

Section III: Regional Topics

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Thumb Wars: Hitchhiking, Canadian Youth Rituals and Risk in the Twentieth Century

Abstract

The “coolest thing” about hitchhiking in the 1970s was “that total sense of freedom.” Hitchhiking emerged in Canada the 1930s and grew in tandem with the use and reliability of cars and with road construction. In 1935, the *Globe* observed, “One could not go very far along the highway without meeting scores of people standing by the roadside vigorously waving their thumbs to secure lifts.” In spite of adult’s warnings against taking rides from strangers, thumbing was always popular with youth, especially in the late-1960s, when the hippies linked hitchhiking on modern new motorways with participation in the youth scene. This paper examines the changing perception of hitchhiking in the twentieth century. For most of the time picking up a hitcher was perceived as an act of charity or paternalism or, in the case of females, of chivalry. A successful hitchhiking exchange is a ritual that required trust, boundary negotiation and control. However, one never knew the true identity of the hitchhiker nor the motives of the motorist, and therefore, in tandem with exciting road stories, a counter-narrative appeared in the press that challenged the commonsense assumption that rituals create social cohesion. By the 1970s, civil society’s anxiety about hippies, dropouts and youth unrest, cast a dark shadow over hitchhiking, especially for girls on the road.

The “coolest thing” about hitchhiking in the 1970s was “that total sense of freedom.” A woman recalled how “you could literally just walk onto the road and get yourself anywhere in North America that you wanted to go.” Her traveling companion added, “You never knew what sort of vehicle or driver was going to drive up. It could be some beater truck, or a hot car, or a Mercedes, or it could be some bloody pervert.”¹ Hitchhiking has been called thumbing, ride bumming, auto-stop and thumb tourism.² It emerged in the 1920s and grew in tandem with the use and reliability of cars and with road construction. In 1935, the *Globe* observed, “One could not go very far along the highway without meeting scores of people standing by the roadside vigorously waving their thumbs to secure lifts.”³ People hitchhiked for a variety of reasons. In the 1930s, it was the chief mode of transportation for the unemployed and the down-and-out. During the Second World War, gasoline rationing and rubber shortages made it popular with car-less soldiers and mothers with heavy grocery bags; but overall the most spirited

hitchhikers were yet-to-be car-owning teenagers and young adults. Youth hitchhiking became especially popular in the 1960s when the beatniks and folk music scene reconstructed hobo “thumb travel” as a “hip-youth” activity and passed it down to the “hippies” who linked hitchhiking on modern new motorways with participation in the “radical youth scene.”⁴

In the 1940s, folklorists observed that hitchhiking could flourish only in a culture that saw “nothing strange in the use of automobiles over long distances . . . nothing exotic in the casual intimacy between complete strangers, and no breach of etiquette in a road side pickup.”⁵ According to social conventions, car owners were in positions of authority vis-à-vis the car-less. The ride beggar was situated according to rules that govern cap-in-hand exchanges between the haves and have-nots, which follow old English Poor Law conventions by which a “deserving” person had the right to ask for assistance and it was an “amiable virtue” to show charity and compassion toward the needy.⁶ For most of the twentieth century, picking up a hitchhiker gave a motorist the chance to be a good Samaritan.

For many generations, social scientists agreed with Alfred Radcliffe-Brown’s assertion that public rituals enable social actors to play culturally prescribed roles and communicate needs in coded ways. The function of ritual was to create cohesion, continuity and consensus within a community.⁷ Hitchhiking is a visible ritual, not a secret one like a prayer or wish. A successful lift exchange required both parties to understand and play their ascribed roles and abide by the rules for the duration of the encounter. When the ritual was successful, drivers could assume that they would not also be asked for money for food or liquor and hitchhikers were confident that motorists expected no payment for the pleasure of having done a good deed.⁸ However, at certain points in the life of a ritual its meaning may be transformed. Today, a new generation of social scientists argues that Radcliffe-Brown’s students misunderstood the function of ritual. Adam Seligman says rituals have never portrayed the “world as it is.” Rather, they portray a fantasy, imaginary and pretend world.⁹ In the case of pilgrimage rituals and secular rites of passage, Nehemia Stern’s work on contemporary youth hitchhiking shows that hitchhiking reproduces the moral, political and religious ambiguities that are inherent in daily experience.¹⁰

This paper examines adventure hitchhiking in the twentieth century. For most of the century it was regarded as a rite of passage for youth. For motorists, picking up a young hitcher was perceived as an act of charity or paternalism or, in the case of female hitchhikers, of chivalry. A successful hitchhiking exchange required trust, boundary negotiation and control. However, one never knew the true identity of the hitchhiker nor the sincerity and motives of the motorist, and therefore, in tandem with 1930s adventurous road stories by polite and well-adjusted youth, a counter-narrative appeared in the press that challenged the commonsense assumption that rituals create social cohesion. By the early 1970s, civil society’s anxiety about hippies, dropouts and youth unrest, cast a dark shadow over hitchhiking, especially for girls on the road.

Adventure Hitchhiking: “Thumb Fun”

Victor Turner’s concept of liminality enables social scientists to see adolescence as the transitional state or limbo between childhood and adulthood when

the young citizen apprentice must undergo a series of tests before being reincorporated by society.¹¹ Accordingly, rite of passage travelers, wanderers, drifters and backpackers fabricate “crazy feats” in order to experience the excitement of growing up.¹² Children learned to hitchhike by imitating their older siblings and friends. Missing children were not constructed as a serious social problem until the late 1960s, so any motorist, neighbor or passing stranger might offer a lift to a youngster on the way to a swimming hole, ball diamond or school and be perceived as a good Samaritan.¹³ These exchanges were regarded as valuable opportunities for an adult car owner to participate in the civic education and moral development of a young Canadian. The idea that someone might violate the boundaries of the ritual was remote enough in 1932 that the children’s columnist with the *Globe* newspaper said hitchhiking was an excellent opportunity for children to show off their manners. When three southern Ontario boys hitched a ride home from a rained-out camping trip, they thanked the driver so profusely that the columnist used hitchhiking as a example of how youngsters could “make a habit of thanking people for large or small courtesies.”¹⁴

Between 1930 and 1938 the Government of Canada increased spending on roads, and thousands of men on unemployment relief were put to work under provincial and federal schemes that committed \$19 million to the construction of highways that would for the first time permit Canadians to “traverse the Dominion without entering the United States.”¹⁵ The federal government also upgraded access routes from the United States and upgraded the roads to National Parks in order to attract tourism.¹⁶ People were eager to explore the new highways, and adventure hitchhiking quickly became a cheap travel game for students and young adults. Players had to travel as far as possible for as little money as possible. At the depth of the Depression, the *Globe and Mail* published many hitchhiking stories that emphasized speed and distance, thrift, and the pleasure and freedom that the new motor-vehicle technology provided. Hitchhiking enabled a Gananoque, Ontario, teenager to travel 40,000 miles through various parts of the world without paying “one cent for transportation.”¹⁷ In 1934, two 19-year-olds from Edmonton thumbed rides for 2,300 miles to meet Prime Minister R.B. Bennett at the Chicago World’s Fair. The sideshows and headliners included Cha-Cha girls, a moving life-size dinosaur exhibit, a 628-foot Skyride, a Midget City with 60 Lilliputians, and Chrysler Motors’ latest dream car, which went 50 miles per hour. The boys collected the signatures of the mayors of every city and town they passed through. Prime Minister Bennett gave them his “blessing” when he signed their scroll.¹⁸ In 1936, Ellsworth and LeRoy Toll took a year away from their studies to hitchhike around the world. When they returned they gave amusing travelogue lectures in United Church halls in Quebec and Ontario about their 38,000-mile, 27-country steamship and hitchhike adventure, which had cost them only \$75.¹⁹ The *Kingsville Reporter* said the town hall was packed with a “very appreciative audience.” The Toll brothers’ lecture “was the finest ever staged in town.”²⁰ In 1937, two 17-year-old boys, carrying only two small tents and two sleeping bags, hitchhiked from Niagara Falls to Vancouver in 22 days with 100 rides. Their longest lift was between Lexington, Nebraska, and Salt Lake City, Utah. They planned to work their way home along the southern route through San Francisco and Denver.²¹ In Saskatchewan, a “knight of the highway” discovered that “seven in ten cars will give a lift—except in the Prairie

Provinces where seven in ten will pass by." But disappointment, waiting in rain, sleet, snow and hail were all part of the ambiguous pleasures of hitchhiking.²²

Like other rites of passage, hitchhiking is a gendered performance. Young women possessed the same wanderlust that their brothers did. Cars afforded women previously unimagined access to "automobility," and the sense of personal freedom was empowering.²³ In 1938, Nora Harris hitchhiked from Victoria to Halifax because it was "educational to travel." Her father wanted her to make the trip by bicycle, but the 23-year-old insisted on hitching, sleeping outdoors and cooking her meals over a fire. The most challenging leg of her journey was between Ontario and Quebec. Because there was no road passible around the north shore of Lake Superior, Nora was stranded for a week in Fort William until a grain boat captain carried her through the Great Lakes to Port Colborne; from there she walked over 400 miles to Montreal. Nora made the long trip alone because she wanted the freedom to move when and where she wished. "I am a timid person," she confessed. "I thought it would help me to get over my self consciousness."²⁴

In 1945, the *Newmarket Era and Express* dubbed Joyce Hill and Margaret Smith Canada's "hitchhiking ambassadors." The 20-year-olds had spent their teenage years building Avro Lancaster Mk X bombers in a munitions factory, but after the wartime restrictions on travel to the United States were lifted, they decided to hitchhike across the continent before they started university. They departed from Toronto and slept in a haystack in Michigan, saw rodeos and Glacier National Park, helped with "Victory over Japan Day" celebrations in Seattle, took a ferry from Victoria to Vancouver, and hitchhiked on to Banff, Calgary, Regina and Winnipeg, then down to Chicago and finished back across the boarder in Windsor. Margaret and Joyce discovered that making personal connections with drivers was a valuable part of hitchhiking. Negotiating boundaries, sociability and enlivening the exchange gave them their best chance of remaining in a car as long as they chose too.²⁵ The *Spokane Daily Chronicle* interviewed the girls. Joyce was quoted: "People took us miles out of their way to show us points of interest. . . Before we can thank them for the ride they are thanking us our refreshing conversation and company." Margaret added, "Everybody we've met has been so kind and courteous that we are simply amazed. . . We haven't walked 2 miles in the 2,000 we have traveled so far. . . This transcontinental hitchhike is the big adventure of our lives."²⁶

Rituals are the foundation of many youth subcultures, clubs and leisure organizations.²⁷ In the middle decades of the twentieth century a willingness to hitchhike was a membership requirement of many co-educational youth activities as diverse as the YMCA, the Young Communist League, the Canadian Youth Hostel Association and the Canadian Youth Congress. Like other youth culture rituals, which involve a shared taste in music, dancing, hairstyles and fashion, hitchhiking aided in social bonding.²⁸ North American college students had hitchhiking teams, contests and championships that disregarded national boarders. In 1938, two University of Michigan students claimed to be "North American Hitchhiking Champions," having thumbed 85,000 miles across every Canadian province and American state, Alaska, Central America and Mexico.²⁹ In 1940, the Berkley Thumb Wagers challenged the Fresno State College Hitchhikers Club and other college teams to a 2,000 walk-and-thumb marathon.³⁰ A Toronto teenager, Linda Folkard, logged 15,000 miles to become "Miss

Hitchhiker of 1946.”³¹ Co-ed hitchhiking clubs were also popular in the United Kingdom, and many North American youth went on hitchhiking tours of Great Britain and the Continent.³² By the 1930s, youth around the world were attracted by the open road and sense of adventure that automobile technology provided.³³

Hitchhiking was also the chief mode of travel for young political activists. In 1938, a Youth Commonwealth Federation delegate, Emerson Parks, thumbed over 2,500 miles in eight days to attend the Federation conference in Edmonton.³⁴ In 1939 many of the 500 delegates hitchhiked to the annual meeting of the Canadian Youth Congress in Winnipeg. At its peak the Congress represented the interests of almost 400,000 young students, veterans and workers, members of the YMCA, YWCA, church groups, and youth wings of Conservative, Liberal, Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and Communist parties.³⁵ The object of the Winnipeg meeting was to “foster a spirit of national unity among people that make up Canada’s population.” The *Globe and Mail* said, “From every corner of Canada youth were coming together, stirred by the ideal of a united country . . . knit through common interest.” Lloyd Birmingham, secretary of the Christian Student Movement chapter at the University of New Brunswick was so passionate about the Congress that he hitchhiked for two and a half days to get there.³⁶ In the 1930s, Ben Swankey, who was a member of the Young Communist League of Northern Alberta used his time alone with motorists who picked him up to promote socialism; however he admitted that drivers were often more impressed by his hitchhiking than his “Red Bogey.”³⁷

In 1933, two Calgary school teachers, Katherine and Mary Barkley, founded the first Canadian branch of the International Youth Hostel Association. The sisters thought too many young people were wasting time and money in movie theaters and on “juke box jiving.”³⁸ Youth hostel associations promoted fellowship for young men and women of all nations. The Canadian provincial associations saw recreational hitchhiking as the most economical way for young people to enrich their civic education through travel. In the early 1950s, the Alberta branch held information sessions on how to hitchhike in Europe. A notable hitchhiking adventurer was Valeen Pon. In 1949, Pon and two girlfriends were not prepared to settle down after graduation, so they hitchhiked “the length and breadth of Europe.” Valeen saw first-hand “all the major works of art and collections in Europe.” She said, “Now I can define the various schools of art, literature, music and architecture.”³⁹ In 1954, three College of Education co-eds described the “thrills of [their] hitch-hike across Europe.” Lydia Paush, Diane Marchment and Imogene Walker gave “hints” on the cost and what to pack.⁴⁰ Faculty of Arts students Georgia Papis and Loraine Irvine also hitchhiked the whole length of Europe except Greece, where there were few cars on the road. They said, “hitchhiking is not frowned upon” in Europe but girls should not wear slacks or blue jeans because they were not popular.⁴¹ Many travelers discovered that the Canadian flags they sewed on their rucksacks helped them to get many rides.⁴²

There were many cultural moments when hitchhiking promoted sociological, psychological and gender cohesion. In the 1930s, there was strong social approval for “trios and pairs” of “job-seeking” women and girls seen “trekking along near Norfolk County looking for work in the tobacco fields.”⁴³ During the war, in her syndicated advice column, “Miss Manners,” Emily Post gave a nod to hitchhiking for “Defense Debutantes,” provided they followed the “Dos and ‘Don’ts” and thumbed in a “patriotic” manner. Miss Post instructed factory girls to “remember

that the rides are not social gatherings and conversation is not necessary."⁴⁴ It should be noted that that reporters who wrote women's hitchhiking stories took pains to emphasize their respectability. Paush, Marchmont and Walker had been in England for a Christian student conference and volunteer work. The *Edmonton Journal* published Pon's convocation photograph and called her a "brilliant scholar . . . The small Chinese girl . . . counted many prominent members of the International Federation of University Women" among the friends she stayed with on her travels.⁴⁵

During the Second World War, economic restraints slowed road construction and repairs, and winter snow and spring flooding made road trips across Canada difficult if not impossible. In 1949, to kick-start the postwar economy, the federal government passed the *Trans-Canada Highway Act*. It provided joint federal and provincial funding to build the country's first "first-class, hard surface road" that would link each province by a road across the "shortest practical east-west route."⁴⁶ In 1953, the National Film Board dubbed the envisaged Trans-Canada Highway "Canada's New Main Street." The teenagers who came of age during the road-building boom associated automobility with the "good life," and their numerous rites of passage involved cars.⁴⁷ Hot-rodgers, joy-riders and drive-in movies, and youth subcultures such as leather-jacket greasers, Mods on Vespas, bohemians and beatniks in their plaid shirts and blue jeans embraced the rituals of automobility and travel. The hipsters, who wanted to avoid "squares," middle-class careers, and domestic responsibilities, became vagabonds, wanderers and drifters. They were literally, "on the road," both symbolically and geographically.⁴⁸ Their hitchhiking road rituals were copied by the hippie generation who made the transition to high school, college or work in time to witness the grand opening of the 7,388-kilometre Trans-Canada Highway in 1962, its completion in 1966 and the Canada's hundredth birthday in 1967.⁴⁹

Motorist Gaze: "Thumbs Down on Hitchhiking!"

Given society's seemingly positive response to hitchhiking travel by the young, it is instructive to note that hitchhiking was actually a violation of the 1934 *Highway Traffic Act*. The police could charge hitchhikers with "soliciting a ride from any motor vehicle on the traveled portion of the public highway." Fines ranged from \$5 to \$25, and repeat offenders could be incarcerated.⁵⁰ Admittedly, the law was a weak deterrent because car owners enjoyed offering rides to young people. In 1937, a Saskatchewan hitchhiker said a thumb traveler's "best friends" were the salesmen, businesswomen and nurses, who were "generous and usually traveling alone and liked company."⁵¹ Nevertheless, together with positive media representations of young people's road adventures, an alternative representation of the ride-sharing ritual emerged that focused on the dark side of hitchhiking.

During the Great Depression many people sacrificed a great deal to keep their cars on the road, and though they were happy to provide roadside assistance to "decent people" when they could, they were disappointed when hitchhikers turned out to be ungrateful freeloaders and chiselers. Motorists complained about hitchhikers who disguised themselves in "respectable" clothing, such as flannel slacks and tweed jackets, or bought discarded military uniforms, or stuck college pennants on their suitcases and pretended to be students.⁵² Working people sent letters to newspapers complaining about private-school pupils who poked their

heads into cars, demanded lifts and muttered insults like “piker” (cheapskate) when they were turned away.⁵³ A Toronto motorist picked up five boys who put their feet on the car seats and “rifled through the car pockets and stole his driver’s permit, which was later found in a garbage bin.” He said, “This you see is why one more driver gives no more rides.”⁵⁴ The sight of lazy boys and schoolgirls hitchhiking home dismayed their teachers. The Toronto Board of Education tried to stop the “heartbreaking spectacle.” Police officers made fools of themselves when they “lectured and warned” because youngsters only pretended to be “crestfallen and apologetic.” The junior culprits knew hitchhiking was a violation of the *Highway Traffic Act*, but they doubted the police would arrest them or take them to juvenile court, so the next day they were again spotted out on the road hitchhiking.⁵⁵ In 1935, the Boy Scouts of Canada adopted two new slogans: “Real Scouts don’t Hitchhike” and “Scouts hike, they don’t hitchhike.” The Dominion Office reminded motorists that the boys were trying to learn “manly self-reliance” and that offering free rides distracted them from earning their hiking badges honestly. Hitchhiking was a disease to be “stamp out . . . in the troops.”⁵⁶

In the 1930s, social workers worried that the irresistible temptation to hitchhike would promote a widely scorned, “get-something-for-nothing” attitude, truancy and ultimately juvenile delinquency. According to child psychologists, “wanderlust” in a well-adjusted child was the “elementary expression of the romantic interest in life;” however, it was equally the cause of the “restless” and “rebellious” minds of young hobos. The eminent psychologist Cyril Burt said running away was the “first step on the downward stair to crime,” which led to “far more desperate misdemeanors.” On the road impressionable youngsters were exposed to low company, gangsters and hoodlums.⁵⁷ Depression-era social workers realized that many young people had been pushed from home by family discord and the burdens of poverty. A youth worker for the Dominion-Provincial Youth Training Scheme told the guests at a Lion’s Club luncheon that the boys and girls he met hitchhiking between Fort William and Cornwall told him “they had to sleep in surroundings that would arouse protests from the Humane Society if somebody’s dog was substituted.”⁵⁸ The best solution for wandering boys was industrial training, and girls on the road needed jobs in domestic service, where they would be under the supervision of respectable people; without these, wandering youth might never be reintegrated into society.

Feminist historians argue that spaces are gendered and women who take to the open road have been “deemed to be erratic misfits.”⁵⁹ The gendered ambiguity of hitchhiking reveals the cultural assumption that women have a different relation to cars and the road than men have. Early twentieth-century social workers maintained that when girls went “astray” they headed straight for the streets. Mimi Sheller and John Urry argue that the male domination of public space appears in the practice of “kerbcrawling” by men in motorcars. For women, the road is a stage where their hitchhiking bodies perform for the “prevalent male gaze.”⁶⁰ In 1938, Ontario social workers compiled psychometric descriptions of the “mental state” of teenage girls “bitten by the wanderlust bug.” Seventy-six girls under 16 and 152 girls 16 and over had run away. Their psychological profiles revealed they had left home because they were unhappy there, were following a boyfriend, wanted to join the circus or had dreams of stardom in New York and Hollywood; however,

. . . from these facts, it is generally agreed that home conditions—the economic status of the family, restrictions of freedom and other factors—are not the cause of most cases of “itchy feet.” The irresistible yearning to see the world, if only a small portion, in a few days is the answer to most instances of wanderlust.⁶¹

Girls picked up hitchhiking in New York State were sent to the Florence Crittenton Home.⁶² Fifteen-year-old Mary Walsh hitchhiked 1,500 miles from Toronto to Wadena, Saskatchewan, before turning herself over to the police after a driver put her out in the middle of nowhere. The police send her to the Manitoba Home for Girls.⁶³ Two sisters from Hamilton were picked up hitchhiking in Toronto and turned over to the Catholic Welfare Home even though they had not committed any crime.⁶⁴

In 1950, the *Reader's Digest* published an article called “Thumbs Down on Hitchhikers! Too Many Rob and Kill.” It summarized 20 years of hitchhiking-related accidents and crimes in the United States. Canadian readers read about murders and rapes, and the shocking warning that 40 percent of all hitchhiking-related crimes were never reported in either local or national newspapers.

A hitchhiker may look like the boy next door. The thing to remember is that he isn't. . . . The hitchhiker wants your car and cash. He may kill you to facilitate escape. But don't make the mistake of thinking he'll give you a swift clean death. Usually a hitchhiker kills as if he were taking out on the motorist his grudge against.”⁶⁵

By the 1950s, the so-called predatory sexuality of female hitchhikers became a standard feature of true crime novellas, B movies and television programs. Movies with names like *The Violent Years* (1956) and *The Night Holds Terror* (1955) dramatized the violence perpetrated upon innocent motorists by teenage girls and youth gangs.⁶⁶ In 1955, viewers of the popular television series *Dragnet* watched an episode where a female hitchhiker beat and robbed male motorists.⁶⁷ The occasions for roadside chivalry collapsed when gentleman-motorists realized that “pretty travelers” were pretending to be farmer's daughters and the “charm-ers” who flagged down their cars had boyfriends hidden in the bushes waiting to jump out when the car stopped.⁶⁸ It appears that the freedom that accompanied road rituals was largely the prerogative of male driver's fantasies, as 21-year-old Everett Amaral discovered when he picked up three teenage hitchhikers in summer of 1951. The *Globe and Mail* reported that the “handsome curly haired” Everett was terrified by three girls with a long-bladed knife who sexually assaulted him. One hitcher had red hair and the other was a brunette and they “were pretty.” Everett told the police that the third girl, “the short dumpy one” forced him to have sexual intercourse. The “knife girl held the weapon almost at my face and the third girl drove the car to a lonely road.” Afterwards, they forced him to drive to a drug store to buy a bottle of peroxide, because “they'd decided to become blonds.” The police charged the “amorous trio” with lewd behavior and disorderly conduct.⁶⁹

In the 1950s, many Canadian motorists drew the same conclusions regarding the dangers of hitchhiking that Americans had drawn; namely, hitchhiking was the mode of travel for drifters, deviants and escapees. “The smiling lads with the well-developed thumbs” of earlier decades had become a “major menace on the country's motorways. . . . Big-hearted drivers may not find it easy to disregard

the thumb of a foot-sore pedestrian, but they must ignore them if there ever is to be an elimination of the highway menace.”⁷⁰ In 1964, the *Newmarket Era* wrote, “Out of 100 hitchhikers that pass through a small town, 84 had criminal records and twelve were runaways.”⁷¹ Consequently, the ambiguity associated with hitchhiking had transformed it from the embodiment of trust and sharing to a risky, nerve-racking and dangerous activity. Official statistics on road crime by hitchhikers, fictional accounts and urban legends of vanishing hitchhikers put a spotlight on the violence perpetrated upon innocent motorists by hitchhiking criminals, wayward girls and adolescent gangs. Letters to the press said that foolish motorists who invited juvenile delinquents and “ex-cons” into their cars had only themselves to blame if they were robbed or assaulted. Although hitchhikers risked their lives when then got picked up by “hop-heads,”⁷² a victim of a hitcher’s assault revealed the contradiction inherent in the hitchhiking ritual when he said, “It is a risky thing to play the part of a Good Samaritan.”⁷³

Youth Gaze: “Everyone I wanted to be like was hitchhiking”

Despite safety concerns, the fact that hitchhiking continued to exist was a tribute to many people’s belief that mobility was a democratic right and if a car owner freely consented to give a “footloose traveler” a lift, it was no business of the police or an insurance company. In the 1930s the police appreciated it when civic-minded motorists gave lifts to the down-and-out, because automobile hitchhiking was safer for “hobos” than riding the rails. Provincial Motor Leagues did not think hitchhiking was a “serious enough problem to warrant official consideration.”⁷⁴ Youth said it was “a bit of a lark to get from one place to another by using one’s thumb,” and vagabond travel games enabled them to go as far as possible for very little money and to learn a great deal about the world. For Depression-era youth, “swinging the duke” to “land a hop” was “thumb fun.”⁷⁵ This also held true for baby-boom youth, who ignored their parents’ warnings about the dangers of standing out in traffic and hitchhiked a lot. The police did not want “hitchhikers endangering themselves or others.” Youth discovered they could avoid harassment if they stood “well off the roadway” or took a bus “out a ways” and then start[ed] hitchhiking.”⁷⁶ Interviewees recalled that rather than arresting scruffy hitchhikers many Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) drove them to the youth hostels in their cruisers. For 1970s “pioneers of alternative travel” every ride was a unique and collective adventure.⁷⁷

Depression era Prime Minister R.B. Bennett was not the first leader of the country to give young hitchhikers his blessing. One of the most prominent hitchhiking role models of the late-1960s was the newly elected Prime Minister of Canada, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. The 1968 federal election campaign had harnessed the enthusiasm of young, media-literate baby boomers, who were attracted by Trudeau’s cosmopolitanism and his rhetoric of “participatory democracy” and a “Just Society.”⁷⁸ Reports of the excitement he caused when he appeared at the youth hostel in Jasper National Park added to the hitchhiking fad. The Canadian Youth Hostel Association published his photograph and endorsement in their annual report for 1967–1968. Trudeau talked openly about his own hitchhiking adventures in Quebec, Europe and the Middle East. He said travel “provides fulfillment and adventure, and responds to a beckoning known to man since his beginning. What better way is there to know Canada and promote the world?”⁷⁹ A

northern Ontario boy captured the excitement of Trudeaumania: "Trudeau was our man . . . we heard he liked canoeing and the outdoors. He was like us!" That year membership in the Canadian hostelling association "quintupled."⁸⁰

By dotting the Trans-Canada Highway with federally funded youth hostels, Trudeau's Liberal government hoped to make use of the hitchhiking fad as a way of managing the youth unemployment crisis and harnessing youth unrest and campus radicalism. In the spring of 1970 the Secretary of State announced its \$200,000 youth hostel program and ordered a dozen armories across Canada be converted into free summer hostels for "transient young people."⁸¹ The following summer the Opportunities for Youth program was established so youth could set up a wide variety of government funded projects, including hostels. The *Winnipeg Free Press* reported:

An estimated five million young people will be crossing Canada by thumb. Students from the east coast will be headed to view the Prairies, Rockies and the Pacific National Exhibition, while west coast students will be heading for Montreal, Ottawa and the Maritimes. They will sleep in parks, line the sides of the roads, cause city councils to dedicate thousands of dollars to youth hostel facilities.⁸²

Canada's liberal hitchhiking culture was attractive to American youth too. Between 1971 and 1974 the *New York Times* ran these headlines: "Canadian Youth Take to the Road with Government's Blessing," "They Use Their Thumbs to Roam the Land" and "Youth in Canada Drifting Around with the Government's Blessing."⁸³ Teenyboppers, young workers and university students made the connection between a hitchhiking trip, personal growth and freedom. Across Canada, teenagers "fell in love" with the way "hippy people" looked with their guitars and backpacks, and they longed to follow them.⁸⁴ A Simon Fraser University student, Ron Verzuh, noticed that there were many hit songs with hitchhiking themes on the radio. There was Vanity Fair's "Ride, ride, ride, Hitchin' a Ride," The Beatles' "Long and Winding Road," and Blood Sweat & Tears' "Ride Captain Ride, upon Your Mystery Ship." Verzuh said the songs set the "mood . . . they tell you to move, to go to another place." He started a "Trip Tips" column with the slogan "Hitchhikers of the World Unite" in the campus newspaper and invited students to drop by his residence room to talk about travel.⁸⁵

The desire of many young people to explore the new highways indicates their frustration with traditional textbook methods of learning about Canada's people and geography. A Waterloo University student wrote:

You don't really get to know anyone or any place from a book or magazine. There is only one way to do that—by talking to people first and or travelling down the road away from your home town . . . You are bound to meet other Canadians . . . some doing the same thing you're doing—namely tripping.⁸⁶

In 1968 a letter printed in the Lethbridge University newspaper said:

To find what this short period of being on earth is all about (if it is indeed possible to find this out) a person must get away from all he has already lived with, he must travel, he must meet, he must give, he must take, he must love, he must hate, he must run, he must crawl, he must fly, he must swim, and he must be reborn and die several times in one life time.⁸⁷

In 1973, a student at the University of Victoria described what his hitchhiking experiences meant to him:

I have hitchhiked in many countries . . . I have had rides with people whose language I could not speak; had rides with madmen and executives, college-students and professors, men and women, and I think I have learned (in a Whitmanesque sense) a great deal from hitchhiking. It's something I have truly come to love, and hence respect. For me hitchhiking is flowing with the tide of life, it is movement, and the tapping and understanding of that movement (I may sound overly enthused about this, but seemingly "insignificant" actions can and do "mean" a great deal if you've got eyes and ears to sense the meaning).⁸⁸

Twentieth century road stories all contain similar accounts of sleeping in barns, haystacks, hedges and hostels, not eating for days, or wiring one's parents for money and at last arriving home with "thin shoes and empty pockets."⁸⁹ On the road the hitchhikers took pride in the unpredictability, excitement and risks, however, baby boomers did not dress neatly in college jackets and pressed trousers or skirts and sweater sets as some predecessors in the 1930s and 1940s had done.⁹⁰ Rather, they had long bushy hair and blue jeans and they flipped peace signs to oncoming traffic. 1970s road stories reveal an eagerness to reject the prejudices of mainstream culture and a willingness to hop into cars with people their parents' generation called rednecks, Indians, truckers, weirdos and cowboys.⁹¹ As they traveled, they performed the rituals associated with traditional Canadian tourism but added a new twist. They slept rough or in youth hostels rather than in hotels. Some travelers were "not attracted to drugs" or left friends back home "to get away from that stuff;"⁹² whereas others smoked pot, ate magic mushrooms and dropped LSD. In 1967, a boy and girl from northern Ontario hitchhiked all the way to Montreal for Expo '67 but did not go in because they "didn't give a damn!"⁹³ A British Colombian hitchhiker compared the hitchhiker's life to the life of the Buddhist monks. He said that through pride and humility, "somehow or other" the hitch-beggar "gets a ride, moves on and fulfils his journey."⁹⁴

Highway to Hell: The Dark Side of "Hitchin' a Ride"

There is no way of knowing how many young people hitchhiked across Canada in the late twentieth century. Because of the vast geography and sparse population, it may be, as Lawrence Aronsen suggests, that hitchhiking was a distinctly Canadian manifestation of the "Age of Aquarius."⁹⁵ Public perception of transient youth supports Nehemia Stern's suggestion that rituals reproduce the uncertainties inherent in everyday life and that is why hitchhiking was seen in increasingly negative terms in the final quarter of the century.⁹⁶ The summer "armies" of hitchhikers along the new Trans-Canada Highway in 1967 and 1968 alarmed many motorists.⁹⁷ Unlike the hobos who had hitchhiked across the country in the dark days of the Depression, the young drifters were not looking for work.⁹⁸ Older Canadians regarded dropping out of school and work as a "new style of vagrancy."⁹⁹ They were unsure where long hair and rock and roll lyrics stopped and true rebellion began.¹⁰⁰ Rather than fostering social cohesion between the generations, at the height of the popularity of hitchhiking, the powerful mainstream press played an active part in drawing the public's attention to the dark side of hitchhiking, especially for girls.

The sight of scores of dirty, long-haired young people thumbing rides fueled the ire of taxpayers from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The *Vancouver Province* proclaimed, "Hitchhiking Has Become a National Phenomenon."¹⁰¹ The *Montreal Gazette* said, "Thousands of youngsters will be on the road this summer."¹⁰² The *Calgary Herald* told "taxpayers" to brace themselves for transients, because 50,000 hitchhikers "passed through in '71."¹⁰³ An American couple picked up a hitchhiker headed to Vancouver, just to ask "where all the hitchhikers were heading." It was something they had not seen in Iowa.¹⁰⁴ National park officials and tourists objected to the dirty young people sleeping in picnic shelters. In cities and towns, merchants were convinced that the transients and alienated youth congregating downtown drove customers away. Anti-hitchhiking lobby groups were formed across that country because they did not want federally funded youth hostels in their neighborhoods. They focused on the low moral character of dirty hippies, transients, freaks, dropouts, Vietnam War draft dodgers and runaways. A protest group in London, Ontario, called youth hostellers "pigs, freaks and kooks," and locals threatened to burn down the hostel and use shot guns to keep the "freaks" away.¹⁰⁵ On Prince Edward Island, a farmer threatened to spread hog manure on fields surrounding the site, and 36 housewives erected a plywood and barbed wire barrier to stop a federal hostel from opening in Charlottetown in June 1971.¹⁰⁶ University students said due to massive student unemployment, there were more hitchhikers on the roads than there were cars.¹⁰⁷ A student newspaper published a satirical monologue that mocked the Opportunities for Youth program's ability to create satisfactory youth employment. "Trudeau the Libertine" says,

surely the young shall be with me for have I not given them the Opportunities for Youth Program with such tasks as counting trees on Twelfth Avenue in Calgary. For those without jobs have I not told them to hitchhike to see the country? Does not waiting five hours in the hot sun for a ride teach patience and is this not a sign of stupidity?¹⁰⁸

Between 1969 and 1972, municipal authorities, the police and Members of Parliament were receiving an increasing number of complaints about young men and women hitchhiking and sleeping rough along the Trans-Canada Highway. Members of a social work organization called the Canadian Welfare Council published three surveys with data on transient young men and women from middle-class families. They concluded that the men were sowing their wild oats. But the women were a source of concern.¹⁰⁹ Early 1970's sociologists linked girl's hitchhiking to "feminists ideas" that promoted the belief that liberated young women had the same rights as men, namely to "take a walk at night, to thumb a ride . . . any time and in any place." This research showed the more positive hitchhiking experiences she had, "the more strongly she believed that she could handle a dangerous situation."¹¹⁰ The Canadian Welfare Council's report revealed disturbing information about "transient girls." Even though they were from privileged families, they had wretched physical health, a poor mentality, a need for affection, working-mothers, and ambivalent attitudes towards marriage but a strong attachment to the "idea of raising children." The Council concluded:

The problems of girl transients are quite different from the problems of the boys and young men on the road . . . Boys, when they wish to do so, can return to a

settled and ordinary life, but in many cases a girl's whole chance of happiness is destroyed.¹¹¹

As we have seen, the fact that hitchhiking existed in Canada at all had been a tribute to long-held beliefs that mobility was a democratic right and lift giving embodied tolerance and trust. Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the Canadian establishment was reluctant to admit that these values and principles had become an artifact of bygone days; therefore, rather than clamp down on hitchhiking completely, the authorities redirected their anti-hitchhiking rhetoric almost exclusively at the behavior of young women and girls. Instead of acknowledging the uncomfortable reality of sex- and gender-based violence in postwar Canadian life, protest groups petitioned against neighborhood youth hostels, which they called "brothels" and labeled girls who left their school, work and families to travel as promiscuous, stupid bad girls who were asking for trouble.¹¹²

All across Canada, from 1970 to 1980, journalistic exposés focused almost exclusively on sexual assaults on female hitchhikers by drivers, which revealed the high price young women paid for participation in mobility. Two American college girls hitchhiked from California to explore Canada. One was killed and the other badly injured when they leaped out of a moving car during an attack by the driver.¹¹³ Three months after she left Quebec to hitchhike out west, the partly decomposed body of a Quebec college student was found by some berry-pickers nine miles from Hudson Hope, British Columbia. Her father said she had left home without telling anyone.¹¹⁴ The *Edmonton Sun* counted three sexual assaults of young women who "paid dearly" for hitchhiking.¹¹⁵ In 1972, under the headline "Raped and Robbed" the *Ottawa Citizen* tallied three rapes, two armed robberies and "dozens" of assaults connected with hitchhiking. In August 1973, Ingrid Bauer disappeared; her body has never been found. Her mother told the press, "We'd never let her hitchhike at night, but she caught her father off guard."¹¹⁶ The official explanation for the rise in sexual assault was attributed to hitchhiking by young girls and the belief that it attracted crime.

The press published interviews with ex-hitchhikers who openly described their worst experiences on the road. The syndicated advice columnists Abigail Van Buren and Ann Landers printed several letters from victims of assault warning other girls of the dangers of hitchhiking.¹¹⁷ After a coroner's jury recommended a vigorous program of education on the hitchhiking peril, a Toronto filmmaker collected 70 road stories from "adventurous youngsters." Ninety percent of the youngsters described how they faced sexual attacks, threats with broken bottles, nightmarish rides at breakneck speeds and one motorist who pulled up without a stitch of clothing on. The filmmaker was astonished when no branch of government or school board came forward to finance the film.¹¹⁸

The police also responded weakly, with a list of their own hitchhiking "Dos and Don'ts." They warned hitchhikers not to get into a car if the driver, "looks or acts strange or appears impaired . . . don't ride in the back of an open truck, get a license number . . . immediately report anything untoward . . . Girls should never hitchhike alone. Even if there are two, don't get in a car with three or four men."¹¹⁹ Some regional police officials concluded that advising people, women in particular, not to hitchhike did not do any good. The Peel Regional Police said

“if they [women] haven’t learned by now, they’re never going too.”¹²⁰ In 1977, the Ontario Provincial Police erected a gigantic bilingual billboard with the slogan “Going my way? *Tu me prends?*” It depicted a skeletal hand hitchhiking. The public reaction was negative. People called it tasteless, excessive, ridiculous, depressing and in bad taste.¹²¹

Once the risks and dangers of female hitchhiking were acknowledged, the ritual was revised to include the proviso that girls who hitchhiked were asking for trouble. If she failed to enforce the appropriate rules and physical boundaries she was blamed if she was assaulted. This view was endorsed by many court judges who heard sexual assault cases. For example, in 1972, Justice Duchesne dismissed a rape charge against a 28-year-old married driver. In his ruling he stressed that all young women who hitchhike, including the 17-year-old victim, “were inviting motorists to believe their purpose is not entirely innocent.” He concluded, “The real victim of this episode was the girl’s mother.”¹²²

Ironically, during this period of heightened anti-hitchhiking propaganda, the summer soft porn movie hit for 1974 was a film called *Sex Brats and Hitch-Hooker*. The movie section of the local newspapers showed a risqué poster of two scantily dressed female hitchhikers.¹²³ Popular-culture representations of girls on the road, pop songs and teen movies constructed the hitchhiking girl as a lonely figure on the run from her fractured family or a flower child who would not strongly object to a sexual encounter in the stranger’s car.¹²⁴ Twenty-first century hitchhiker, Vanessa Veselka observed during her time on the road, that “society collectively decided” that girl’s hitchhiking stories should be told only as “morality tales that exist only in the shadow of a predator.”¹²⁵ In this research, I have observed that male and female hitchhikers often made “jokes” about the dangers inherent in hitchhiking, and these were repeated in the newspaper of the day, like the remark by a young woman quoted in the *Edmonton Journal* in 1971, who said, “After four days hitchhiking on my own . . . I’m unmolested.”¹²⁶ The *Globe and Mail* told of two young men stranded hitchhiking around Espanola, Ontario, who made a sign “Will Accept Deviants.”¹²⁷

The dominant assumption that only girls could be victims of sexual assault made male victims highly reluctant to report incidents to the police, so they kept silent. Male interviewees said, “You have to keep an eye on the conversation. They want to see what your interest in sex is.”¹²⁸ Another said, “I was raped by a male . . . Suddenly we are traveling on a dirt road and we are taking his ‘short cut’ and you get molested. I was only thirteen.”¹²⁹ A prairie youth said,

I got picked up by an older man, he did not say anything, but I could hear this kind of whispering like the radio was on really low. Then I realize it’s him saying: ‘want to suck my cock . . . I leaned myself against the door and yelled, STOP THE CAR!’¹³⁰

From a young hitchhiker’s point of view, the ambiguity of the hitchhiking ritual was summed up in these words. The “rules of the hitchhiking game” are that sooner or later, a young hitchhiker will come to harm. “When the hitchhiker is a delectable young thing in a mini skirt or a long-haired youth standing on the side of the road hitching, there is a distinct chance the person will not reach his destination safely.”¹³¹

Hitchhikers' Legacy: Ritual and Rite of Passage Travel

Participants in a ritual know that an unsafe world may not be made safer by the application of the ritual; nevertheless, they hope that if they successfully negotiate the boundaries, social conventions will be followed and their wishes (and prayers) will be answered.¹³² As far as hitchhiking is concerned, that was not always the case. Canada's hitchhiking "craze" declined in the mid-1970s because of pressure by anti-hitchhiking groups on the police and the RCMP to enforce restrictions against hitchhiking on highways, and some municipalities passed bylaws banning hitchhiking in towns and cities. The commercial tourism sector increased the number of cheap alternatives for young passengers through student discounts and standby tickets on buses, trains and airplanes. New 10-speed bicycles facilitated cycling across the country, and a new youth mobility rite of passage travel was born.

As we have seen, the rituals of youth subcultures make sense to those who choose to participate in them; therefore, their behavior is best understood when interpreted in light of the meaning and value young people of a certain generation give to them. Youth in the 1970s, did not know, and their parent's and grandparent's "forgot" that they had also thumbed across Canada or Europe in the 1930s and early 1940s. In contrast to the conservative parent culture, which uses prejudiced and negative behavioral labels drawn from political or moral ideologies, subculture participants embrace risky practices and describe them as self-affirming, playful, spontaneous, experimental, adventurous, communal, powerful and transformative.¹³³ Today the hitchhikers of the 1970s are regarded in academic literature as the pioneers of alternative tourism. In this paper, young hitchhikers claimed that their hitchhiking adventures transformed them. A positive legacy of the travelling youth lifestyle has been the acceptance by society and in education policy of the value of travel for young people, as evidenced by the institutionalization of the year off or "gap year" between high school and college, semesters abroad and volunteer travel experiences as the "secular rite(s) of passage" of today's youth. Currently, youth, parents, teachers and corporations see travel as an excellent transformational learning experience that will assist with the development of global youth consciousness and self-enhancement.¹³⁴

An alternative legacy of the hitchhikers' story is that without an accurate holistic understanding of the consequences of a ritual, the pleasure and dangers of youth mobility cannot be explained. Hitchhiking was regarded as a rite of passage for boys. A man on the road is "caught in the act of becoming."¹³⁵ However, in social work discourses, a young woman on the road had something seriously wrong with her. The Canadian Welfare Council concluded that feminism influenced girls to push the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior. Interviewees describe how hitchhikers tried to look after each other. A Vancouver youth hostel staffer said, "Very quickly we realized that a lot of women were being raped, a lot of them . . . and we began to put up notices: 'Don't Hitchhike Alone' and 'Hitchhike with a Male' . . . Word was getting out, but there was no one to tell . . . Nobody was listening."¹³⁶ Interviews with baby-boom youth show that they objected to the double standard and wholly negative representation of female hitchhikers. A girl from Windsor said, "I was a good girl—I wasn't promiscuous in any way. I wanted to see the world. I had the book called *Hitchhikers' Guide to Canada*."¹³⁷ Recent studies of young tourists' perceptions of fear on holidays show

that young men and women deliberately seek out risky activities to enrich the experience, thrill and excitement of travel.¹³⁸ The meaning of rituals change, but the risks and ambiguity inherent in them do not.¹³⁹ The lesson of the post-sixties hitchhikers is that without an accurate and holistic understanding of the consequences of a ritual, the pleasure and dangers of youth mobility cannot be explained.

Endnotes

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1. Oral history interviews and some written accounts were drawn from open-ended interviews with 100 women and men of the baby boom generation who hitchhiked across Canada, the USA and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. A snowball sample was created by enlisting the assistance of friends who were hitchhikers or knew hitchhikers. I also located travelers who were quoted in contemporary newspaper reportage. Finally, following public talks and media interviews many people contacted me to offer their stories. Vancouver interview with #81a, #81b and #90, June 22, 2011.

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9. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 43, 89; Mario Rinvulcri, *Hitchhiking* (London, 1974), http://hitchwiki.org/en/Hitch-Hiking_by_Mario_Rinvulcri. Accessed February 24, 2014.

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11. Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rights of Passage," in Louise Mahdi, Steven Foster and Meredith Little (eds). *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation* (Chicago, 1987), 3.
12. Erik Cohen, "Nomads from Affluence: Notes on the Phenomenon of Drifter-Tourism," *International Journal of Comparative Studies* 14 (March 1973), 90. Chandra Mukerji links hitchhike adventures and the telling of road stories to performance and play. Chandra Mukerji, "Bullshitting: Road Lore among Hitchhikers," *Social Problems* 25, no. 3 (February 1978): 242–243; Amie Matthews, "Young Backpackers and Rite of Passage Travel," in Garth Lean, Russell Staiff and Emma Waterton, *Travel and Transformation* (London, 2014), 160.
13. Karen Staller, "Constructing the Runaway Youth Problem, Boy Adventurers to Girl Prostitutes, 1960–1978," *Journal of Communication* (June, 2003), 331.
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comfort across Canadian soil from the Atlantic to the Pacific." Monaghan, "Canada's New Main Street," 44, 48. Mathieu Turgeon and François Vaillancourt, "The Provision of Highways in Canada," 164.

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