

BEAT ATLAS

**A State by State Guide to the
BEAT GENERATION
in America**

Bill Morgan

Photographs by Allen Ginsberg and Others

Foreword by Nancy J. Peters



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CONTENTS

Foreword 7

Preface 11

Northeast Region 14

I. New England States 15

Massachusetts 15

Maine 36

New Hampshire 37

Vermont 39

Rhode Island 43

Connecticut 44

II. Middle Atlantic States 49

New Jersey 49

New York 59

Pennsylvania 80

Midwest Region 84

III. East North Central States 85

Ohio 85

Michigan 88

Indiana 92

Illinois 93

Wisconsin 100

IV. West North Central States 102

Kansas 102

Nebraska 106

Minnesota 109

Iowa 112

Missouri 115

South Dakota 121

North Dakota 122

South Region 124

V. South Atlantic States 125

District Of Columbia 125

Delaware 129

Maryland	130
West Virginia	132
Virginia	133
North Carolina	135
South Carolina	140
Georgia	142
Florida	143
Kentucky	149
Tennessee	150
Mississippi	151
Alabama	152

VI. West South Central States 154

Louisiana	154
Arkansas	157
Oklahoma	159
Texas	160

West Region 168

VII. Mountain States 169

Colorado	169
Montana	181
Idaho	183
Wyoming	185
Nevada	186
Utah	188
Arizona	188
New Mexico	194

VIII. Pacific States 199

Oregon	199
Washington	206
California	211
Alaska	238
Hawaii	240

Acknowledgments 243

Bibliography 247

Index 251

FOREWORD | Nancy J. Peters

Most people associate the Beat Generation with urban bohemian life in Greenwich Village or in San Francisco's North Beach. Bill Morgan's popular guidebooks—*The Beat Generation in San Francisco* and *The Beat Generation in New York*—offer appealing walking tours of the homes and haunts of Beat writers and their friends in those two key cities. Now, his *Beat Atlas* offers an in-depth review of Beat sites in the rest of the country, the towns the writers came from, and the places they inhabited and celebrated in their work.

The book begins in the Northeast, in Massachusetts, with an extensive survey of literary landmarks in Jack Kerouac's Lowell, the historic mill town where he was born and where he set pivotal autobiographical stories. Browsing through a few random pages, we find New Yorker Gregory Corso in Cambridge, where he was living when his first book, *The Vestal Lady on Brattle*, was published. And then a few pages later, here's Lawrence Ferlinghetti in school at Mount Hermon High, in the hamlet of Gill.

In the Rockies, Morgan leads us through Neal Cassady's down-and-out neighborhoods in Denver, and a later section of the book documents Gary Snyder's early years in the Pacific Northwest.

William Burroughs doesn't immediately come to mind when you think of Midwestern writers, yet he came from St. Louis, Missouri (as did his friends David Kammerer and Lucien Carr, who were to play an incendiary role in the Beat story), and he spent his last sixteen years in Lawrence, Kansas. (In intervening years, he resided briefly in New Orleans and, in the late 1940s, gave marijuana farming in south Texas a try.)

Allen Ginsberg, originally from Paterson, New Jersey, rarely stayed in one place. He traveled incessantly, reading, writing, and promoting poetry wherever he went.

He prodded publishers to issue the work of his friends, and universities to invite them to read. When censors came after them, Allen rose to their defense. When they were broke, he lent or gave them money. A master communicator, Ginsberg spread the literary news and kept poets in touch with one other, generating a culture of connections. Using his enormous energy and talent for publicity as a way to make known the work of the many writers he admired, he capitalized on the idea of a literary “generation” (like the Lost Generation or the Spanish Generation of ’27).

The Beats never had a specific agenda for a movement. The writers’ subjects and writing styles were distinctly their own, their backgrounds were different, and they had opposing political views. Friendships faded, and lives took new turns. But they all hated the stifling conformist materialism around them and determined to make writing their life.

The term Beat Generation is catchy and the name caught on with the press. But “beat” is an ambiguous word—beaten down? dead beat? beatific? The writers themselves were never consistent in defining it. Such prominent writers as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, and even Kerouac and Burroughs distanced themselves from the label “Beat writer,” but there can be no doubt that they were part of a sizable postwar generation that propelled American literature and culture in a radical new direction. It seemed an outrageous barbarian invasion to the conservative literary establishment with its traditional publishers of academic, formal poems that had a very small audience. Walt Whitman’s democratic spirit had been unloosed in the land, with compelling prose and poetry—spontaneous, audacious, candid, and accessible.

Donald M. Allen’s prescient *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* is a good example of the range of this nationwide tide of poetic exuberance. Among the contributors are

FOREWORD

Beats Ginsberg, Corso, and Ray Bremser; New York School poets Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, and John Ashbery; Black Mountain poets Robert Creeley, Paul Blackburn, Denise Levertov, and John Wieners; and from the San Francisco Renaissance, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, David Meltzer, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Lew Welch.

The work of these and other compatible writers began to be widely published in fine letterpress editions of chapbooks and inexpensive paperbacks from adventurous small presses that sprang up from coast to coast. Journals ranged from simple mimeo sheets such as Diane Di Prima and LeRoi Jones's *Floating Bear* to Paul Carroll's breakout *Big Table* to Wally Berman's striking handmade *Semina*, which incorporated drawings, collage, photos, and poems. This countertradition in publishing continues in the zines, mini-presses, online publications, and handmade artists' books that emerge in today's diverse and vibrant literary scene.

Bill Morgan provides a comprehensive bird's-eye view of the proto-Beat presence across America, and this alone illuminates an important area of literary history and geography. But even better, he also maps the complex, ever widening nexus of poets and visionaries who, for half a century, wrote to each other, performed together, supported one another's work, and sustained movement that was dissident, controversial, and ultimately dominant.

PREFACE

“So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it. . . .” Thus begins the beautiful final chapter of *On the Road*. I’ll wager that half the people who have read Jack Kerouac’s book have also dreamed of going on the road and living the life that Jack described so vividly. Very few of us have ever done it, but, in reading the work of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and other Beat writers, we can share in the experience of what it was like to wander across America in a gentler time.

The Beats were continually on the move, and as a result, important literary events occurred in a variety of locations throughout the country. Too often we feel that we have to visit New York, San Francisco, or Boston to find places where literary history was made. Although these towns are the publishing capitals of America, they aren’t the places where most of the Beat writers came from, and they aren’t necessarily the places where those writers found their inspiration. Still, I was surprised when I sat down to put this book together that I found “Beat History” in every one of the fifty states. The Beat Generation writers came from everywhere and went everywhere, members of a twentieth-century American literary movement that hailed from all parts of the country. They were born in Massachusetts, Oregon, Kansas, Missouri, New Jersey, and Louisiana. Being so diverse in origin, their writings were not dictated by a single, regional characteristic, so the Beat movement became a national thrust, a joining of like-minded, kindred spirits intent upon exploring the width and breadth of America.

I don’t know why it is, but when I read something, I

PREFACE

find myself interested in the biography and background of the author. Where were they from and what experiences did they have? Where were they when they wrote a particular poem or book? I was fascinated to learn that Robert Frost was sitting in his dining room in Shaftsbury, Vermont, on a hot summer morning when he wrote “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Zane Grey wrote many of his novels about the Old West in his home in Lackawaxen, Pennsylvania, on the banks of the Delaware River. In contrast to this, I discovered that Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote about places, people, and events as they roamed about the country. They didn’t invent as much as record, inspired by what was actually happening around them.

Possibly you jot down your own thoughts in a pocket notebook, collecting people and experiences, just like Kerouac. As you read his work, you’ll grow to realize that his books are based on the real people he met on his travels. He shaped their stories into fiction so that his books could flow in an interesting way, sometimes breaking away from a strict adherence to chronology and geography. Artistic license allowed him to change events that took place in Shelton, Nebraska, to Preston, a town on the other side of the state, and he even moved the location of *The Subterraneans* from Greenwich Village to North Beach. Kerouac’s remarkable memory and extensive notebooks also made it possible for him to re-create scenes years after they had taken place, and by visiting the actual locations some wonderful discoveries will be made.

It is fun to imagine just what building Dashiell Hammet had in mind when he invented Sam Spade’s office, and to wonder whether Melville was looking at the whale-shaped ridge of Mt. Greylock when he wrote *Moby Dick*, but with the Beat writers there is no need to speculate. In *Doctor Sax*, when Kerouac describes the ancient stations of the cross at the grotto, he is describing an actual spot that still exists in modern-day Lowell. The

PREFACE

“houseless brown farmland plains rolling heavenward in every direction” that inspired a Ginsberg poem can still be seen in Kansas today. All you need is a map and the desire to get out there and see it yourself. This guide is designed to help footloose souls follow their own interests to some unusual parts of the literary landscape.

Allen Ginsberg vowed to read his masterpiece, “Howl,” in every state in the Union at least once, and he managed to achieve that goal before his death in 1997. Maybe these stories of the Beat Generation will inspire another young author to write his own masterpiece and share it with America in the same way. Ginsberg and the others will be with him. Allen said it himself in the last line of “Howl.” “I’m with you in Rockland / in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night.”

Organizational Note This is the third book in a series from City Lights. The first two cover the Beat Generation in New York and San Francisco, respectively, and were organized as walking tours to those cities. This volume mentions only a few locations in those two places, but unlike those, this one is not designed to be followed in any predetermined sequence. It is organized first by region and then by state and town within each region. No attempt has been made to put the towns into any order other than alphabetical. Within each section, one location has been selected to highlight a notable place of interest. Lowell, Massachusetts, the birthplace of Jack Kerouac, introduces the book for no other reason than its importance as a Beat site. Other towns within that state follow in alphabetical order. By working with this guidebook in one hand and a trusted map in the other, you can plot your own tour around the country, just like Jack, Neal, and Allen did more than sixty years ago. Grab your rucksack and hit the road!