

HANGING OUT AT THE HANGOUT

*If I am doing nothing, I like to
be doing nothing to some purpose.*

Alan Bennett

Small towns have them. Big cities and suburbs have them. Ancient Greece had them in spades, and because of the free exchange of ideas that took place there, historians credit them with jump-starting the Golden Age of Athens.

I'm referring to hangouts, and Renovo had some of the very best.

Adolescents with time on their hands could play bumper pool and eat baked hamburgers with stewed onions at Gianoplos's restaurant, read comic books and consume Fudgsicles at Hevner's newsstand, play the pinball machines and wolf down chilidogs at the Texas Lunch, and play straight pool, French, or eightball (while munching on frozen Milky Ways and breathing an addicting quantity of secondhand smoke) at Pompili's poolroom.

One hangout changed owners so often, we could scarcely keep the name of the place straight: Renehan's begat Bender's, Bender's became Rip's, Rip's morphed into Stoutie's, and Stoutie's segued into Jean's. But regardless of who owned it, it remained a place where we could loiter. And loiter we did - we dawdled, we drank, we dined. But most of all, we talked. The topics of discussion ran the gamut of adolescent interests: from muscle cars and "American Bandstand" faves to the feature film playing at the Rialto and the all-important question of who's going steady.

The crème de la crème of Renovo hangouts was Bratz's dairy store. It had the requisite jukebox with the latest hits, it had waitresses who were amenable to letting you nurse a Coke or a plate of fries for a couple of hours, and, for gastronomes of any age, it had peanut butter fudge sundaes to die for. (Fascinating footnote: One enterprising adolescent regularly borrowed Bratz's business phone to call his sweetheart. That is, until some no-good stoolie ratted on me, er, him.)

Perhaps the aforementioned hangouts should be called "hangins" because all of them were indoors. Renovo's most frequented hangouts, however, were outdoors: front porches, street corners, and cars.

In a symbiotic ritual that is no doubt typical of many small towns, the porch-sitters and the corner-standers would watch the

townsfolk who were riding "around the horn" (i.e., cruising round and round the same well-traveled oblong path that was roughly the perimeter of Renovo), while the cruisers would check out the people who were sitting on porches and standing on corners.

I myself spent many a summer evening wiling away the time on street corners with fellow teenagers of the guy persuasion. We would hang out there, often way past curfew, trying to look studly and waiting for a girl(*any* girl)to walk by. Long after the sun had waned, conceding the sky to an inky summer night, one of us would get sleepy and begin to nod off, which was a cue for the others to evoke the specter of premature burial by the town undertaker, Mr. Bingman: "LOOK ALIVE! Here comes Bingman!"

Come to think of it, what we were really doing when we were hanging out was entertaining ourselves...small-town style.