

OUT OF THE BLUE

By SCOTT WALLACE

RUMOR AND GOSSIP invariably are served up as staples in the conversational diet of any community. In Columbia, Mizou alumnus Bill Trogdon, now known nationally as William Least Heat Moon, is finding success has made him the subject of even larger, more grandiose tales.

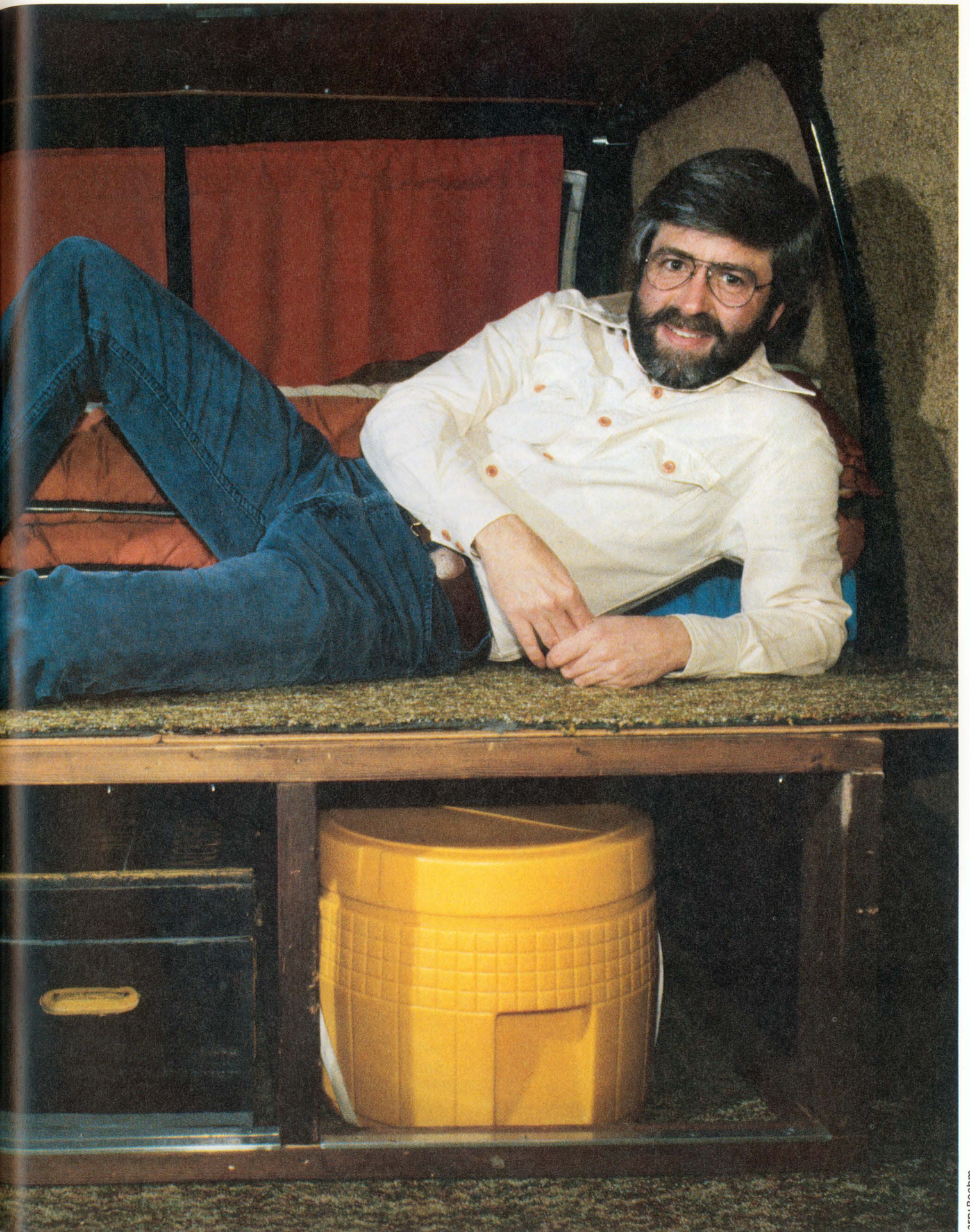
The wild stories began to reach Trogdon after his first book, *Blue Highways*, gained national acclaim. The book, which Trogdon wrote under his Indian name, has sold nearly 150,000 copies and has hovered in the middle of the *New York Times* best-seller list since its release in January.

Trogdon has been featured on "The David Letterman Show," "CBS Morning News," PBS's "Late Night," Larry King's "Coast to Coast" and in *People* magazine. A chapter excerpt is in the June 1983 issue of *Reader's Digest*.

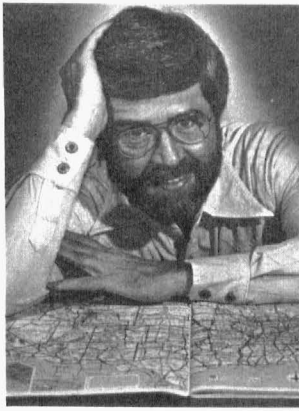
Blue Highways has been reviewed in nearly every major newspaper, news and literary magazine. Although *The New Yorker's* John Updike was less than enchanted by the "thousands of miles and hundreds of incidents, conversations and pieces of scenery," most were. Updike

Trogdon named his van *Ghost Dancing* after the Plains Indians ceremony for the return of the old life.





Larry Boehm



Along America's backroads, Trogdon heard the echoes of another era, a past virtually ignored by today's fast-moving, mainstream society.

wonders about Heat Moon's "Indianness" and says the book fails "to pull the worlds of detail toward some gravitational center." On the other hand, Michael Parfit wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Heat Moon is unburdened by philosophical baggage, so all his energy goes into making the moment live." In the *Wall Street Journal*, Edmund Fuller hailed the work "outstanding Americana, which I rank above the next best thing preceding it in the genre, John Steinbeck's *Travels With Charley*." *The Chicago Sun Times'* Norbert Blei credits Trogdon with "an exactness of prose heightening certain moments into poetry." Featured on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, the book was reviewed by Noel Perrin, who concluded, "Maybe twice a year I read a book I wish were even longer. This is one."

Curious about the financial implications of his success, some Columbians started making their own calculations as to what it all meant for Trogdon. Soon the stories got around. Trogdon has ordered a new Rolls Royce. The Trogdons are giving their house to charity. Trogdon is driving a shiny, red Corvette.

"It's incredible," Trogdon smiles and shakes his head. "I have no use for cars other than as a means of transportation. I have a red Honda, but I don't know how it became a Corvette."

There was a time when everything, including the gossip, was a good deal worse for Trogdon. By the time he set out on his three-month, 14,000-mile journey around the United States in the spring of 1978, Trogdon had acquired a reputation for failure. He had lost his teaching job at Stephens College. His wife had left him. He lacked direction. So nobody thought much of it when Bill Trogdon packed up his Ford van and left town. It would only be another road to nowhere.

"I knew I had to go through with the trip," Trogdon says. "I knew if I turned around and came back that they would have thought I couldn't do anything I set out to do. I wouldn't have been able to face them."

TROGDON was not aiming to write a book. He hoped that the journey would somehow change his life. He wanted it to be an exploration of America's hinterlands and a time for self-reflection. He decided to stick to the backroads—the ones marked in blue on the old road maps—and to document his experiences and the peo-

ple he met in writing and on film.

In this way the journey would test Trogdon's abilities as a reporter and photographer, two professions which he had dimly considered pursuing at one time or another. Trogdon came to the University in 1957 from Kansas City with the idea of studying journalism. But he later turned away from journalism, a discipline in which he saw the subtle uses of language subordinated to the sterile packaging of "facts." Trogdon went on to study English literature and eventually earned his doctorate from the University in 1973.

But after teaching English at the University and Stephens for several years, Trogdon felt burned out. He felt he was simply doing time, going through the motions.

He returned to the School of Journalism in 1976 to study photography. Only months before he set out on his journey around the United States, Trogdon received his fourth degree from UMC—a BJ in photojournalism.

But while the journey offered Trogdon the chance to sharpen his reporting and photographic skills, it was primarily a time for self-questioning. Trogdon had been heir to two separate bloodlines and traditions—Anglo and Indian. Trogdon slowly discovered, as he guided his van along the twisting two-lane roads of rural America, that for years he had submerged the Indian part of his identity. He located in his Indian heritage a spiritual dimension that had all but disappeared from his life. He came to believe that years of trying to live by the institutional standards of modern society had rendered him a spiritual cripple, an isolated individual with little sense of purpose.

He remembered his youth: long discussions with his father about the past and a disappearing way of life; the teachings of John Niehardt, whose *Cycle of the West* course Trogdon had taken 20 years earlier at the University. Niehardt had written several books giving testimony to the anguish of the Indian people whose culture faced extinction.

Trogdon had taken along with him one of Niehardt's works, *Black Elk Speaks*, which documents the visions of a Sioux medicine man. Trogdon says that, in the course of his journey, Niehardt's teachings exerted themselves with increasing force.

"His words had remained buried some shadowy way in my consciousness," Trogdon says. "They lay fallow there for

two decades and then they started coming back again with renewed vigor and importance."

Trogdon also brought with him Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman and Black Elk provided contrasting views of 19th-century America. Whitman glorified the advance of industry and democracy and rejoiced in the beauty of pastoral America. Black Elk lamented the destruction of tribal life and the partitioning of the land by the white man.

IN REACHING deep into the heart of rural America, Trogdon had the sense of penetrating into a previous epoch virtually forgotten by mainstream society. He discovered people along the backroads who still maintained a close connection to their ancestry and to the land from which they had come. Trogdon returned to Columbia with a renewed sense of purpose. He decided that he would write a book about his experiences and the people he had met along the blue highways.

He worked nights on the loading docks of the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, while he wrote during the day. He learned to survive on a salary of \$2,000 a year. For four years Trogdon labored on the manuscript, submitting it to nine publishers and making extensive revisions each time it was rejected. He began to think that it never would be published in his lifetime.

"I thought, maybe someone a hundred years from now would find it stashed in an attic and say, 'so that's what it was like back then.'"

Finally, almost four years to the day Trogdon left on the trip, Atlantic-Little-Brown informed him that it had accepted the manuscript.

"It was a tremendous relief," Trogdon recalls. "You know, tears came to my eyes. I couldn't believe it. The journey was finally over."

Today, the 43-year-old Trogdon, dressed in blue jeans and flannel shirt, looks more like a model off the pages of the L.L. Bean catalog than one of the hot new literary talents.

Trogdon says that, despite speculation, his life is not going to change much as a result of the success of *Blue Highways*. He attributes his appreciation for the simple life to his lean years at the *Tribune*.

"I had to reduce down to the absolute basics," Trogdon says. "I'm not at all interested in cluttering my life with material things and everything else that 'success' is

supposed to bring."

But Trogdon concedes that, at the very least, he no longer has to worry about resorting to menial labor as a source of income. He hopes this will free him to concentrate exclusively on writing. He says he also looks forward to traveling with his wife, Linda, whom he married during the writing of the book.

So—everything seems to be going Bill Trogdon's way these days. Nevertheless, Trogdon wishes he had set out on his own years before instead of waiting until he was driven by desperation.

Trogdon recommends that every college student take a similar trip, either before or shortly after graduation. Further, he suggests that universities offer a Travel 101 course requiring students to explore new and unfamiliar environments. The students should then write detailed reports about their experiences.

"The reporting of it is most important," Trogdon says, "because it's in the reporting that your ideas coalesce and begin to clarify."

Trogdon says his most valuable educational experiences came outside the classroom. He believes he learned the most from two of his senior colleagues in the English department at Stephens College, Jack LaZebnik and Andrew Jolly, also published writers. The three would hold frequent "seminars" in the old Daniel Boone Hotel, topics ranging from literature to women to geology.

While those days have long since passed, Trogdon keeps in close contact with LaZebnik, whom he regards as his best friend and staunchest ally. LaZebnik, who has known Trogdon for 15 years, served as a kind of "preliminary editor" in the preparation of the manuscript. He believes Trogdon's thoroughness in writing and rewriting the manuscript is largely responsible for the success of *Blue Highways*.

DR. WILLIAM PEDEN, professor emeritus of English at Mizzou, is delighted with the book's success. Peden says Trogdon came to see him with the manuscripts and photographs in the winter of 1982. "I told him he should send it off to some of the better publishers and see what happens," Peden recalls. "I was very happy and, quite honestly, amazed by the way the book has taken off. It makes you happy to be part of the University and have such people around." □



Trogdon hasn't decided which name to use on his second book, but the success of *Blue Highways* may leave him without a choice.