

Bill Bryson: Fledgling Author

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DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – Writer Bill Bryson wanted to tell the good folks of Britain something about America. In doing so, he told Americans something about themselves.

Bryson, the son of a sports writer, drove through 38 states in his mother's Chevy Chevette to compile the material for his recently published book, "The Lost Continent." It's a witty, insightful look into the United States, poking fun at everything from Southerners and recreational vehicles to historical markers and his own family.

It also speaks of what Bryson enjoyed about America, places such as the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, Gettysburg, Pa., and Charleston, S.C.

"It was a fabulous experience," Bryson said in an interview. "It was something I had wanted a chance to do, and almost nobody has a chance to go out and see the whole country all at once.

"I can't believe how lucky I was to be able to do it. Not only to go back to all of the places that I wanted to, but to go to places I'd never seen and to be paid to do it."

Bryson, who lives in England, returned to Des Moines for his father's funeral in 1987. As he and his brother and sister were reminiscing about their family vacations, he was struck by the thought that America had become a foreign land to him. He decided to retrace family vacations to find out how the country had changed.

After receiving several rejections from publishing houses, a small British publisher, Secker & Warburg, bought the rights for about \$10,000. It was just enough to cover Bryson's expenses.

One of the publishers who originally rejected "The Lost Continent" was Harper & Row, which eventually bought the U.S. rights for \$375,000. Harper & Row's rejection slip is in a frame hanging above Bryson's desk.

Bryson said the American firm has been good-natured about its earlier rejection and, to his surprise, made few changes in the book.

"I thought I was writing a very small book for a British publisher," he said. "I thought I was explaining what America was like to Britons. When I heard that Harper & Row bought the book, I thought they'd probably cut some things and change all this stuff.

"Americans already know, for instance, that Washington and Baltimore are right next door. But they said, 'Oh no, we like it like it is.' They didn't change much of anything. The British version explains what Bud Light is. That's the only thing that really got changed."

Bryson writes that his intent was to find the perfect small town, where "Bing Crosby would be the priest, Jimmy Stewart the mayor, Fred MacMurray the high school principal."

From his opening line, it's clear that Bryson was out to have fun: "I come from Des Moines. Somebody had to."

He describes Des Moines residents as being "strangely serene," and writes that people who have never been there "drive in off the interstate, looking for gas or hamburgers and stay forever."

Once on the road, Bryson finds ample material for his zingers.

Like Southerners:

"The average Southerner has the speech patterns of someone slipping in and out of consciousness," he wrote. "I can change my shoes and socks faster than most people in Mississippi can speak a sentence."

Or recreational vehicle owners:

"These things, these RVs, are like life-support systems on wheels. Astronauts go to the moon with less backup. RV people are another breed - and a largely demented one at that."

Then there's Nebraska, which Bryson calls the nation's "most unexciting" state. "Compared with it, Iowa is a paradise," he wrote. "Iowa at least is fertile and green and has a hill. Nebraska is like a 75,000-square-mile bare patch."

Bryson said he wrote the book with the idea that Americans can laugh at themselves. If anyone takes offense at what he said, he's sorry.

"I thought it was quite obvious that I was joking," he said. "It was never meant to be taken seriously. If you grew up in a place like Nebraska and were really proud of the fact and then see the things I said, ... I could see how you could take it seriously."

Bryson's kidding even extends to his own family. He wrote that his father, Bill Sr., had two criteria for a vacation attraction: "Was it educational and was it free?"

"His idea of holiday heaven was a museum without an admission charge," Bryson wrote. "He was so cheap on vacations that it always surprised me he didn't make us sift in litter bins for our lunch."

However, he was worried that his father, a longtime sports columnist for the Des Moines Tribune, would be perceived as a buffoon, so he showed the manuscript to his mother before it was published.

"I said to her, 'Look, if there's anything you're unhappy with, tell me,'" Bryson said. "She thought it actually was an affectionate account. ... I was well aware I was using both my parents as comic book figures for purposes of humor. My mother wasn't troubled by it at all."

Bryson never did find his perfect small town, although he visited some that came close. Among his favorites were Columbus, Miss.; Charleston, S.C.; Savannah, Ga.; Gettysburg, Pa.; Chestertown, Md.; and Pella and Storm Lake in Iowa.

And if a foreigner had one place to visit in the United States, Bryson would recommend the Grand Canyon.

"It's the one experience America has that can't be duplicated anywhere else," he said. "You can go to the Alps if you want to see mountains, you can go to the Yangtze River and see a river that's as great as the Mississippi, but there's just no place in the world that's got a hole in the ground like the Grand Canyon."

His worst experience was in Sundance, Wyo., where a gum-chewing waitress at the only restaurant in town wouldn't serve him because a group of Shriners were having a private party there. He had to make do on \$6 worth of potato chips and candy bars from a gas station.

"Anywhere in Iowa, someone would have fixed me up with a sandwich," Bryson said. "They seemed to take a positive pleasure in the idea I was just going to eat potato chips and candy bars. I never encountered that type of malice anywhere else."