

## UMBC professor, author heeds call of the West

**Christopher Corbett enjoys exploring long stretches of U.S. 50 in Nevada in search of the authentic American West.**

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



To those who think U.S. 50 is primarily a road that spans Maryland's bucolic Eastern Shore, Christopher Corbett begs to differ.

Corbett, an award-winning journalist and author, spent countless hours traversing the dusty stretch of Old U.S. 50 that lies between Salt Lake City and Reno, Nev., while researching his two books, "Poker Bride" and "Orphans Preferred: The Story of The Pony Express."

Dubbed "The Loneliest Road in America" by Life Magazine in the 1980s, this remote stretch of highway is Corbett's favorite getaway destination, a place he believes is the best representation of the authentic American West.

Corbett is also a tenured professor at University of Maryland Baltimore County and teaches a class

titled "The American Road Trip," peppered with tales recounting his years on the road as an Associated Press journalist. Since 1995, Corbett has written The Back Page column for Baltimore's Style magazine.

### **Where is your favorite travel destination?**

There's no place like the American West. Central Nevada is the place I consider the true West. Many Easterners think Las Vegas is Nevada, but the majority of Nevada is this incredibly bleak, almost lunar landscape. Having grown up in a mill town in Maine, the West might as well be a different planet.

### **Where do you suggest visiting, exactly?**

If you really want to experience the West, drive old U.S. 50 from Salt Lake City to Reno. ... [I]t's a 650-mile, two-lane, godforsaken strip of asphalt that goes across bleak desert with hardly anything out there.

### **How did you discover it?**

I was on assignment for Associated Press and stumbled upon a former Pony Express station. It was one of those places that triggered the hundreds of John Wayne films that play forever in my head, eventually becoming the subject of one of my books.

### **It's 650 miles; how long does it take to drive?**

At least two days — more if you have the time, so you can appreciate how weird and spooky the true American West really is. It's not for everyone; this ain't Nantucket!

### **Is there any place to stop along the route?**

There's a funny little town called Eureka — a great name for a mining town, which it was. It has an old opera house that is right out of "Fitzcarraldo" [the fictional story of a man determined to build an opera house in the middle of a jungle].

This grand, crazy structure looks like it was dropped down out of 19th-century Europe. I also really like The Eureka Sentinel Museum, where the newspaper was published for 100 years. It's like being transported back to a time when [Mark] Twain was a journalist and makes you realize how much fun it must have been to work in the newspaper business 135 years ago. It's just a great old town with a dusty main street.

### **What else is in the town?**

One way to entertain yourself is to buy a local newspaper — there's no better way to take the pulse of a town. I love to walk in the cemetery reading the headstones; there's someone from everywhere in the world buried there. These "mining bowls" were unbelievable in the people they would bring into these places.

### **What's the landscape like along the drive?**

This part of Route 50 follows the Overland Trail (a 19th-century stagecoach trail) and the Pony Express route over incredible deserts. The countryside just hasn't changed much since the mid-1800s. You can see enormous distances — the road in some spots is so straight that your eye almost can't comprehend the distance you are taking in. It just melts into the horizon. You're so far out in the middle of nowhere,

you can't get anything on the radio; the dial just keeps spinning around.

There are also some significant altitudes; some of these passes are 7,000-8,000 feet. It's so dry that everything has been preserved so perfectly. I saw a sign that said "No Gas, No Water, 100 miles." People are constantly amazed that the Pony Express stations are in pretty good shape considering no one has maintained them in 150 years.

### **Does anyone live out there?**

You can drive a long way before you see another soul. There are "Open Range" signs along the road, and you see a lot of wild game — coyotes and antelope. People live on ranches that are sometimes hours from the main road, and even further to anything resembling civilization. They're quite taciturn, if you know what I mean. But I find it all very charming.

And then there's a town called Fallon, closer to Reno. I stopped there one afternoon and watched a mom-and-pop rodeo. I like a rodeo if it's not commercial, just a lot of calves and kids racing around having a good time.

### **Any interesting memories?**

I was driving down the road and noticed a town up ahead. I could see some buildings that were about 30 miles out and I thought it might be a good place to have a cool drink. When we got there, it was all boarded up, had been for many years, and there was no one around. There are a lot of ghost towns like that out there. It's so remote, there's no one around to vandalize these places. Another good place to stop about halfway across the state is Austin, Nev., an old gold-boom town. The buildings are like an old Charles Addams [of Addams Family fame] drawing with spooky-looking 19th-century mansions. I like to eat at The International; just bar food or breakfast.

### **Where do you stay?**

I like odd spots. There's a great hotel near the Utah state line in Ely called The Hotel Nevada. It's a little seedy, and has things like an exhibition of stuffed rattlesnakes in the lobby, and brands of all the local cattleman's associations on the wall. In the restaurant you can have a chicken-fried steak. In Eureka I stay at the Jackson House hotel. A couple of doors down is the Keyhole Bar, a real Western bar without trying to be one.

### **So who would enjoy this type of trip?**

There's not a lot of people who are going to jump in the car to do this. You've got to want to see something that's genuine.

### **What is the one item you will not travel without?**

My DeLorme. It's a handheld GPS that delivers apertures of grid maps combined with satellite communications.

### **Can you describe your favorite travel bag?**

I have an old LL Bean canvas tote with a leather bottom; it's older than my 25-year-old daughter. It's been everywhere with me: down the Green River in Utah, to Labrador in Canada.

**What do you like to read?**

Wallace Stegner's essays; he's done some lovely writing about the American West. There's also a lot of hilarious British travel writing from the 19th century.

**What's next on your travel bucket list?**

I'd like to get back to Oaxaca in the south of Mexico. It's high-desert country there, too, and an old colonial city. I'm practicing my Spanish a lot.

—*Stephanie Citron*

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