

Why Not The Worst?

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By Gene Weingarten

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My little puddle jumper begins its descent into Elko, a charmless city of 20,000 in the northern Nevada desert. Eighteen seats, all filled. This is not because Elko is a hot tourist attraction; it is because almost everyone else onboard belongs to a mariachi band. These guys have identical shiny blue suits and shiny blue shirts and shiny blue ties and shiny blue-black hair, like Rex Morgan in the comics, and they seem embarrassed to have accepted a gig in a place as tacky as Elko.

Compared with my final destination, Elko is Florence during the Italian Renaissance.

When I tell the Elko rental car agent where I am headed, she laughs. Elkonians, who proudly sponsor a yearly civic event called the "Man-Mule Race," consider their neighbor 70 miles west to be an absolute clodhopper riot.

"Don't sneeze," snorts the rental car woman, "or you'll miss it."

Yeah, I know. I went to Battle Mountain five weeks before, to see if it was dreadful enough to be anointed, officially, "The Armpit of America." I was exorbitantly convinced.

That first visit was in late August. This second one is in early October. In the interim, Everything Changed. With the nation united in mourning and at war, with the Stars and Stripes aflutter in places large and small, slick and hicky, the idea of poking fun at any one part of us became a great deal less funny. The zeitgeist had shifted. Snide was out.

I had to go back, to rethink things.

The road to Battle Mountain is flatter than any cliché -- even pancakes have a certain doughy topology. On this route, there is nothing. No curves. No trees. It is desert, but it is lacking any desert-type beauty. No cacti. No tumbleweeds. None of those spooky cow skulls. The only flora consists of nondescript scrub that resembles acre upon acre of toilet brushes buried to the hilt.

You know you have arrived at Battle Mountain because the town has marked its identity on a nearby hill in enormous letters fashioned from whitewashed rock.

I have returned to this place to find in it not America's armpit, but America's heart. I am here to mine the good in it, to tell the world that Battle Mountain doesn't stink. That is my new challenge.

I hang a right off the highway at the base of the hill, which proudly proclaims, in giant letters:

BM

Man. This is not going to be easy.

Take a small town, remove any trace of history, character, or charm. Allow nothing with any redeeming qualities within city limits -- this includes food, motel beds, service personnel. Then place this pathetic assemblage of ghastly buildings and nasty people on a freeway in the midst of a harsh, uninviting wilderness, far enough from the nearest city to be inconvenient, but not so far for it to develop a character of its own. You now have created Battle Mountain, Nevada.

The letter was signed by Seattle resident Peter Hartikka, one of 220 people who mailed in their nominations for the nation's foulest place. I had invited these letters in my humor column after discovering on the Web a dismayingly indiscriminate use of the term "Armpit of America." Hundreds of people were describing dozens of locations they happened to dislike. It seemed an unacceptable anarchy of scorn.

The nominations were, literally, all over the map. There were predictable urban cesspools (East St. Louis, Ill.; Elizabeth, N.J.). There were places of idiotic purpose (Branson, Mo.; Las Vegas, Nev.). There were places of legendary lack of class (Buffalo, N.Y.; Fargo, N.D.).

The winnowing proved easy. Several nominees bit the dust because they are proximate to someplace immeasurably better. Gary, Ind., and Camden, N.J., two of the nation's least appealing locales, won reprieves because of their nearness to Chicago and Philadelphia. The armpit must smother. It can permit no escape.

Likewise, many promising candidates succumbed to personal knowledge or basic research. Terre Haute, Ind., a bland and sullen city popular with the KKK, offers too many cultural opportunities to make the cut. Wilkes-Barre, Pa., may be awful, but next-door neighbor Scranton is awfuller, and Scranton has a certain likable pugnacity that comes from knowing you are famously crummy and not giving two hoots. The otherwise leprous Bridgeport, Conn., was spared because it produced my wife. (The winnowing was not entirely without bias.)

Butte, Mont., may have surrendered its soul and much of its natural beauty to rapacious mining interests, and its citizenry may be congenitally inhospitable, and the city may resemble a suppurating chancre sore and smell like the sulfurous Stygian River of Woe, but . . . actually, there is no but about Butte. Research confirmed its foulness and it might well have become The Armpit had it not been blown out by the competition.

There is a maxim in journalism that some stories are just too good to check out. What that means is that the juiciest of tips, when subjected to research, tend to desiccate and crumble. I feared this with Battle Mountain, but after two days of research, I was ablubber in juice.

The town began as a lie. Prospector George Tannihill christened it in 1866 as a mining district, saying he chose the name to commemorate the fierce battle he and 23 settlers led by a Capt. Pierson had heroically won against marauding Indians there in 1857. Nevada historians have since poked a few holes in this story: There

appears never to have been a Capt. Pierson, or 23 settlers, or any attacking Indians, or a battle, or pioneer heroism, or, for that matter, a mountain. (There does appear to have been a year "1857.")

According to David Toll's *The Complete Nevada Traveler*, the Battle Mountain area has two famous alumni. The first was W.J. Forbes, the Mencken of the Southwest. His was a brilliant if quixotic journalistic march across California, Nevada and Utah, culminating in the creation of a Battle Mountain newspaper named *Measure for Measure* in 1873. Unfortunately, it was designed to appeal to people who liked to read and knew how to think. When it failed, Forbes spiraled into depression and drink. As summarized half a century later by Carson City journalist Sam Davis: "A friend found [Forbes] stiff and cold across his shabby bed. He had fought a fight against all odds all his life, was one of the brightest geniuses the coast had ever seen, but he . . . lived in communities where his mental brightness was more envied than appreciated."

Battle Mountain, where genius comes to die.

But no Battle Mountaineer past or present reached the level of fame attained by Civil War Gen. James H. Ledlie, who retired to the area after the war, and even has a railroad siding named after him. Ledlie's name actually found its way onto the lips of a president of the United States, and in a startling superlative. Ulysses S. Grant himself called Gen. Ledlie "the greatest coward of the Civil War."

A notorious gambler and drooling drunk, Ledlie had been in command of a division of Union soldiers in 1864 when a group of Pennsylvania coal miners boldly dug a tunnel underneath Confederate lines protecting Petersburg, Va., packed it with explosives and blew it up. Ledlie's troops were to have stormed the confused enemy, but the general was soused in his bunker and refused to come out. His men mounted the attack in leaderless disarray, and were slaughtered like rabbits.

Battle Mountain was built as a mining town, and still survives as one, but just barely. Gold prices have lately been low, and the local mines have been cutting back. The population has recently sunk to just under 4,000. Without money from mining, there isn't much to recommend it. Even God discourages visitors: In the summer, Battle Mountain temperatures hit 100 by day and plummet to 45 at night. Winters typically see a month or more at sub-zero.

It is valuable to research a town through published material; it is far more valuable to talk to people who know it well. I found that the surest way to get a spirited defense of a place was by phoning a reporter who works there. Journalists may be notorious for their negativity, but when *The Washington Post* calls to say it is thinking of identifying as the Armpit of America the city or town in which your career is unspooling, negativity often yields nicely to sputtering indignation. At least, that was the way it usually worked.

I telephoned Lorrie Baumann, editor of the *Battle Mountain Bugle*, and told her my idea.

"The Armpit of America?" she said.

"That's sort of the, um, concept."

Silence.

"Sounds about right," she said.

But it's a such a big country, I said, with so many crappy places. How could I be sure this was the 'pit?

Lorrie's response was as dry as a desert full of toilet brushes.

"I think a quick drive around downtown will answer any questions that might be lingering in your mind."

I ordered up a plane ticket.

Still, I had one more call. The tough one. I couldn't very well arrive unannounced.

Sharlene "Shar" Peterson is the executive director of the Battle Mountain Chamber of Commerce. She told me a little about the town, and then I told her what I was proposing to do.

She laughed, then didn't say much of anything for the longest time.

The Battle Mountain Chamber of Commerce was thinking.

Shar?

"Well, I mean, who wants to be called an armpit? But, you know . . ."

I sensed where she was going. I wanted to kiss her.

". . . This could be an asset. We're just a dying, ugly little mining town without a real identity. It could be an opportunity."

Is this a great country, or what?

"Listen," Shar said, a trace of concern creeping into her voice, "I have to tell you we now have a Super 8 Motel and a McDonald's. I hope that doesn't knock us out of the running."

And so I went. It was my first trip, the one where cynicism was still allowed.

Signs are designed to convey information, and the signage of Battle Mountain speaks with eloquence. I'm not just talking about the big, thundering messages, like the enormous BM. Humbler signs have their stories to tell, too.

Downtown Battle Mountain boasts three principal business establishments, each with its own marquee, each a triumph of misinformation. The most elaborate sign adorns the Owl Club; it is a huge neon triptych

featuring a smiling hoot owl proudly serving up a tray of piping hot food, a cow dourly contemplating the words "Choice Steaks," and a big, blocky, authoritative "FAMILY DINING."

The Owl Club serves no food. It's a bar. Its restaurant is closed.

Two doors down is the Nevada Hotel, where several placards inside, yellowed with age and indifference, caution against "obscene" language. Outside, the Nevada Hotel's marquee is 20 feet high and transforms nightly into the defiantly gapped "Nevada Hotel."

It is not a hotel. It's mostly a bar and restaurant. There are rooms but they have no TVs and no phones and they don't rent them out.

But my favorite sign is the one down the block, at Donna's Diner. If there exists in America a more eloquent testament to the Jughead shrug, a better paean to intellectual lassitude and inertia, I demand to see it. At some point in the past, evidently, Donna's Diner ordered itself up a fancy illuminated sign. And the sign came, and the letters came, and the time came to put the letters on the sign, and wuh-oh. Not enough room.

Now, there are several ways to deal with such a situation. You can order yourself up a bigger sign, or you can buy some smaller letters, or you can do what Donna's Diner did, which is this: "DONNA' DINER"

According to *The Complete Nevada Traveler*, Donna's Diner is "a local treasure." I headed there dubiously, because in my first half-hour in town I had not observed much in the way of riches. I'd seen age, but no quaintness. I'd seen buildings, but no architecture. There was a coin-operated community car wash, but no community park. There was a store that sells only fireworks, but none that sells only clothing. There was a brothel but no ice cream parlor. There were at least seven saloons, but no movie theater.

(There were entertainment opportunities. A flier advertised an event at the upcoming county fair, where a cow is led over a grid of numbered squares, and you bet on the numbers, and you win if the cow poops on your number.)

Sensing there must be more to Battle Mountain -- a hidden sophistication behind its bucktoothed rustic front -- I bellied up to an oilcloth-covered table at Donna's and signaled for service. I picked up a humor book that sits on every table and opened to a list of "Things That Will Not Impress City Women." One was, "Leaving the hanky from your nosebleed stuffed up there when you go dancing."

I told owner Jerry Williams I was trying to get a feel for the soul of the place, and I wondered if he could be a sort of ambassador for Battle Mountain, and tell me what there was to do.

"Do?"

"Right."

"In Battle Mountain?"

"Yes."

"Absolutely nothing."

Eventually, as I ate Donna's specialty sandwich -- fried, breaded frozen shrimp on toast with green pepper and a slice of cheese the color of a traffic cone -- Jerry opined that the two things people do are what people do in every city in Nevada, which is drink and gamble.

I am not a particularly knowledgeable gambler, but I have an image of what a casino is, thanks to James Bond. Casinos contain tuxedoed cads and rotters with slender mustaches, and ladies in sequined gowns that hug their behinds. There are dice tables, and blackjack tables, and roulette wheels, and games so complex and exotic they can only be played by persons from Zurich.

In Battle Mountain, casinos are basically drunks at slot machines. They play with the intensity and excitement of people sorting socks at a laundromat.

At the Nevada Hotel bar, there is a video poker machine at every bar stool. I was playing and losing, and drinking a beer. Beside me, mechanic Mel Langer was playing and losing, and drinking a beer. Mel is a mechanic. He said the people here are nice and friendly, but there isn't much to do.

Bartender Helen Lumpkin agreed. It's worst for the kids, she said, because they find excitement in the wrong places: "Fifteen-year-old girls with bellies out to here."

Mel looked around conspiratorially and lowered his voice.

"When I moved here seven years ago from California, the odd thing was, the thing I noticed, and I'm not being negative . . ."

He took a drink.

". . . I am just saying, without being faultfinding, don't get me wrong, what I noticed was the obesity of the women. Have you noticed that?"

Gallantly, I said I had not.

"Well, the men work in the mines day and night and there's nothing to do for the women except eat."

One thing to do is bird huntin'. There is nothing quite as delicious, or as beautiful, as ducks in the wild, with splendiferous iridescent greens and blues and broad chests of rich mahogany. Alas, there aren't that many ducks around Battle Mountain. Battle Mountain bird hunters tend to settle for something called a chukar, a

bird with the peculiar habit of running up hills and flying down. Chukars don't make good eating, but locals are pretty proud of them just the same.

Helen has one in a glass showcase behind the bar. She showed it to me.

"So that's the famous chukar I've been hearing about," I said.

It's a scrawny little flapdoodly thing with mottled feathers and a hooked beak.

"Yep, that's the chukar."

It looks like a cross between a chicken and a pigeon, with the least fortunate features of each. It is the color of dirt.

"So there it is, then."

"There it is."

As you enter Battle Mountain, a large billboard promises two things: "Fine Dining" and "A Good Night's Rest." Having despaired of finding the first, I aspired to the second at the famous Owl Club, where rooms are only \$29 because the place doesn't go in for fancy big-city amenities like a coffee maker in the room, or an iron, or a shoe-buffing cloth, or shampoo, or a clock, or a telephone, or spotless carpeting.

I sank into bed for my promised good night's sleep, which I admit, in all candor, was delivered exactly as advertised, the solemn covenant between Battle Mountain and its guests remaining intact right up until 4:21 a.m. when the Union Pacific rumbled and roared and clanged and whistled its way through downtown, about 200 feet away.

Breakfast was pretty good flapjacks at the counter at the Nevada Hotel, where I had come to discover for myself the niceness and hospitality that I'd been hearing tell of.

I soon found myself surrounded by guys who plainly did not like who I was or what I was doing there. Hubert Sharp, a short, square man with a short, square haircut, has been living in Battle Mountain for 20 years, and he informed me he would not live in Washington, D.C., "if you gave me title to the whole place." When I asked why, Hubert said something about the citizenry of Washington that was so offensive, it occurred to me he might have kin in Terre Haute.

Hubert and his pals Bill Elquist and Tom Beebe meet here some mornings, a sort of rump parliament of Battle Mountain. Tom used to be the sheriff. Bill, who owns a backhoe and does odd jobs, is one of three Lander County commissioners; the commissioners run the town, which has no mayor.

Pretty soon the door opened and a big guy named Max walked in and occupied a stool. Max is a pooh-bah. As the town's justice of the peace, he presides over all criminal and civil matters. I told him who I was and why I was there, and he grunted noncommittally, and picked up a fly swatter.

"Max, what's your last name?" I asked, pen in hand.

A fly alighted on the counter.

"I'm not going to tell you."

"But you're the judge. You're a public official. You have to tell me."

Whap! The fly escaped.

"No, I don't," said Judge Max.

His name is Max Bunch. I learned that from Lorrie Baumann, the editor of the Battle Mountain Bugle. Lorrie knows everything. She does everything: Takes pictures, writes stories, edits stories. With her knowledge of the town, she has few illusions.

Nevada, she said, attracts people who have trouble fitting in anywhere else, and of those misfits, the ones who have trouble fitting in in Nevada go to small towns like Battle Mountain.

"For the folks who like it here," she said, "it's mostly a matter of not being able to imagine anything else."

When I'd asked Battle Mountaineers what they most wish they had, a startling number mentioned a Wal-Mart. The closest one is in Winnemucca, 52 miles away. No one mentioned what I would have mentioned, which is anything bespeaking age, history or architecture. The town once had a nice old train station. They tore it down.

In Battle Mountain, entropy reigns; architectural context is nonexistent. One of the prettier wooden houses, with two levels and a porch, is 40 feet from the 24-hour car wash, serve-yourself, \$1. Corrugated aluminum and aluminum siding seem to be the building material of choice. There are a lot of trailers. One had a smaller trailer in the back yard.

"When I first came here a couple of years ago," Lorrie said, "Battle Mountain was in the middle of constructing a new jail. Well, when it opened, one of the county officials was speaking, and he said it's great we have a wonderful new jail but it's a pity that it is the nicest building in town."

I had one more question, and I was almost embarrassed to ask it:

How could she bring herself to live here?

"I don't."

Lorrie Baumann lives in Winnemucca. That was the deal under which she took the job editing the Battle Mountain Bugle: that they didn't make her live in Battle Mountain.

Shar Peterson is a slim, attractive, intense woman with striking hair that appears to have been styled by a Van de Graaff generator. The executive director of the Battle Mountain Chamber of Commerce is always smiling, and she was smiling at this very moment, but I knew she wasn't glad to see me. After our first phone conversation, Shar had talked to some of the town mothers and fathers, who apparently had not shared her vision about the terrific publicity potential of this armpit thing. As Shar put it, "Some people are taking it as a negative."

Shar had apparently been strongly encouraged to dissuade me from my mission, to argue the case against the armpit. Once enthusiastic collaborators, we were, at the moment, potential antagonists.

I sat down. Laid my cards on the table.

"Shar," I said, "this is not a handsome town."

"We understand that," she said, her smile defiantly unbroken.

Shar was doing her level best to show me the highlights of Battle Mountain. It was not easy. It was, in fact, a grim little exercise in desperation salesmanship. Shar is an excellent guide and spin artist, but being executive director of the Battle Mountain Chamber of Commerce is a little like being regional sales manager for Firestone tires.

Heading out on Route 305, Shar pointed out several distant hills in the Shoshone mountain range.

"That looked better before the fires."

And:

"Usually, in different weather, that's a nice view of the valley."

And:

"The people aren't exactly xenophobic. You just have to earn their trust."

We saw several distant peaks with bald smears caused by mining. "They'll look normal afterwards. They'll just be a little less high."

Shar wanted to show me some of the nicer houses, but they were scattered around, so to get to them we had to pass homes that looked like the sort of place Snuffy Smith's wife, Loweezy, is forever brooming out.

Shar came here many years ago, when her husband got a good job in a local mine. He still has it, and so she is still here. She loves it, she said. She said it three times.

I said nothing. We passed one of the more expensive homes. It features a rather startling facade of faux boulders that sort of look like stone, the way cardboard sort of looks like oak.

"I have two choices," Shar said at last. "To make myself miserable or to learn to love where I am. Do you know what I mean?"

I did.

"Okay, maybe we're an armpit," Shar said. "If so, we're shaven, and clean, and sweet-smelling because out here in the desert, we're arid, extra dry. "

The woman is very good.

Doug Mills owns Battle Mountain's Mills Pharmacy, which was the only place in town I could find a "Battle Mountain" T-shirt for sale. It had a cartoon of a mining car filled with nuggets of something oddly brown that are either shining or stinking, depending on how you interpret the lines radiating from it. Doug is a major civic booster; he has a pet project he thinks can help turn the town's fortunes around.

Out at the airstrip are a few vintage airplanes. They just need a little restoration, Doug figures, and they could become the centerpiece of a Battle Mountain museum. His concept is something called "Planes, Trains and Automobiles," celebrating Battle Mountain's storied history involving all three transportation modes.

Trains, I understood. Battle Mountain was built by the railroads. What about planes?

Amelia Earhart, he said, once stopped here to refuel during a solo transcontinental autogiro flight.

Okaaaay. And automobiles?

Doug studied his shoes.

The town of Carlin, he said, which is real nearby, "was the home of the first Datsun dealership in Nevada."

I let this marinate in the silence.

"Well," Doug said, "you got to go with what you got."

Hang a left at Battle Mountain's only sort-of traffic light (it blinks red 24 hours a day), cross the railroad tracks, follow the big red arrows and you're at Donna's Battle Mountain Ranch (no relation to Donna' Diner). An enormous parking lot accommodates 18-wheelers, which tend to park outside for about 20 minutes at a

time with the engines running. Donna's Battle Mountain Ranch, open 24 hours a day, Visa and MasterCard accepted, ATM on the premises, is probably the most successful retail business in town.

One hundred dollars an hour, three girls on call, take your pick: the one who is a little skinny, the one who is a little big, or the one who is a little old. They all seem nice and friendly and accommodating. It's all perfectly legal.

I was here only because I was ordered to come. When I asked Gene Sullivan, one of the three county commissioners, where I should go in town, he'd nodded solemnly in the direction of the railroad tracks.

"Whorehouse," he said.

I figured he must have had his reasons. Probably he knew that the management would express its gratitude to the town that sustains it, and respect for the locals who are open enough to expose their vulnerability in the timeless transaction of the hungry heart.

The locals are louts and creeps, said Paula Navar, day manager, who tends bar beneath a painting of a voluptuous nude.

"They raise hell," she said. Most of the clients at Donna's Ranch are transients, drivers en route from one place to another. Paula said they're swell.

"They're gentlemen. It's the locals, when they come in, who cause the most trouble. They just don't know any better. With them it's 'whore' this and 'whore' that. Listen, I know whores. I've worked with whores. These ladies are not whores."

A middle-aged redhead with big glasses, Paula said she loves her job and loves and respects her bosses, if not the town.

Paula considers herself an outcast in Battle Mountain -- an attractive single mother, perennially under suspicion by Battle Mountain wives as a potential home wrecker. She finds this funny.

"I don't want their husbands. I don't want to be married to Billy Bob."

Evening was approaching and it was almost time to leave, but I had one more place to visit. The literature about Battle Mountain said the sunsets are spectacular, if viewed from the prime sunset-viewing spot. So I went. I was alone, at the top of a hill, Battle Mountain behind me, squinting westward as the Earth wheeled and the sun began to sink behind the Shoshones.

The clouds were like shredded gauze, and slowly they glowed a resplendent, fiery orange against the baby-blue sky, outlined like the beard of a disapproving Celtic god. It all seemed beautiful and humbling, out there at the famous sunset-viewing site, above the NO DUMPING sign riddled with buckshot, beside the placard authorizing acceptance of "municipal solid waste," "construction and demolition debris," "tires," "dead

animals," "medical waste" and "non-friable asbestos," out there alone with nothing but my thoughts and a disquieting fragrance carried on the west wind, out there at the dump.

Alas, the Earth kept wheeling. September 11 came and went and everything you have just read became impossible to publish. Which is why I have returned, with a new mission. A rescue mission.

Seattle photographer Brian Smale arrived the day before me, and began shooting on his own. He knew this was about the Armpit of America, but no one had told him about the new mission. So, when we finally meet up, Brian Smale is all smiles.

"This is easy!" he says. "This is like fishing with poison!"

Oh, man.

Karen Davis is the owner and chief hair stylist of Stewart's Styling Salon, a full-service beauty parlor that also sells china figurines, candles, clocks, leather jackets, celebrity posters and underpants.

"It's a small town," says Karen, "so you have to diversify or you'll never make it." She is 42, a Marilu Henner type, and she grew up in Battle Mountain and raised her children here. She is smart, sophisticated, the kind of woman who could succeed anywhere, but who has chosen to succeed here. I have decided she is to be my first triumphal interview in the Battle Mountain Reclamation Project.

So, it's a pretty okay place, then?

"There a lot of good people here," she says measuredly. "There's a lot to be said for living in the wide-open desert. People who can't see the beauty here are lacking something in themselves. "

So, it's a great place, then?

Karen says it can be a little difficult for people like her and her husband, who don't drink or gamble and who like culture and fine dining and nice clothes. But, she quickly adds, there's plenty to do when you're raising kids, because you are involved in their school activities.

Her kids are almost grown up, now?

"Yes."

And?

"And I want out of here so bad I could scream."

It is not coincidence that I have returned to this place during the week of October 1-6. This is to be Battle Mountain's finest hour. The town has been chosen to host an international event, the world championship

human-powered vehicle race, in which competitors attempt to set a land-speed record on recumbent bicycles. The trials take place every night near dusk, out on Highway 305, just outside of town.

There are only a few dozen spectators, but it's a spectacular sight. The bikes are sleek. They look like bullets, encased in plastic aerodynamic shells, and they reach speeds of almost 80 mph, whizzing nearly soundlessly across the finish line, faster than you could ever imagine an engineless vehicle moving.

Afterward, I collar Matt Weaver, the bike racer surfer dude from California who started the event several years ago, and asked him what factor, or combination of factors, led him to choose, of all places on Earth, Battle Mountain.

Basically, Weaver explains, building up enormous speed on a bike requires a very long stretch of straight road, almost six miles. But it has to be more than straight. It has to be straight and flat, with virtually no gradient. So he got in his car, with sophisticated measuring instruments on the seat beside him, driving thousands of miles looking for a high enough level of flatness, on a flatness meter.

"So, I'm, like, wow, I'm never gonna find this, six miles of road flat enough," he says, "and then suddenly, I am on this stretch, and it says it's level one, and then level two, and then level three, and I'd never seen a level three, and then four, and five, and ding ding ding!"

So he chose Battle Mountain because it had a boring road?

"Very, very, very boring!" Matt corrects. But that's not all, he says.

Thank goodness.

It had to be a road that could be closed down easily for the races, he says, so it couldn't be in a place that's used a lot.

So it had to be a very, very, very boring road in a very, very, very boring place?

"Exactly!"

The reclamation project is not going well at all. In a funk, I find myself shambling over to the most depressing place in town, the cemetery, where I notice something odd. The most recent headstone I can find is from 1988. Have Battle Mountaineers stopped dying? Is boredom some sort of elixir?

It makes no sense. I begin to explore, and finally, I literally stumble over the truth. It's a stone marker level with the ground. All the newer graves have no tombstones. They're easy to miss from a distance.

Here's one with two festive helium balloons tethered to it, dancing in the wind. It's the final resting place of Robert Nevarez, died 1999. There's a handwritten note tucked into his bucket of plastic flowers, and I

consider reading it, but I haven't the heart.

The balloons say "Happy 18th Birthday!"

Which is when I realize I've been going about this all wrong. This isn't about architecture, roads, weather, cultural opportunities, or ugly little birds.

It's amazing what you can discover when you start to look in the right places.

From today's classifieds in the Battle Mountain Bugle:

"Several photos and negatives found in Turner Lane. They are miscellaneous shots of people fishing, and a school photo of an eighth-grader named Charlee. To pick them up, please . . ."

I think: Who on Earth would take that sort of time and effort for something so trivial? Not anybody where I come from. We're not boring enough.

On this day, Battle Mountain is transformed. It is homecoming weekend, when the undefeated Battle Mountain Longhorns are taking on the hated Mustangs from Lovelock High, in Pershing County. Nearly every store window is soaped up with pro-Longhorn or anti-Mustang slogans.

And suddenly, I remember something. Back when Shar was squiring me around town, she brought me to see Tom Reichert, the head of Lander County building and planning and economic development. Tom was one of those people who didn't really cotton to this whole armpit idea. He was polite, but prickly.

I dig through my notes.

"This is a very family-oriented place," he'd told me. "The number one adult entertainment in Battle Mountain is attending youth sports events. I guess it is embarrassing that we're so lacking in things to do, we have to concentrate on our kids."

Now, I'd talked to kids, asked them about growing up here, and mostly I got rolled eyes and vows to bomb out of there at the earliest possible moment.

Still, I have to say, a whole lot of kids seem to have spent a whole lot of time soaping the heck out of this town for homecoming.

BREAK Over at the Civic Center auditorium, high-schoolers are putting on a talent show. There are maybe 30 rows of seats, maybe 20 seats across. And in a town too small to support two fast food restaurants, every seat is filled, moms and dads and little brothers and sisters, crammed in the aisles and spilling out into the vestibule, craning to see and straining to hear, over an insufficient PA system, a high school girl lip-syncing Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean."

Afterward, everyone -- kids, parents, teachers -- repairs to the high school grounds, for the homecoming bonfire. There aren't many trees in these parts, so Battle Mountain High makes do with a giant mound of wooden forklift pallets donated by local businesses.

When ignited with gasoline, these frames make a better than passable bonfire, the flames licking 50 feet into the night sky, against the cheesy backdrop of high-rise signs for the McDonald's and Super 8 Motel, the pyre discharging heat devils that dance on the grass like little tornadoes. Chipper, fresh-faced teenage girls in cheerleader costumes, girls no bigger than Labrador retrievers, are high-stepping and kicking and chanting in voices that squeak, "We are the mighty, mighty Longhorns," and even littler girls on the side are imitating their varsity big sisters, and the high school band is playing a spiritedly terrible "Born to Be Wild," and parents are whooping and cheering, passing cameras back and forth to remember this forever.

The bonfire throws a lot of heat. You really feel it. It stings your eyes, and reddens your face.

BREAK It's all about the football game, of course. The Longhorns have a shot at the state championship, but first they must destroy Lovelock. One cheerleader, Natalie Ormond, 16, in full costume, has an arm in a sling. What's a broken arm? This is homecoming; you play hurt.

The game has started, but I am watching the grandstands, not quite believing my eyes, and doing some math, and not quite believing my numbers. I count 670 people here, plus the players, which amounts to approximately one-fifth the entire population of Battle Mountain. In the city of Washington, that would be like 115,000 people showing up for a game between the Ballou Knights and the Woodson Warriors.

The game is too close for comfort -- Battle Mountain is leading 17-14 in the fourth quarter -- when the Longhorns have to punt from their 40. A bad snap. Gasps from the crowd. Longhorn punter Nick Sandru is forced to tuck the ball and run. He cuts right, shakes a tackler, sheds another, and races 60 yards for the touchdown, and the game.

The crowd explodes. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a figure in jeans and a polo shirt racing down the sideline, jubilantly trailing the play, arms pumping the air. This is not a coach or a trainer. This is someone who got so beautifully caught up in the joy of this moment that all professional skepticism and cynicism have evaporated here in Battle Mountain, the place she doesn't want to live.

This is Lorrie Baumann, the hard-bitten newspaper editor.

BREAK The shirt that Rose Carricaburu is wearing has a photograph of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima, and beneath it, it says, "If you want to burn the flag, why don't you ask one of these guys for a match?" Rose owns this place, Rosa's Cantina, out across the railroad tracks, near the whorehouse.

A month after September 11, you can see plenty of American flags in town, though the pall that hangs over Washington and New York is not evident here. Osama bin Laden is unlikely to be targeting Battle Mountain.

The can behind the bar is taking donations, but not for disaster relief. "We Love You, Sherry," it says. Sherry is the owner of a nearby bar, and she has a bum ticker, and they are raising money to maybe get her a new one.

Rose is collecting for a business rival?

"There are no rivals in Battle Mountain," she says.

A weathered-looking guy sidles over. He is James Hopper, who owns H&H Exploration. "There's a flag flying on my trackhoe," he says. "The terrorists, what they've done? They've screwed up! They vaporized those poor people in New York, and they brought the whole nation together. The way I see it, little town U.S.A. is just like Big Town U.S.A. We all have hearts, and we all bleed."

He extends a hand.

"The way I see it," Hopper says, "you're my friend. Right?"

Oh, man.

BREAK Brian the photographer and I are cruising the streets, one last tour through town, and I am explaining to him my dilemma. I don't want to officially declare Battle Mountain the Armpit of America, and they don't want me to, and I don't have to, and, truth to tell, maybe it isn't. Sure, it's got some jerky people, but it has some wonderful people, too. Maybe it's not the armpit. Maybe there simply is no such body part, now.

On the other hand, Shar Peterson was right. Back there on the phone, before all this began, she was dead-on right. You don't have to be an economist, or a sociologist, or an architect, or a land-use planner, to understand that this place is in trouble. It's got almost nothing going for it.

In America in the 21st century, you need something. You need an identity. A personality. You need to be someplace someone's heard of. You need to be able to pass a word-association test. ("L.A." "Movies!" "Detroit." "Cars!")

There's no answer for "Battle Mountain." Yet.

That's my dilemma. Do I hurt them in order to help them?

Lord, give me a sign.

Brian sees it first. He stops the car, and looks up at the sky, and points. My jaw drops.

God may indeed work in mysterious ways. But one thing, surely, is no mystery: He uses available material. When He visits destruction upon the tropics, He doesn't send a blizzard, He summons the power of the warm seas and the tropical winds.

In Battle Mountain, He writes in flickering neon.

Above us looms the highest structure in town, the giant sign on stilts 40 feet above the gas station, an enormous red and yellow SHELL.

The S is burned out.

So here it is, for better or worse.

Having objectively examined the evidence, which is clear and convincing, and having reached its conclusion beyond a reasonable doubt, The Washington Post Magazine hereby confers upon the town of Battle Mountain, Nev., the title of Armpit of America, with all the privileges and responsibilities therein.

One hundred seventy years ago, a young Frenchman named Alexis de Tocqueville preceded me into America's heartland, determined to map out not so much the nation's appearance, but its soul. He came away impressed by the resourcefulness of the people, a resourcefulness born of the enormous freedoms conferred by democracy and an anarchic economy.

I find myself returning again and again to something Tom Reichert said to me. Tom is the economic development guy who didn't like the armpit idea one little bit. He argued and argued, and finally said, with some defiance:

"Well, if you're going to make us the armpit, fine. You do it. Maybe we can work up some sponsorships. Maybe Secret antiperspirant will buy new uniforms for the girls softball team."

That, Tom, is exactly the idea.

And it would be just the beginning.

I can't make this happen. I've just handed you a tool. The rest is up to the image-makers -- people like you. And Shar, who better than anyone understands the possibilities. And Lorrie, who cares way more than she lets on. And Doug Mills, who might consider changing the wording on the Battle Mountain T-shirts he sells at his pharmacy, if you get my drift.

A renaissance for Battle Mountain? The way I see it, this is America, we're all in it together, and anything is possible. All it will take is a little sweat.

Gene Weingarten writes the Below the Beltway column for the Magazine. He will be fielding questions and comments about this article at 1 p.m. Monday on www.washingtonpost.com/liveonline.

 **Comments**

Gene Weingarten

Gene Weingarten, a writer and editor for The Post from 1990 to 2021, has won two Pulitzer Prizes. They were not for putting poop jokes in The Style Invitational. . Follow 
