980's. As she watched, she observed that the people on television who were being called homeless looked just like she and Don. "There were lots of homeless, but we didn't call ourselves homeless." Rather, they referred to their lifestyle as 'living on the road.' She was also astonished, because they would have never lived on city streets, but rather either were on the road, or they went to the country where they could survive (Sandra King, pers. comm.).

Hitchhiking is about much more than a mode of transportation. It is about meeting people, getting to know others as well as yourself. It is not about results, nor is it a means to an end. It is about the journey of getting somewhere; it is a lifestyle. A lifestyle that is counter to mainstream American culture. There is a certain type of freedom that goes along with living on the road, yet there are also a new set of responsibilities. My informant did not recall the times being particularly great. As a matter of fact, she has a difficult time remembering the good times "though I know there were some." She also reflected on how she feels when her grandchildren go out hitching, stating "I wish they wouldn't do it." Yet, this lifestyle has become a refuge for many, and it means different things to different individuals. For Sande, it served a spiritual purpose. For others, it may be an escape. But few hitchhikers will deny that this is a life that they chose, to travel, to live without borders. The band Wookiefoot, very popular among certain groups of traveling folk, probably sum up the general attitude best in their song, 'Home Free.' "Home free, is where I long to be. With my pack upon my back, an open road ahead of me. And mister when you look, no don't look down on me. I'm not homeless (no). I'm home free." (Wookiefoot, 2009).

Works Cited

- Alcorn, David S., and Condie, Spencer J. 1975. "Who Picks Up Whom: The Fleeting Encounter Between Motorist & Hitchhiker." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 3(1): 56-61).
- American Folklore. 2014. "The Hitchhiker: A Massachusetts Ghost Story." Accessed November 17. http://www.americanfolklore.net/folklore/2011/08/the_hitchhiker.html.
- Barclay, Eliza. 2014. "More Cities Are Making It Illegal To Hand Out Food To The Homeless." *Food For Thought*, October 22. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2014/10/22/357846415/more-cities-are-making-it-illegal-to-hnd-out-food-to-the-homeless>.
- King, Sandra. 2014. Interviewed by author. Digital recording. Tompkinsville, Kentucky. November 15.
- KMPH FOX 20. 2013. "Hitchhiker Gives Psycho The Axe [Official Video]." Published February 4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16oUKdOUstU>.
- Snopes. 2011. "The Vanishing Hitchhiker." Last Updated April 8. <http://www.snopes.com/horrors/ghosts/vanish.asp>.
- Snopes. 2011. "Shopping Mauled." Last updated April 8. www.snopes.com/horrors/madmen/hairyarm.asp.
- Wickman, Forrest. 2012. "Digit To Ride: How sticking your thumb out became the universal gesture for hitchhiking." *Explainer*, June 12. http://www.slate.com/articles/life/explainer/2012/06/ray_dolin_shot_while_hitchhiking_why_do_hitchhikers_stick_out_their_thumb_.html.