

# Local Focus



## Taking on the Law in the Land of the Free . . . and the Home of the Silly

**R**ich Smith, a British journalism student, spent one Christmas Day playing board games. He came across a reference to an obscure law in Florida that made it illegal for divorced women to go parachuting on Sundays. Enchanted by this and a treasure trove of other dumb American laws, he decided to spend the summer after graduation driving across the United States and breaking every outdated or just plain absurd law he could find. “Tying giraffes to lampposts seemed a funnier way in which to become a felon” than arson or murder, Smith writes in his book about the spree, *You Can Get Arrested for That*.<sup>a</sup>

Smith and a friend attempted to break two dozen laws in all, succeeding in most cases. Many of the laws concerned personal behavior. Traveling east from San Francisco, Smith carried out his first successful crime by peeling an orange in a hotel room, an action illegal throughout California.

He then drove to Globe, Arizona, where it is illegal to play cards on the street against an American Indian, and did just that. He made sure to order plenty of garlic bread along with his pizza in Indianapolis, because in that city it is illegal to enter a theater within 3 hours of eating garlic. He also broke the law by eating watermelon in a cemetery in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and by sleeping on top of a refrigerator in Pennsylvania.

There is no end to laws that many people consider silly. Alabama has a prohibition against flicking boogers into the wind. In New York, it’s illegal to stick your thumb against your nose and wiggle your fingers at someone. Montana men aren’t allowed out in public with shaved chests on display, while New Mexico women can’t go out in public if they haven’t shaved.

The fashion police have made it illegal to wear a goatee in Massachusetts, so Smith grew one in plenty of time for his visit to that state. He also broke several laws concerning fishing, including his attempt to hunt down marine mammals in a lake in Utah and, of course, his blatant disregard for Chicago’s ban on fishing while wearing pajamas. But he lacked sufficient skill to violate Tennessee’s stricture against catching a fish with a lasso.

Although Smith managed to break numerous laws, several others defeated him. He failed to find a bathtub to carry illegally across the village green in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, and he couldn’t persuade a woman in Iowa to kiss him for longer than 5 minutes (or at all).

Several of his crimes were witnessed by police or private security guards, but perhaps it’s in the nature of “dumb” laws that they aren’t rigorously enforced. The only time Smith and his buddy got into serious trouble was when they drove at 97 miles per hour in a 75-mile-per-hour zone in Wyoming. That time, they got nailed.

<sup>a</sup>Published by Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006.