



“Visions of America” Prologue
Readers Digest Edition
by Joseph Sohm

AN IDEA CALLED AMERICA

“The moment I heard of America I loved her.”
— Marquis de Lafayette, 1777

I first fell in love with America as a five-year-old, growing up just off Route 66 not far from the banks of the mighty Mississippi. When I was eight, my family took a cross-country car trip to Washington, DC. I can recall sitting in the backseat for days on end, peering out the window looking at the small towns, old gas stations and Burma-shave signs dotting the way to the nation’s capital. I snapped their pictures with my Brownie camera as if I were sending postcards back home. From that day on, I viewed life through a viewfinder. I felt destined to explore the back roads of our 48, I mean, 50 states. While the open road ultimately became my friend, America became my lover.

In 1775, the Marquis de Lafayette also fell in love with America. Attending a dinner in Metz, France, this impressionable teenage nobleman was inspired by the Duke of Gloucester (brother of England’s King George III) who recited grand adventures about the American cause for Liberty. Lafayette went to bed that night dreaming about the American Revolution. By early morning, he woke his cousin and friend, the Count de Ségur, by tugging on his arm and reportedly saying, “Wake up! Wake up! I’m going to America to fight for freedom!”



By June 1777, Lafayette was realizing his American Dream. As one of France's wealthiest men, he financed his own ship to the colonies and landed near Charlestown, South Carolina. By December, he became an aide-de-camp to General George Washington at Valley Forge. For the rest of his life, Lafayette put himself in the service of an "idea" called America. Not only did he assist Ben Franklin in raising French financial and military support for the American Revolution, but as a boy general, he played a crucial role in the British surrender at Yorktown.



This is how compelling the American idea was to Lafayette and to tens of millions of immigrants, who have come to our shores in search of their American Dream. Our nation is shaped less by its geography than by the originality of our ideas. How Lafayette could fall in love with a country without ever setting foot on it shows just how brightly these Visions of America burn in the hearts of humanity.

My Visions of America is not just the manifestation of my boyhood dream to photograph the U.S.A.; it is living testimony of how the American idea has manifested over two centuries. Each picture in this book reflects what we have collectively achieved as an American civilization. While I took these images, I don't consider them mine. They are portraits of what "We the People" invented. Consider Visions of America less a book, and more an album of our extended American Family. In these pages, you may see a picture of the town you grew up in, the city in which you reside, the baseball team you follow or the national park you visited last summer. You might even find a picture of yourself because after all, this is what the book is about: you! It's the America Lafayette and I fell in love with. And the best part is, so can you.

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