

## BLUE HIGHWAYS: TOURING ROADS LESS TRAVELED

By J. B. Leftwich

About two decades ago, William Least Heat Moon, author and sometimes college teacher, wrote an account of his adventures in exploring this country and titled his book, *Blue Highways*.

The writer, whose name, in part, is derived from his Native American heritage, explored the USA, while avoiding interstate and federal roads. His adventures were along state and county routes – the highways printed in blue ink on road maps. This selection of roads brought him to villages with quaint names, including Nameless, Tenn.

Recently, with my son, Jim, we disdained I-40 to drive along U. S. 70, and ultimately along blue highways, to visit cemeteries where our ancestors are buried.

U. S. 70 is not a blue highway, but it is a road less traveled and more scenic than I-40. This does not imply I-40 is not scenic. The segment from Lebanon eastward is one of the most beautiful drives in the interstate system. But U. S. 70 is prettier.

Except for interstate businesses, I-40 in our region is sterile, a mosaic of rural scenes and a taskmaster that demands concentration. 70 is alive, vibrant, teeming with action and saturated with history. Driving along 70 from Lebanon to Cookeville, you are on the Old Walton Road, named for William Walton who was a pioneer investor and landowner in Smith County.

Walton deeded 50 acres of land to the founders of Carthage in exchange for \$1.00. The founders, also known as commissioners, sold lots and used the proceeds for public buildings. Carthage is wont to boast that by 1906 the town had the largest and “most elegant” brick courthouse in the state.

Carthage is located on the Cumberland River at a site where William Walton operated Walton’s Ferry. Early settlers shipped their products on flatboats and keelboats and later on steamboats from Carthage and Rome, only a few miles apart. The two towns thrived.

As the years rolled by, Carthage produced historical and political figures, some of international significance, including the two Al Gores, Tennessee governors Benton McMillin and William Bowen Campbell, and Civil Service Commissioner Lucile Foster McMillen who served in 1933.

Perhaps the Carthage resident with the greatest international impact was Cordell Hull, U. S. secretary of state immediately before and during World War II.

The Old Walton Road took us through Rome where a ferry on the Cumberland operated until 1996 and where Romans once competed with Carthaginians for river trade, and on to blue highways that routed us through rural Putnam and Smith counties.

We drove along roads once dotted with farmhouses but now largely marked by suburban type structures, all with well-kept lawns and most with satellite dishes.

And thence to the Odd Fellows cemetery in Baxter, a municipality formerly most noted for Baxter Seminary, a Methodist high school attended by county students and funded in part by Putnam County. The church-state alliance for many years saved Putnam the expense of building another high school. Now, Baxter's Upperman High School has one of most modern plants in the state.

For 35 years, Harry L. Upperman served as its president and the town's ambassador. He was Baxter's most famous citizen. Maybe. Charlie Hughes who, for generations, climbed his flagpole at 4:30 each morning and from a small platform sounded reveille on his bugle challenged him for this honor. Charlie's fame spread when Robert Ripley told his story in "Believe It or Not."

And thence to Smellage Cemetery near Boma where family members are buried in one of the most tranquil sites along our route.

And thence to the Maddux Cemetery in Buffalo Valley where even more ancient forefathers lie at rest on a gentle slope near Indian Creek.

Sunshine faded as heavy clouds moved in and the rains came with drought-breaking dimensions, drowning conversation in our pickup truck cab and aborting our visit with dead relatives. The rain buoyed us until we reached Wilson County and discovered the god of rainfall, knowing precisely the path of the county line, had stopped the storm.

Unlike William Least Heat Moon, we did not navigate the outer reaches of our nation, but for a short interval we had our own adventures on Blue Highways and roads less traveled.

(J.B. Leftwich is a veteran journalist and a columnist for *The Lebanon Democrat*.  
Email: [leftwichjb@charter.net](mailto:leftwichjb@charter.net))

<http://www.ajlambert.com>



J. B. Leftwich & his wife Jo Doris  
Picture courtesy of J. B. Leftwich