

No Place like Home

By Linda Hasselstion

I devise a test of community connection.

Waving in the country has been the subject of too many humorous essays, often written by city folks, so I want my signal to be simple and clear. With my right hand at the top of the steering wheel, palm out, I raise my index finger and middle fingers. I make this gesture when I can see the oncoming driver's face, allowing time for a response.

My first waving experiment lasts twenty-eight miles, from my turnoff to Hot Springs, South Dakota and includes eighty-four vehicles. Greetings are returned by six.

For the next few miles, I review my data. My headlights are on, a universal signal for "Passing is dangerous." Many of us in this neighborhood adopted this custom after losing relatives and friends to accidents on two-lane highways; therefore, the cars showing headlights may have been local. The school bus driver waved, but the highway patrol trooper didn't. I waved three times at three cars too close together, and got no response. The first driver was nervously watching the two behind him. Both of them were riding each other's bumpers, zigzagging, peering ahead and trying to pass in the no-passing zone.

Intrigued by the results, I repeated the experiment from Edgemont, South Dakota, to Lusk, Wyoming, on two-lane SD 18 and WY 18-85, famous for lurking troopers, leaping deer, and speed traps.

The first vehicle I meet is a battered pickup with local plates. The driver's arm is extended along the back of the seat. Surprised, he waves, grins, and waves some more. No one waves first. When I wave at two semis hauling hay bales, the first driver looks astonished; the second is talking on his cell phone. A dozen dead deer decompose in the ditch; speeders have made this road a death trap for wildlife. Covering sixty-six miles in sixty-two minutes, I wave seventy-four times and receive only four salutations.

Experiments summary: 158 waves, 10 returned. What might we learn from this waving experiment?

At the very least, my research may indicate plains folk are dangerously out of practice in the traditional friendly western wave. If they just moved here, maybe they don't understand the custom. And perhaps longtime residents aren't feeling friendly in these challenging days.

A friend with whom I discuss my trial suggests that my waving is an aggressive act, and compares it to the traditional New York third-finger wave. She suggests that my waving symbolizes my refusal to adapt to "modern" ways, and calls me "a holdout, a living old westerner practicing neighborliness." (I suspect she want to say "old fossil.")

If this is aggression, why not? Let's all start waving at each other on two-lane highways. If your wave expresses your hostility to bigger highways and look-alike communities, that's fine. If it's pure friendliness, that's ok too. Maybe the jerk tailgating that oncoming car will be so startled he'll drop his cell phone and drive with both hands.

Perhaps we'll start choosing to drive where people wave, relishing the relaxation of lower speeds limits on two-lanes the way we adjust our lifestyles in wilderness, the way we are rediscovering cooking under the banner of "slow food." When increased traffic on narrow roads encourages highway planners to push for wider routes, maybe we'll take the next step: discussing with neighbors whether we need a bigger highway before we leap on the bandwagon of support.

Waving certainly won't solve the problems of growth and development in western

communities, but we have to start somewhere. Waving a hand is better than brandishing a firearm and maybe our ulcers won't flare up.