

The Lawnmower Man

Alvin Straight lived a quiet life until he went on an unusual journey that put him in the spotlight. The Laurens, Iowa, resident took a 240-mile road trip on a lawnmower. At 73, Straight wanted to see his brother, Henry, whom he had not spoken to for almost a decade. The 80-year-old brother was ill in Wisconsin after suffering a stroke.

Straight didn't trust public transportation and could not drive a car because he had limited vision and no driver's license. So, he decided to drive a 1966 John Deere mower to Wisconsin. On July 5, 1994, he loaded a 10-foot trailer with gasoline, food, clothes and camping equipment. He hitched it to the mower and started out from Laurens. The mower's top speed was 5 miles per hour, and the trip along backroads took nearly six weeks. Straight endured rainy weather and breakdowns. The odyssey, naturally, made headlines.

Straight didn't like finding himself the object of attention. He turned down appearances on David Letterman's "Late Show" and "Tonight" with Jay Leno. Filmmaker David Lynch turned the mower incident into an acclaimed movie, "The Straight Story," which was filmed in Laurens, Clermont, West Bend and Lansing. The movie starred Richard Farnsworth, 78, as Straight and Sissy Spacek as his daughter.

Straight, who was born in Scobey, Montana, and his wife, Frances, brought their family to Iowa in 1973, where he worked as a general laborer. He was a veteran of World War II and the Korean War, and the father of five sons and two daughters. "The lawnmower man" died of a heart ailment in 1996. His funeral procession to the Ida Grove Cemetery was accompanied by a mower similar to the one he had used on his trip.

What drove Alvin Straight on that 240-mile trip? It wasn't all the gasoline he loaded onto that trailer. Nor was it the John Deere mower, although many of my farmer friends swear by the durability and efficiency of that company's products.

No, it was none of those things. It was love that pushed and guided Straight on that long road to see his brother. It's the kind of love that puts others above self, the kind of love that energizes and sustains the associates of Life Care, American Lifestyles and Life Care at Home as they daily interact with the special people God has entrusted to them.

--Beecher Hunter