

96 and Not Dead Yet: Johnny Carson Did It

by [Reg Green](#) (June 2025)



Hitchhiking, an austere dictionary puts it, “is a means of transportation that is gained by asking individuals, usually strangers, for a ride in their car or other vehicle. The ride is usually, but not always, free.””

The subject came to mind this week when I read an old *New Yorker* article on Johnny Carson, the epitome of mid-West respectability who, it turns out, first saw Hollywood by

hitching there from home.

Of all the changes that have occurred since my salad days, the demise of hitchhiking is for me the most memorable sign of the decline in trust between strangers. In those days, a few years after World War II, few college-age kids could afford long-distance travel. To hitchhike, however, all you needed was an energetic thumb and a rough idea of where you wanted to get to. To go first class, having a girl with you was useful. In shorts.

I went all over Western Europe (the Eastern half being still in the joyless grip of the Soviets, under whom no one trusted anyone) mostly alone, traveling on any vehicle that offered itself. Generally the rides were either in comfortable sedans with businessmen or trucks going long distances. Both kinds of drivers liked having someone to chat with.

Some were going far enough to cross national frontiers but I'd take any broken-down jalopy that looked as though it could get through the next few miles. Once a hearse picked me up and my bright redshirt in the seat next to the driver in his black suit must have made by-passers question the sincerity of the mourners.

I had one long ride in France with the lion tamer of a traveling circus, his sad-looking pet in a cage on wheels pulled along behind. I often traveled overnight, the competition being less and, once, dropped off in the middle of nowhere, slept in a dry ditch by the side of the road with traffic thundering by all night a few feet away.

One night I got a lift from northern England to Scotland in a truck with a driver who in his spare time was the assistant hangman for Manchester. (As I said, this was a very long time ago.) I believed his tales implicitly and took care not to disagree with him in any way but, since then, have realized

they were probably just some of the fantasies drivers tell themselves that make a lifetime of solitary overnight journeys bearable.

I remember fondly setting out in the north of France for faraway Spain, when a truck driver stopped and said he was going to Andorra. Andorra! The little country hundreds of miles away on the border of Spain. "When will we be there?" I asked, as I scrambled aboard. "I'm driving overnight so it will be in the morning.' Wonderful! That would be like adding a whole day to my vacation.

"That's quick," I said. "Yes, Andorra is playing tomorrow," he replied. "Oh, well, you can't miss that," I said, knowing Spain's passion for soccer. "Right," he agreed. "I'm Andorra's goalkeeper."

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Reg Green is an economics journalist who was born in England and worked for the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Times of London*. He emigrated to the US in 1970. His books include *The Nicholas Effect* and his website is nicholasgreen.org.

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