

A WALK ACROSS AMERICA
By Don Vermilyea



POWER, THE LAW AND HOMELESSNESS

Over the past nineteen months and 7,000 miles, I've had many encounters with law enforcement officials. Considering the huge majority have been stops to check me out, I'm pleased most have ended up on a positive note.

Sometimes I'm stopped for breaking the law. Walking the freeway or interstate highway right-of-way in most states is illegal. I don't do this for fun or to get into trouble, but many times in the Western U.S. the freeway replaced the old highway. If I'm in a populated area there are viable different routes, but out in the boonies the alternatives are mostly slim and none. I think most officials know this and pass me by, although some strictly enforce the law and investigate. I produce my I.D. when asked, am told to leave the right of way or be arrested, and comply with their requests.

Thirteen months ago I wrote my President on official church stationery about my problem walking the major highways in the U.S.A. I explained I was working like he's asked Americans to do. That is, volunteer and help others. Apparently volunteering 168 hours a week isn't enough if one is a homeless person, as I haven't heard from him or his aides. It's disappointing there hasn't been a reply, even a negative one.

Most of the time I'm stopped there are no laws being broken. I believe I'm stopped because of profiling. Although I'm a white mature male, which is usually a freedom ticket in my country, I believe I'm stopped because I look homeless. You know, the large backpack, the unkept look, the stumbling around because my pack is very heavy, and the miles are never ending.

I am homeless so I look the way I look, but I'm not a threat to anyone except maybe some Sundays while sharing from a church pul-



pit. Some in the pews don't want to hear the truth and maybe they feel uneasy hearing that message.

When I'm stopped for reasons other than breaking the law I'm not so quick to produce my I.D.. In this country we pride ourselves on our freedoms. One of those freedoms is the freedom to be black, tan, yellow, red, wear a turban on our head, or look homeless, whatever that looks like. I know there are criminals hiding in the above groups, but there were white guys in 3 piece suits running Enron Corporation who were criminals, too. Maybe we should start profiling every man and woman in America in a power suit and I.D. them, or every cop in a uniform cause some are prone to criminal acts. I don't think this would be good for our country. I know it doesn't feel good to be profiled because I look homeless.

Walking in Limon, Colorado, about 75 miles east of Denver, I was minding my own business, having legally walked in on U.S. highway 24 from the west. I was on my way to a nice couple's home in town who agreed to put me up that night. I was walking on the left side of the road facing traffic off the traveled road surface thinking how blessed I was to have a safe place to sleep, get some good food, a shower, and have

some friendly conversation.

For about the hundredth time I was stopped by a law enforcement official. This time it was Officer Fred Wyler of the Limon, Colorado Police Department. He and I were friendly enough. That is no chips on our shoulders. He wanted to see I.D. and I asked with all due respect what I'd done wrong or illegal and his reply was nothing, we I.D. everyone new to town.

I knew that was a bunch of bunk. It would have been closer to the truth if he'd said we check everyone out new to town who looks homeless, unkept, or in some other way dangerous to the community.

I explained what I was doing (walking for the Lord), where I was going (a mile down the road to a family home), how I'd be out of town the next morning at 5:30 so I could be at a church in Arriba, Colorado that night. I also explained how this wasn't Nazi Germany, or the old Soviet Union, or some dictatorship like Iraq where the officials could do whatever they wanted to the citizens. He didn't want to hear how our freedoms go away when we give in to official tactics like this.

He didn't want to hear any of it, or know the walk website address.

He wanted my I.D. and explained his post-9/11 security in America tightening policy which I listened to carefully and understood, but I said I'm not doing anything wrong and I'm a good upstanding citizen of the U.S.A. with no warrants or anything else chasing me around.

After about 5 minutes of sharing our reasons he told me there was someone reported fitting my description at the R.R. tracks. He was investigating that incident, and wanted to know if I'd been down there. I said no and no one on the entire walk has looked like me with such a huge backpack and I hadn't seen anyone near the tracks as I walked by. I suspected this was probably more bunk so he could have his way with me.

I told him he could come up with any story he wanted to make an investigation so he could I.D. me, but I'd done absolutely nothing wrong so the answer still was no.

He asked me many times what I was hiding and my answer was a polite nothing. I'm a solid citizen of the U.S., hiding nothing.

Finally he told me to take my pack off, which I did because I figured I was being arrested, and then, for the first and only time of this entire walk something happened.

No one, except for hugs and handshakes, had ever put their hands on me. He led me to his cruiser a few feet away, took my right arm and pinned it behind my back, asked if I had weapons, frisked me, found my wallet, took my I.D. out, got his information, gave me my wallet and I.D. back, and again told me we I.D. everyone new to town.

I believe if I'd told him to get his hands off me or had physically resisted him the situation would have turned real ugly in a flash.

It was obvious to me he used his power and had his way with me.

[Continued on page 10...]