SMALL TREASURES
By Jeff Carlton

For about two months now, I have traveled with my fellow Road Trippers and, for the record, we haven’t “found ourselves” or referred to this as a “journey of self-discovery.”

People have romantic notions about life on the road, but it’s not like we’re out here on our own, surviving on wits and crashing for the night where we can. We have expense accounts, company credit cards, a travel agent and the guarantees of decent lodging and reliable transportation.

We’re not wandering aimlessly from state to state on some quixotic jaunt crisscrossing America.

The long hauls, anonymous hotels and strange cities can be taxing. This trip’s about half over and already much of it is a blurry jumble of wake-up calls, checking in, checking out, searching for food and catching up on the home front.

The football aside, what stands out are those occasional moments that you aren’t supposed to laugh about until 10 years from now: a speeding ticket in Nevada, a fender-bender in New Orleans, missing our exit on an interstate in Georgia and not noticing for 80 miles. With us, it’s usually an hour before we start laughing.

Some of the day-to-day details of this trip are pretty mundane. You try to find excitement on the Nebraska plains while sitting in a car all day. Still, when most people hear about what we’re doing, they seem pretty envious. And they should be.

There’s nothing quite like reading a different newspaper in a different city almost every day. Or finding that perfect restaurant, nightspot or moment that captures the essence of where you are. In New Orleans, it was losing track of time in a karaoke bar, stumbling out onto Bourbon Street at 4 a.m. and discovering that no one had gone home. In San Francisco, it was talking about our career options in a bar where Jack Kerouac used to drink. It was seeing the sun rise over a desolate Wyoming landscape and watching it set over a tranquil Puget Sound.

I’m not sure if we’ve learned a great deal about ourselves, but I know we’ve learned about each other. How do you spend 24 hours a day with the same people for four months? It’s a fair question that’s often asked of us and carefully answered.

Our trip is a life lesson in diplomacy and the delicacy of relationships. Dealing with each other on this trip is usually fun, sometimes frustrating and occasionally dull. But even in the worst moments, I know that all of this is once-in-a-lifetime.
A COMMON BOND  By Dawn Reiss


As we travel America’s highways, one thing is obvious: Football is a common thread of our culture. It’s not pop culture, either. It’s personal.

Why else would a 62-year-old grandmother, Frances Lindquist, have a life-size cardboard cutout of Joe Montana in her living room? Simple, she says, it goes with her neon Coors Light 49ers sign in the window and the autographed No. 16 jersey that hangs framed over her mantel.

Why else would George Manley, a 30-something technical support specialist for an Internet company, pack his massive body into a skin-tight Raiders jersey, pads and helmet on a Friday afternoon? Simple, he says, it goes with his dog collar, spiked gloves, tire chains and Fu Manchu. And if he didn’t wear all that, he would be ostracized from the Black Hole, a place where Raiders fans wear black leather, silver studs and bondage collars while chanting near a skeleton-filled cage.

These are two extreme examples of the football fanatics we’ve met on our journey. They come in all shapes and sizes. They come from all economic backgrounds. And they all share that adrenaline rush when the ball flies through the air each Sunday.

Gregory Brown, a one-time banker, drives a streetcar past the French Quarter, old southern mansions in the Garden district and Tulane. For Brown, with his starched-white shirt and tie uniform and an elaborate silver crucifix hanging from his neck, driving on Sundays is difficult. That’s a holy day in the Saints playbook.

In Nashville, a city where people can name a country tune in three notes, Titans jerseys outnumber rhinestone-studded shirts. These NFL neophytes pack their football altar, wagging their red foam swords to the beat of a drum, like red lobster tails, and prying to their sacred god, jevon “The Freak” Kearse.

Football might not be life’s work for Americans, but it is their life. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you are from. Everybody is talking football. Even in Arizona, people might not discuss Cardinals football, but they talk for hours about the Packers and the Cowboys.

Whether it’s college or pro, high school or a backyard league, football, even in a small Wyoming town with the population of two, is a way of life—and, more important, a common bond from coast to coast.