



Ken Wachsberger, a lecturer at Eastern Michigan University, drew from his experiences of more than seven years of traveling throughout

the United States, Canada and Mexico for his book, "Beercans on the Side of the Road: The Story of Henry the Hitchhiker."

On the road

Wachsberger remembers his life as part of 1970s counter-culture

"If you've ever hitchhiked and stood at the side of the road, watching cars pass you by, especially in the pouring rain with no bridge in sight or no umbrella and you're getting sopped without anyone even noticing you, you feel a lot like a beercan on the side of the road."

YPSILANTI—And if you want to know what that feels like, plus capture a bit of the left-wing spirit of the 1960s, you might like reading Ken Wachsberger's new book, "Beercans on the Side of the Road: The Story of Henry the Hitchhiker" (Azenphony Press, \$8.95).

Set in 1976, the book chronicles the travels of Henry Freedman, a middle-class, Jewish youth who "gets high, drops out of school, quits his job, meets God, hits the road, joins the Nutty and Zany Idiots party" and experiences a host of adventures that take him to Miami Beach and Bar Harbor, Maine.

HENRY is a fictional character, but Wachsberger said that the story is autobiographical.

Wachsberger, 38, was born in Detroit and raised in Cleveland. After graduating from high school in 1967, he attended Michigan State University for three years until a student strike movement occurred on campus in 1970 after the Kent State students-National Guardsmen incident.

"I came back for one more term (fall 1970) just to check my new feelings of something has to change vs. the old status quo of going back to school to see if the feelings were real," he said. "I realized they really were and that I didn't belong in school at that time."

"Since the strike was actively happening, there was more of a pull toward the activism... so at the end of the term I dropped out."

WHEN HE quit school, Wachsberger became active in the anti-war movement and worked in East Lansing's underground press on the Joint Issue newspaper from 1970 to 1973.

Then in 1973, he hit the road. He did a lot of hitchhiking around the country.

'I used to hitchhike from one counter-cultural community to another... Everyone was thumbing and there always was a nice place to crash.'

—Ken Wachsberger

"I used to hitchhike from one counter-cultural community to another," he said. "It was a nice way to travel. Everyone was thumbing and there always was a nice place to 'crash'... a lot of towns had actual crash pad files."

He also went from underground paper to underground paper. It was kind of a "brotherhood/sisterhood," he said.

WHEN HE traveled, Wachsberger didn't always have particular goals in mind. He wanted total freedom, but at some point he got carried away with it.

"For a while, there was the war and I was motivated by anything to stop the war," he said. "I traveled from anti-war rally to anti-war rally, but by the time the war ended, I was on the road."

"My whole lifestyle was 'on the road' and I found it really hard to settle anywhere."

When he finally did "settle" back in Lansing in 1977, he returned to MSU, met his wife, Emily, and obtained his bachelor's degree in 1978.

But then he "hit the road" with Emily, moving to Cleveland and Austin, Texas, before returning to MSU in 1981 and earning his master's degree in creative writing in 1984.

HE HAS worked as a graduate teaching assistant at MSU, as well as a part-time lecturer there and at Lansing Community College, and a free-lance writer, before joining the faculty of Eastern Michigan University last year as a full-time lecturer in the English language and literature department.

"Beercans on the Side of the Road" is a result of Wachsberger's recollections and writing while "on the road," although only one chapter — in which Henry dies and goes to heaven in a Vega — is an actual account of a Wachsberger "happening."

"At some point, I realized the book was being written... I've kept a journal for years. One day I sat down and wrote what I realized was the beginning of a book," he said.

"Then all of a sudden I started finding segments of my journal from years past that were good stories and thought they should be told to a wider audience than just the journal."

THE BOOK captures the spirit of the 1960s, said Wachsberger, who has a self-professed hippie background.

"Every reality is going to have its dark spots, but the spirit of the '60s was the spontaneity, also the relating to people," he said. "In the Reagan years, we're forgetting to relate to people."

"Everything's coming out the dollar sign. It's OK that people are hungry now so long as the stock market's going up."

During his travels, Wachsberger said he experienced people trying to come in touch with themselves, but not in a way that was "totally egotistical" — rather in a way that had them becoming aware of themselves in relation to other people.

"WE TALKED about getting rid of a lot of the negative 'isms' — racism, sexism, ageism," he said. "These all came into being in the '60s."

"We didn't achieve all the goals we wanted to, but a lot of us who were active then never lost the vision. Yes, I've still got the vision and I'll die with the vision and write about the vision and I don't want other people to forget it."

"And these people who missed the vision, maybe they can read the book and that's what they'll get out of it. Maybe they'll get the vision."

'Henry' is funny, 1960s-era story about alienation

"Beercans on the Side of the Road" is a 1960s-era study in alienation as well as a celebration of living one's fantasies.

It is a simple yet complex, and often hilarious, story about one youth's search for his karmic flow.

The story, a picturesque adventure, takes place in 1976. Vietnam is still part of the nation's consciousness. The book is written with the perspective and the humor that come from a Jewish kid who spent his politically formative years writing for the underground press and organizing with the Yippies in Miami Beach in 1972.

Henry (the Hitchhiker) Freedman is the hero of the story. Born in the middle-class Jewish suburbs at the tail end of the post-war baby boom, he missed the excitement and the turmoil that swept college campuses during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

He watched the war on TV, but only if he had his homework done. He wanted to become an activist, but the "Movement" was history by the time he graduated.

Henry was everybody's pride and joy. Academically, he rated near the top of his class and athletically, he earned his sweater. Drugs were used by the kids across the street, but never by Henry because he didn't want to ruin his record.

HE WAS popular, always a leader, and everyone expected great white-collar achievements from his future. If Henry had had his way, he would have quit school after graduation so he could spend all his time writing stories instead of studying subjects that didn't interest him. But he went to college straight out of high school because that was the next step up the ladder of success. And he was expected to climb high during his lifetime.

In "Beercans," Henry's life changes while taking a test ride from Lansing to Austin, Tex., in a car he is thinking of buying. Being in a strange environment, he can resort to free thinking for the first time in his life.

Henry was everybody's pride and joy. Academically, he rated near the top of his class and athletically, he earned his sweater.

As a result he gets high, drops out of school, quits his job, meets God, hits the road and joins the Nutty and Zany Idiots Party. He also tries to unionize mechanics at a car dealership in Austin (and fails when they discover he's a draft dodger), gets busted in Houston for hitchhiking and possession of marijuana and meets veterans of "the Movement." Eventually, he gets to Miami Beach and then travels to Bar Harbor, Maine.

The entire book, beginning with the third chapter, when Henry's alarm clock goes off, is a dream that doesn't end until he is hit by a car that he thinks should have killed him.

THE THEME of the book involves Henry's struggle to deal with the crucial issue facing kids whose parents are upwardly mobile and status conscious. "Whadarsygonnado, meaning 'what role will you select at an early age that will define your every action from that day until you die and that will be the headline on your obituary.'"

Read Baird, an American thought and language professor at Michigan State University, who wrote the foreword for "Beercans," believes the book is needed, so much so that he is using it as a textbook in his course, "America: Cultural Alternatives."

"America needs this book just as it once needed 'Look Homeward Angel' and 'On the Road,'" he said. "Beercans" is published by Azenphony Press of Ann Arbor and sells for \$8.95.

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