People make loneliest road a bit more tolerable

By Claire O'Neill, NPR

It's hard to say where the the 287-mile stretch of Nevada's Highway 50 got its nickname "the loneliest road in America." Photographer Ty Wright thinks some writer got clever in a Life article once upon a time – and that it just stuck.

But when he set out on a road trip for a grad school project in photojournalism, Wright was less interested in the origins of the superlative and more curious about its veracity: Is it really the loneliest road? And if so, who actually lives there?

He spent about 10 days exploring the five or so towns that dot the highway – and mostly what's in between: a lot of nothing. His goal as a photographer was to capture how it looks. And to do that, he says, he listened.

"I think people get behind their cameras and start shooting without listening," he says. "If I don't know you, how can I tell [your] story through images? Even with a place. I found myself parking on the side of the road … just listening."

A self-described "people person," Wright says he found himself searching for connections in the most unlikely places. He has tales of ranches and brothels – and accounts of general goodwill from the locals, who seemed more than willing to accept an outsider without questions. But he still had questions: Who are the locals on this lonely road?

"It takes a certain type of person," Wright says. "A strong, self-sustaining kind of person. They have different worries because their neighbor might be 2 miles away. They're a lot more independent. They're their own maintenance men. Their own

proprietors. And they know how to live off the land. The ethic of work," he says, "is just insane."

Of course, one man's "middle of nowhere" is another man's home. Still, why make home on a lonely road?

"There was no consensus," Wright says, "but I think it was just a tie to the community. And a tie to the land. There's something spiritual and really unique to that place. You see the sawtooth edges of the mountains and the sunset stretches clear behind you and it looks like there's two suns. I've never seen anything like that."

Maybe it's easy for a city slicker to say, but these days it seems like having little reception and lots of road is a rare experience. Yet the feeling of isolation, even in (or maybe especially in) the most wired urban areas, is universal. Wright's antidote for travel loneliness contains a universal truth:

"Ultimately I'd say that people make the road not so lonely."