

# 20 Questions and along the shores of Lake Ontario

> STORY & PHOTOS BY GEOFF KELLY

US Route 20, the longest highway in the country, runs from Newport, Oregon, just a mile from the Pacific Ocean, to Kenmore Square in Boston, Massachusetts. The 400-mile stretch that traverses New York State is mostly scenic, two-lane highways, descended from the first great western turnpikes and, before those, well-worn Native American trails. Until the New York State Thruway opened between 1954 and 1956, it was the most frequented cross-state route; today the decline in traffic is evident in the darkened windows and weed-tangled lots of abandoned motels.

Plenty are still open, of course: the Star-Lite Motel in Seneca Falls, the Chanticleer Motor Lodge in Canandaigua, the Cresthill Motel near Waterloo, birthplace of Memorial Day, whose handpainted sign advertises a permanent vacancy. These are supported by tourists who travel Route 20 in the summer to visit the Finger Lakes, to go antiquing, to tour wineries, to visit historic sites, to patronize farm stands, to see the countryside.

That's what we aimed to do, heading east toward the Finger Lakes on a sunny Saturday morning to see what we would see. We set out eastbound from Buffalo on Route 20, aiming toward Auburn, New York, just past Seneca Falls. Then northward on backroads to Sodus Bay, a quaint beach town with two lighthouses—one that works and one that's a museum. Then homeward on the Seaway Trail, along the southern shore of Lake Ontario.

We hied out of town on Broadway, stopping first at the R & L Tavern on Mill Street, just past the Broadway Market, for coffee and cheese pierogi. Lotte—the “L” in the tavern's name—showed us a suitcase filled with Polish newsweeklies from 1932; the cover photo for the issue on top of the pile was Benito Mussolini. She speaks Polish but doesn't read it as well as her husband, Roland—the “R”—who came to the US at age seven, after he was freed from a Nazi concentration camp. But she thought they might be valuable. I agreed.

“Where did you find these?” I said.

“I don't want to say,” Lotte replied. “If they find out they're worth something, they'll want a cut.”

She used to go driving, too, she told us, when she learned of our plans. All the way out to the Finger Lakes, just to get out of town. When she was younger.



A carved bull in a yard full of wood sculptures on a country road between Auburn, New York and Lake Ontario. The sculptor's wife said he'd seen similar sculptures in Rochester and liked them so much he was inspired to teach himself.

## Signs along the way

A half hour east of R & L, we sprung free of Buffalo's suburbs and into farm country. Add a few words and a catalog of the road signs along the way read like a poem:

“Here we go gathering gifts in May.”

*Like Pharaoh's Treasures;*

*like the Alden Memorial Day BBQ:  
noon 'til gone.*

*Like a token for Sergeant Todd Travis:*

Welcome Home from His Third Tour  
in Iraq.

Elk Meat For Sale *down the street from 3  
Bucks Country Store.*

*Or maybe a gift certificate to Tom Wahl's:*

Free W-Fi: Woo Hoo!

The Western New York Steam & Gas  
Association *confers with*

the New York Steam Engine Association  
*on neutral ground:*

The Jack 'n' Jill Inn—Spaghetti Our  
Specialty since 1947.



Meanwhile, at the Davis Trailer World & Country Mall,

*a Caledonian exhales a long stream of  
smoke and sighs:*

*Too bad Dave's not here.*

LIMA BANK ROBBED: This vault was in the “Bank of Lima” at the time of the first bank robbery in Livingston County. February 8, 1915.

*If you are tempted to stray*

*by Lima's “Wizard of Clay”*

*Stay the course; stay.*

*It's another Dead End.*

Not far from Darien Lake—just down the street from the Miller Elk Farm, in fact—there is a plaque commemorating Mina Griswold, the state's first female rural mail carrier.

For miles on either side of Lima, a battle between neighbors is playing out in the form of yard signs: “WalMart YES” in green and white vs. “Never in Lima” next to a yellow Walmart happy face logo turned into a sourpuss. East of Lima, in the farm country, the ayes have it. But as we drove closer to town and then along the Main Street—by the historic American Hotel, built in 1861, by Aunt Denise's Donut Den and, down the block, Uncle Dave's Upper Deck tavern—the trickle of anti-Walmart sentiment turned into a flood.

Final count for Walmart: seven households. Final count against Walmart: I stopped counting at 20.

## The summer crowd

On Lakeshore Drive in Canandaigua—from the Iroquois *Kanandarque*, which means “Chosen Spot,” population 11,264 year-round and many more in the summer time—is an ice cream stand named Scoops, where the high school girls behind the counter don't wear hair-nets or baseball hats and no one seems to mind that their long, shiny locks brush the tops of every ice cream cone they serve.

Scoops is right on the marina, across from a pleasant lakeside park, where couples sit on benches to watch the sun set. Not far across the water is Squaw Island, New York's smallest state park. It's about the size of a football field.

One of the girls at Scoops has to dress like

The male elk at Miller Elk Farm on Route 20, not far from Darien Lake—and not far from a memorial to Mina Griswold, the state's first female rural mail carrier. Also nearby is the Darien Country Store, a great place to buy a lampshade.

a clown and stand in the boulevard with a sign, drumming up business, directing the slow-cruising summer traffic toward the parking lot. For hours at a time. The girls take turns.

“Okay, I guess,” said the girl taking her turn on Memorial Day weekend, the first busy weekend of the summer season, when we asked how she was holding up. “Someone threw an egg at me.”

She pointed a few yards away, where a broken egg streaked the pavement. “See it?”

Towns like Canandaigua, with its beautiful waterfront, and Seneca Falls, with its Women's Rights National Historic Park, its Seneca Waterways and Industry Museum and its Mary Baker Eddy Library, were filling up with tourists. We recognized them: They looked like us. We had planned to stay overnight in Seneca Falls but thought maybe the town had enough visitors.

Plus the manager of the Star-Lite Motel—a great name but a rundown joint—wanted \$65 for one of his crummy rooms. “After Memorial Day rate,” he told me.

“But Memorial Day is Monday. It's Saturday,” I said.

“I only have five rooms left and the day's not over yet,” he replied.

No bargaining room there, so we pressed on to Auburn, Central New York's home of the derby: the 68th Annual All-American Soap Box Derby, which finished just hours before we arrived; the Annual Memorial Day Duck Derby, which we missed by a day in the other direction; the 25th Annual Finger Lakes Carp Derby, hosted by the Grumpy Ol' Men's Club, \$2,000 in prizes—well, no, that was back in Seneca Falls.

## William and Harriet

In Auburn we took a room at the Budget Inn, where we refrigerated the fresh asparagus we'd bought on the honor system from an unmanned farm stand earlier in the day. We watched a Grateful Dead cover band at a pub called Spirits and ate a pizza around midnight at the corner of the crowded bar at Mark's Pizzeria. In the



The historic town of Conquest, New York, north of the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, is just five miles down the road from the slightly less historic town of Victory, New York.

morning we read the paper at a beautiful old diner on Genesee Street, overlooking the Genesee River, site of the Duck Derby, channeled through town between 20-foot concrete walls. The eggs and home fries were terrible, but the service was friendly and informative: The waitress gave us directions to the home of Harriet Tubman, a mile or so out of town.

Tubman, born into slavery in Maryland in 1820, escaped her chains in 1849 and proceeded to lead hundreds more African-American slaves to freedom, becoming the most celebrated leader of the Underground Railroad. In all she made 18 or 19 trips to the South and back. She first came to Auburn in 1857, when she helped her parents to escape. She settled in Auburn with them.

She served as a nurse, a scout and a spy for the Union Army during the Civil War. When the fighting ended, she was convinced by William H. Seward—the US secretary of state who orchestrated the 1867 purchase of Alaska from Russia, famously dubbed Seward's Folly—to return to Auburn, which was his hometown, too. She spent her years there fighting the federal government for a military pension, in recognition of her service during the war. It was finally granted to her posthumously, which is really too polite an adverb—it was granted in 2003, 90 years after her death.

Her house is small, quaint and ill kept—it and the surrounding park and museum were closed when we arrived, but we walked the grounds and peeked in the windows. The paint was peeling and the clapboard was cracked. By contrast, we'd passed Seward's house, also a museum now, on the way out of town: a sprawling brick mansion on immaculate grounds, beautifully maintained. The only nicer building in town was the Methodist church.

We gathered some purple phlox to perfume the car and turned northward, leaving Route 20 behind.

**The in-between roads to the water**

Here, between Route 20 and Route 104, a constituent of the Seaway Trail, we lost ourselves in a lotus land of country lanes and sunny farms, the road rising and fall-


ing into towns with names like Victory and Conquest. We stopped at a tiny roadside cemetery and read the intertwined histories of two families; we stopped to stare at some alpacas in a paddock; the air was filled with silky wisps and seedlings.

Looking for water to keep the phlox alive, we rattled across a wood-tracked, one-lane bridge and down into a river-flat community of fishing shacks nestled under a canopy of maple, oak and poplar. The road ended in a copse of trees, under which grazed a flock of goats.

At the crossroads was a gas station/general store/diner, where everyone had ordered the special and half the diners where dressed in Sunday churchgoing clothes. The strawberry-rhubarb pie, said the cook, came from a bakery in Syracuse. "Most of the restaurants around here get their pies from the same place," she told us. "But we only have pecan left." We bought rhubarb bread at a roadside stand outside of Sodus Point instead, after a brief visit to the the mysteriously named Chimney Bluffs—a wall of red clay cliffs facing north toward Canada, which resemble chimneys not at all.

At Sodus Bay we changed into swimwear in the vestibule of the public restrooms, which were still locked for the season. Children were splashing in the waves, oblivious to the icy water; we lasted about two minutes.

The Seaway Trail is a 454-mile scenic route paralleling Lake Erie, the Niagara River, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. After leaving Sodus Point, we passed through a chain of lakefront villages and one nuclear power plant before descending into Rochester's Irondequoit Bay, where we struggled to follow the green signs designating the trail—a time-eating diversion. When we finally emerged from the metropolitan slough, the road wound through lush parkland. Before we turned away from the water onto Route 98, inland to Albion, we stopped for a beer at the Black North Inn in Kent, where a few dozen bikers had chosen to end their Sunday rides. They stood around the parking lot and boat ramp in leathers and boots and shades, drinking beer and debating whether to make one more stop—somewhere along the Erie Canal, maybe in Middleport, maybe in Albion. One more stop on the way home, just one more drink, stretch out the day a few more hours.

Not for us, not today. Time to go home. 

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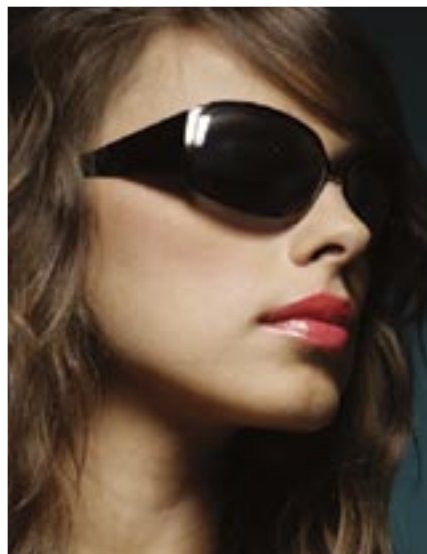
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