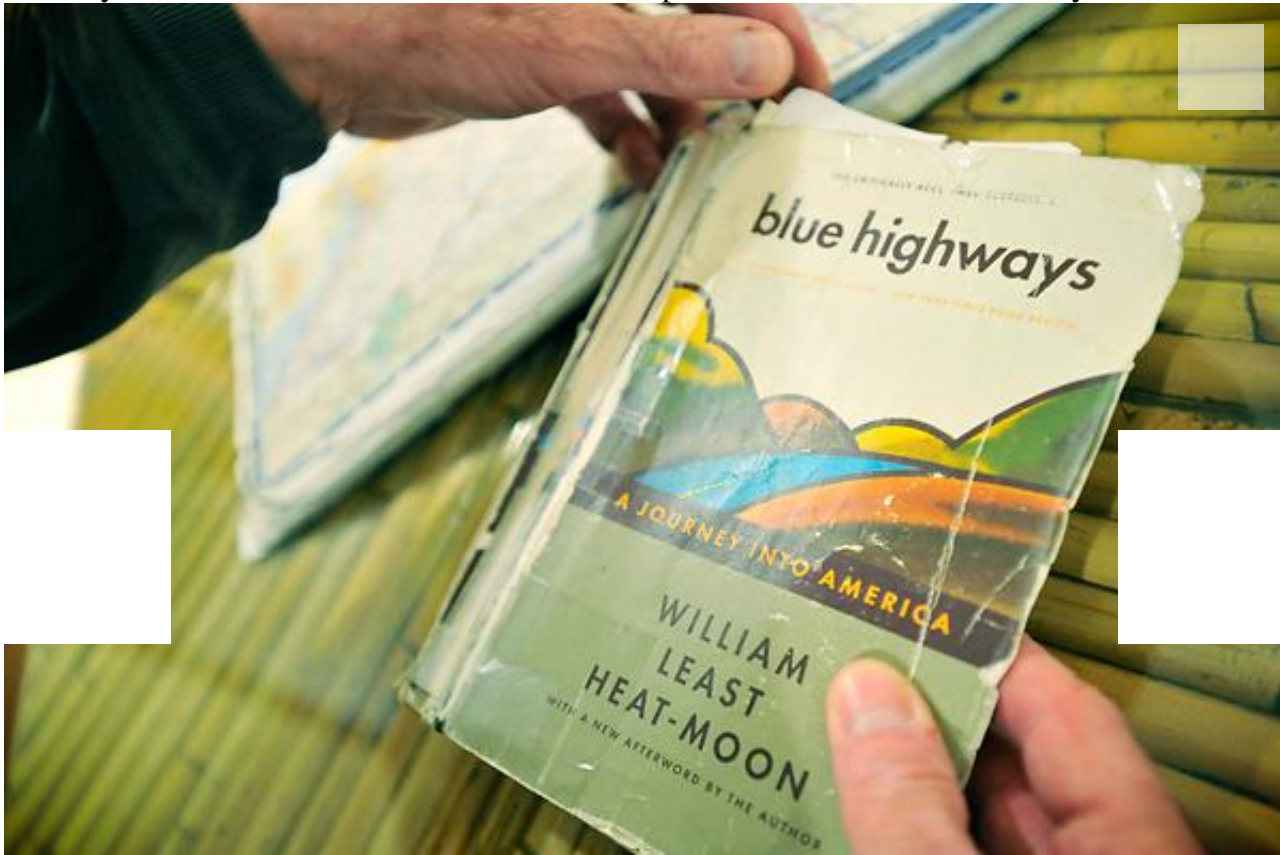


# Thirty years later, photographer revisits 'Blue Highways'

Monday, November 12, 2012 | 6:00 a.m. CST; updated 7:11 a.m. CST, Monday, November 12, 2012



Ed Ailor III holds a copy of William Least Heat-Moon's "Blue Highways" in his home Nov. 5. Ailor and his son chronicled the trip photographically. Separately and together they drove the same journey of 14,000 miles that Moon traveled. | Stuart Palley

Ed Ailor III and his son worked together to travel almost 14,000 miles to capture the "Blue Highways" in photographs.

BY [Jennifer Liu](#)

COLUMBIA — When Ed Ailor III embarked on a cross-country route outlining the edges of the nation and up into Canada, he didn't rely on a GPS to find his way.

He hit the road with an atlas, several gazetteers and a worn copy of William Least Heat-Moon's "Blue Highways."

Ailor, 65, was on a mission to retrace and photograph the nearly 14,000-mile journey along the back roads of 38 states Heat-Moon described in his book.

Nearly 30 years after the original trip, Ailor loaded up his [Baja tan Sportsmobile](#) in October of 2006 and backed out of his driveway.

By August 2008, he had checked off his last location and captured an estimated 10,000 photographs.

His collection of photos and text, along with some taken with his son during several segments of the trip, was published in May by the University of Missouri Press in "Blue Highways Revisited."

The publication coincides with the recent release of the 30th anniversary edition of Heat-Moon's book. Ailor will give a presentation about his quest at 7 p.m. Monday in the Friends Room at the Columbia Public Library.

### **Revisiting a part of history**

The very beginning of Ailor's journey goes back to the Christmas 1982. That's when he received a hardback copy of Heat-Moon's "Blue Highways," which would guide him along the nation's back roads decades later.

"The thought of getting in a van and hitting the back roads of America just to see what you could find really captured my imagination," he said. "I thought to myself, 'Someday I'm going to make this trip.'"

Shortly after reading through the book, Ailor met Heat-Moon, and the two struck up a friendship. It wasn't until spring of 2006 that he consulted the author about the adventure over coffee at Addison's in downtown Columbia.

Heat-Moon was glad his friend had taken an interest in the roads he had traveled and offered guidance for the return visits.

By the end of his travels, Ailor said he had read the book at least 20 times and was able to easily find the scenes he had envisioned for decades.

"He (Heat-Moon) is so descriptive that, time and time again, you'd be going down the road and find the exact spot he was writing about," he said. "Backroads America just hasn't changed as much as the cities."

Ailor's first destinations included Louisiana and Alabama, as far as the South Carolina border. He would eventually break the trip into 13 segments and spend two or three weeks on the road at a time.

The longest he spent on the route at one point was 29 consecutive days. He started in Minnesota and moved eastward into Ontario and parts of New England, then worked his way through the Midwest back to Columbia.

After each segment, he would return home and consult with Heat-Moon about the development and editing of the project.

"He probably used about a gallon of red ink going through it," Ailor said. "But editing with him made me a much better writer, and it was fun working with him on that process."

More than a new-found knack for writing, Ailor attributes a much bigger lesson to his experience on America's highways.

"What I came away with was an appreciation for not only the beauty of our country landscape-wise but also

of the people," he said. "It's truly a wonderful place to live."

### **Traveling in numbers**

When Ailor decided to start the project, he wanted to share the experience with another photographer in the family. He called his son, Ed Ailor IV, 35, who was living in North Carolina.

"When he first told me about the project, I didn't grasp how big an undertaking this would be," his son said.

Though Ailor IV had read the book in high school, he had to brush up on some of the passages in order to realize the expanse of the trip and the routes he would take.

"By the time I looked at a road atlas and kind of retraced the journey, my dad had plotted it out completely on a map of the United States," he said. "When we got together, it was daunting to look at. We were going to travel the entire country."

After months of preparation, he was fully on board with the endeavor.

"There was a lot of planning and a lot of excitement," he said. "I'm sure I hit the road as soon as I could, and that's when the real fun began."

Because he wasn't able to join his father for the entire cross-country adventure, he spent two-week segments photographing scenes from New York to Georgia. He ended up spending a cumulative eight weeks on the road.

"Even when we weren't together, we were in communication and together certainly in spirit," he said. "It was very much a group project and was fun for both of us."

During some parts of the project, the father and son duo would be able to meet up and travel the highways together. They ended up spending about two weeks together to photograph sections of the route through New York and North Carolina.

This time spent together, he said, helped him bond with his father through the view of a camera lens.

"What was so fun photographing together was just to see his perspective," he said. "We had the exact same ideas in mind to photograph. But to go out together, photograph the same exact thing as like-minded individuals with the exact same cameras and to see the different perspectives — that was interesting."

### **Familiar places and faces**

In Heat-Moon's original book, he includes anecdotes from 37 individuals he encountered on the road. Ailor's greatest undertaking was locating 11 of the characters still living three decades later.

One was Laurie Chealander from Frenchman, Nev. When Heat-Moon met her, she was one of only four people living in the town, all in the same family.

With the convenience of the Web, Ailor discovered eight people listed under that name in the country.

He ended up mailing each one a letter explaining his project, hoping to reach the correct Laurie and include an update about her life. A week after sending the letter, he received a response.

The cafe-bar-motel-gas station-home, as described in the original book, had been removed by the U.S. Navy after it purchased the property in 1986. The Chealanders had moved to Fallon, Nev.

Finding Bob Andriot, 68, wasn't as difficult. He was right where he lived three decades ago in Shelbyville, Ky.

In November 2006, Ailor was driving through Shelbyville and found his way into [W. J. Andriot's Paint, Wallpaper, Blinds Store](#). Inside, he discovered a cafe with a familiar name.

"He had no idea that we had named our coffee bar 'Blue Highways Cafe,'" Andriot said. "So that's how the conversation got started."

Andriot recalled Heat-Moon's original visit and even had a copy of "Blue Highways" on display in his store. Ailor's visit was welcomed as a chance to share his experiences over the last 30 years and show how the original publication changed his life.

Sharing stories such as Andriot's is one of the reasons Ailor continues to work on new photography projects.

"I think so much of the American story is written from the past, and it represents so much about what has happened in our lives," he said.

### **The back story includes a medical career**

Ailor's first exposure to photography came from working on his high school's yearbook staff. He received a camera of his own as a high school graduation present.

"I can remember vividly sending off my pictures and getting back color slides. And then I began to dream in color. So I fell in love with photography early," he said.

He pursued a career in medicine as an [otolaryngologist](#), an ear, nose and throat physician. Throughout his practice, he continued to develop a passion for photography.

He retired in February 2005 and now spends his time pursuing long-range projects and fostering [Ailor Fine Art Photography](#).

"When I retired in 2005, the seed that was planted in '83 began to creep back into my mind," he said.

His son said he hopes to embark on more travel projects.

"I got to experience a part of America that I could have gone my entire life without seeing," he said. "It's been amazing to be a part of this project. I would certainly love to travel the route that I haven't seen with my dad and own son."