Brilliant, Quirky, and Uplifting Things That Could Only Happen Here
ONLY IN AMERICA…

1 … do tractors square-dance

ROCHESTER, INDIANA

Swinging your partner round and round gets a tad unwieldy when you’re both on four big wheels, but trust us—it’s just as much fun. This Midwestern pastime dates back to the 1950s, when farm-equipment manufacturer International Harvester featured an ad with whirling tractors. Here’s what they do: Drivers maneuver tractors to execute precision promenades, circles, and weaves, all set to rollicking square dance music and directed by a caller. Indiana’s Lily Pearl tractor dancers, for instance, perform as a team of eight, but in the true spirit of competition, they’re aiming to leave that feat in the dust. “We plan to dance with 16 tractors on the same field,” says farmer Skeeter Daugherty, Lily Pearl’s leader. “It’s never been done before.”

2 … can cancer patients get help with housekeeping

DALLAS, TEXAS

Debbie Sardone (pictured on previous page), 55, remembers every second of the call. Eleven years ago, she answered the phone at her housecleaning service. The woman on the other end asked for a price. When Sardone gave her the quote, the woman responded, “I can’t afford that now. I’m going through chemotherapy and radiation,” and promptly hung up. Sardone, who didn’t have caller ID, chastised herself: Why didn’t I offer to clean for free? Later that day, she gathered her office staff and instructed them to perform services without charge for women with cancer. Three years later, Sardone formed the national nonprofit Cleaning for a Reason, which now boasts 1,085 member businesses in all 50 states (and Canada); together, they’ve donated more than 15,000 house cleanings. One partner describes the work as “vitamins for the soul.” “I never knew how good it would feel to give away for free what I do for a living,” says Sardone.

3 … is a scientist also an artist of the night sky

CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

Professor Tyler Nordgren’s love affair with the evening sky began when he was a Boy Scout on camping trips in Oregon and Alaska. “Once we were on a lake at night, and I saw millions of stars above me. That has stayed with me my whole life,” he says. Nordgren, 44, who teaches physics and astronomy at the University of Redlands in California, has gone to 12 national parks to photograph the sky at twilight and after dark. His mission is to raise awareness of the beauty of their night skies (many people visit only during the daytime) and the threat that light pollution poses. California’s Lassen Volcanic National Park is shown above, and Maine’s Acadia National Park and Utah’s Bryce Canyon National Park are two other favorites of Nordgren’s. “When you look up and see a billion stars, you know that you’re part of a larger universe,” he says.
... do you find trees older than the pyramids

INYO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

If America’s longest-living residents could talk, they’d probably just grumble about the weather. In eastern California’s White Mountains, bristlecone pine trees have survived for millennia, despite the region’s scarce rainfall, bruising winds, and frequent freezes. In 2012, scientists dated one of the trees at 5,063 years old, making it the world’s longest-living organism. The pines’ wood hardens against the elements, guarding them from rot and forming sculptural swirls. They grow as little as an inch in diameter every 100 years, but fortunately, these pines have centuries to spare.

... are ukuleles even hotter than electric guitars

HONOLULU, HAWAI'I

What’s one pound, around 130 years old, native to the United States, and so popular, it’s nearly doubled in sales from 2010 to 2012? It’s the ukulele, now enjoying its biggest comeback since Bali Hai. And why not? The Hawaiian-born instrument is cheap and easy to master, and its plucky sound instantly dispels gloom. The craze has been stoked by a new group of young Hawaiian virtuosos, like Jake Shimabukuro and Taimane Gardner, as well as amateurs on YouTube, like Nicole Tan (pictured on page 70). 19, a Bowdoin College student who posts covers of hit songs like Nicki Minaj’s “Superbass.” “I went to the Internet, searched ‘how to play ukulele,’ and a video came up,” she says. “Five minutes later, I could play it.”

... do survivors pay it forward

SANDY HOOK, CONNECTICUT

Four months after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, a tornado tore through Oklahoma and caught the attention of four friends from the Newtown area. When John DiCostanzo, 34 (in blue polo shirt), heard the news of the devastation, he and (from left) Peter Baressi, Bill Faucett, and Howard Wood resolved to travel 1,500 miles to Moore with supplies. “We had an immense amount of love pour into our town in December, and it continues to show up,” Baressi said to the Newtown Bee. “We needed to share it.” On May 22, the men set off on their drive with 13,000 pounds of goods. They weathered a tire blowout and broken brake line before reaching Oklahoma 40 hours later.

... does the Senate chaplain scold Congress

WASHINGTON, DC

Barry C. Black is privy to a rare sight: Democrats and Republicans holding hands. That’s what the senators do at the end of the weekly Prayer Breakfast he leads. Although Black has held his post of Senate chaplain for 11 years, he drew national attention during last fall’s government shutdown. The Washington Post dubbed him “a folk hero to many” after he spoke truth to power in his invocations. On the shutdown’s third day, he prayed, “Save us from the madness ... Deliver us from the hypocrisy of attempting to sound reasonable while being unreasonable.” On day 11, he asked God to “give our lawmakers the wisdom to distinguish between truth and error.” Black has called his role “descriptive rather than prescriptive,” but he says that during the shutdown, “I was making sure that my prayers were not so otherworldly that they had no earthly good.” Amen to that.
ONLY IN AMERICA...

8 ...is a Bloody Mary a meal
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
Nothing screams America more than excess. And nothing tastes more like brunch than a Bloody Mary. Combine the two, and you get the country’s latest trend in libations. The Cove in Leland, Michigan, serves its concoction with a regional delicacy, a smoked chub. In Minneapolis, the Icehouse’s Bloody Homer (as in Simpson) features candied bacon and a bacon-bedecked donut. The version at Sobelman’s Pub & Grill in Milwaukee is crowned with a Brussels sprout, celery, onion, mushroom, cherry tomato, lemon, pickle, shrimp, sausage, cheese, olive, green onion, asparagus, and—the pièce de résistance—a bacon cheeseburger slider.

9 ...does a 12-year-old build a Braille printer from LEGOs
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA
After his parents received a flyer seeking donations for the visually impaired, preteen Shubham Banerjee went online to research what it’s like to be blind. He was indignant to learn that Braille printers cost at least $2,000. “Capitalizing on disadvantaged people did not seem right,” he says. So he decided to tackle the problem with what he knew best: building with LEGOS. Shubham worked with a LEGO Mindstorms EV3, an advanced set that can be used to make programmable toys like robots. After three weeks of after-school tinkering, Shubham had developed Braigo, a printer that creates Braille patterns by using a needle to punch small holes in paper. The total cost of his machine: $350. Shubham put his plans online as an open-source invention for other innovators. Now he’s busy working on a top-secret project with LEGO.

10 ...do we leave bananas at a grave
HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA
Next time you visit Huntsville, be sure to pack a bunch—of bananas, that is. The city is home to the grave site of a special astronaut: squirrel monkey Miss Baker. In 1959, Miss Baker and Able, a rhesus monkey, were the first primates to safely return from space (they experienced nine minutes of weightlessness). Miss Baker lived at Huntsville’s U.S. Space & Rocket Center until her death in 1984, and visitors still leave hundreds of bananas annually for this little space simian.

11 ...do bald eagles make public appearances
PASO ROBLES, CALIFORNIA
Unlike other diplomats, Thunder the bald eagle doesn’t rely on words to get his point across—his glare is enough. The victim of an oil spill and electrocution, the raptor makes more than 100 appearances a year across America as a representative of our national bird. Thunder’s injuries prevent his return to the wild, so the 11-year-old lives at Conservation Ambassadors, a California nonprofit refuge that houses permanently impaired animals and advocates for protecting their kind in the wild. “People care about animals, but it can take a kick in the butt to get them to act,” says David Jackson (pictured on page 71), the organization’s CEO and one of the spokesbird’s favorite handlers. “After meeting Thunder, everyone wants to help save them.”
... does a janitor become principal
PORT BARRE, LOUISIANA
In 1979, Gabe Sonnier (pictured on page 71) graduated fifth in his high school class and enrolled in college to study engineering. But money was scarce in his family, so he dropped out to help raise his siblings, taking a custodial job in 1981 at Port Barre Elementary School. His work ethic impressed the principal, who one day dropped this shocker: “He said, ‘I’d rather see you grading papers than picking them up,’” recalls Sonnier. But Sonnier, a father of two, waited 19 years until his youngest had completed high school before returning to college in 2000. After eight years of mopping during the day and attending classes at night, Sonnier got a degree and a position as a third-grade teacher at Port Barre. And when the principal retired in November 2013, the one man who knew everything about the school—from fixing leaks to solving multiplication tables—landed the job. “Whatever your circumstance, it doesn’t have to end there. You can finish strong,” says Sonnier, now 53. But don’t be fooled by his talk about finishing—this principal is just getting started.

... is a Muslim teen a superhero
JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY
In February, the Marvel comic book universe—home to heavy hitters like Captain America, Spider-Man, Thor, the Hulk, and Iron Man—expanded to include a unique new superhero: 16-year-old Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American Muslim from Jersey City. Kamala possesses the power to shape-shift into anyone she chooses. Like other American teenagers, she finds herself examining her relationship with her religion and with her very traditional family. According to her cocreator, Seattle writer (and Muslim) G. Willow Wilson, Kamala is both extraordinary and average—a girl struggling to discover who she is and who she wants to be. In other words, she’s the perfect superhero for today’s multicultural America.

... do oysters have foster parents
CHESAPEAKE BAY, MARYLAND & VIRGINIA
If you think “gardening” means only roots, soil, and buds, you need to open your mind. Today, America’s most unusual volunteer gardeners are growing oysters underwater to replenish our shellfish population after a dramatic drop in supply. Oysters are aquatic all-stars: They filter the water and form reefs to create habitats for marine life. In Maryland and Virginia’s Chesapeake Bay, Alabama’s Mobile Bay, and Rhode Island’s Narragansett Bay, nonprofits provide instruction and a cage of itty-bitty baby oysters—each smaller than a fingernail—to marine gardeners. The requirements: access to a dock or a pier and the time and interest to monitor their charges. After one year, the mature shellfish are reintroduced into the bay. But gardeners find it’s hard to stop after one harvest. “People get addicted to seeing their oysters grow,” says Don Webster of the University of Maryland Extension.

... do we respond with such feeling
OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Police sergeant Brian Smith, 52, is known for brightening the station house with his smile. So when he made the offhand remark to coworker Captain Shayna Ray that he’d never received a Valentine’s Day card as a kid, she was determined to make it up to him. While Smith was out on vacation in early February, Ray posted a message on the department’s Facebook page telling people about his 20-plus years of service and encouraging them to send him a card. Her post was widely shared across the United States, and the station’s mailbox exploded with hundreds of pink and red envelopes. When February 14 arrived, officers presented the sergeant with the haul, and he choked up. “What touched me most was receiving the handmade cards from school-children,” Smith says.
ONLY IN AMERICA...

16 ...does an icon roar back to life
SPIRIT LAKE, IOWA

In 1901, the first mass-produced American-made motorcycles were rolled out by Indian Motorcycles. They quickly became the nation’s ride: The New York Police Department’s first motorcycle squad hopped on Indians to chase criminals, and our armed forces used them during both World Wars. But by 1953, rival Harley-Davidson had captured the market, and Indian ceased production.

Numerous attempts to revive the company were unsuccessful until Polaris Industries acquired it in 2011, debuting three new Indian models last year (see page 70). Like the original, the 21st-century Indians are made in the U.S.A. (engines are manufactured in Osceola, Wisconsin; the rest of the bike is assembled in Spirit Lake, Iowa). The brand’s rise and fall is a classic American story of resilience and rebirth, explains Steve Menneto, Polaris’s vice president of motorcycles. “Sometimes we get knocked down, but we always get back up,” he says.

17 ...can one woman save a city in crisis
MARIETTA, GEORGIA

Last January’s snowstorm in Atlanta will go down in record books as the city’s most paralyzing weather in recent years—but also as one of the most ingenious uses of social media. Tech consultant Michelle Sollicito watched how a storm immobilized her city, and she was moved to immediately start a Facebook group to link those marooned by the weather to shelter, fuel, food, transportation, and other assistance offered by Good Samaritans.

Called SnowedOutAtlanta, its membership swelled to more than 50,000 within 24 hours. Strangers saved one another: A pregnant mom and her child found a place to stay; a man with a heart problem was taken to the hospital; and a stranded, scared 71-year-old woman received blankets and hot cocoa. “[Michelle Sollicito] has done more for our city than any official,” one resident told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

“The biggest thing I learned is that everyone can do something to help people in a crisis,” Sollicito, 46, says. Grateful people offered her gifts—a trip, a car, a Disney vacation, even a house—but she asked them to donate to the Red Cross instead.

18 ...do we get everyone out on the dance floor
TAMPA, FLORIDA

Merry Lynn Morris has the simple goal to release everyone’s inner dancer. The Rolling Dance Chair, which Morris, 38, has invented, allows people with disabilities to move fluidly across the floor. Standard wheelchairs travel jerkily and in straight lines. This chair reacts to the motion of a smartphone that’s placed on the body, so that when a person leans left, it rolls left—it can even spin.

Morris, a former professional ballet dancer who teaches at the University of South Florida, was inspired in part by her father, who became disabled after a car accident. She wanted a way for wheelchair-bound people like him to enjoy moving to music again. Her father never tried the chair—she completed a prototype in 2012, and he’d passed away in 2008—but she has used it with kids who have spina bifida and cerebral palsy. She has been thrilled by their delight and reports, “One little girl said to me afterward, ‘This makes me feel free!’”
... will the first lady actually answer the phone on vacation

COLOrado SPRINGS, COLOrado

In 1955, a typo in a Sears ad promising calls to Saint Nick directed children to the Continental Air Defense Command (CONAD). The Air Force colonel who answered played along, and since then, CONAD and its successor, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), have taken Christmas Eve calls from young ones worldwide who have urgent queries like “Am I on the ‘nice’ list?” and “Will I see Rudolph’s nose?”

Last year, kids calling on December 24 may have heard a familiar voice on the other end. For the past four years while on her family vacation in Hawaii, First Lady Michelle Obama has volunteered for the NORAD Santa hotline.

But it takes many elves: In 2013, more than 1,250 American and Canadian military personnel and civilians at Peterson Air Force Base fielded 117,000 calls and 11,000 e-mails. One volunteer told the American Press Service that his favorite call was from a little boy calling from India: “He asked where Santa was, and when I told him he’d passed through India once but was coming back, he screamed, ‘Oh no, I better get to bed!’ and slammed the phone down.”

... do we pioneer the selfie

1839: Philadelphia photographer Robert Cornelius takes one of the first photographic self-portraits.

1925: Anatol Josepho (above) invents the photo booth, bringing the selfie into the public sphere.

1953: Jacqueline Kennedy and then-Senator John F. Kennedy are only two of the booth’s many famous boosters.

1966: Astronaut Buzz Aldrin snaps himself on a Gemini XII spacewalk; he claims it was the first space selfie.

2011: San Francisco Jennifer Lee posts the first self-portrait with the #selfie hashtag on Instagram.

2013: Selfies snowball, and pet, gym, and other themed selfies emerge (LeBron James, above).

2014: As Academy Awards host, Ellen DeGeneres arranges a seemingly spontaneous star-studded selfie, only to have it unmasked a day later as part of a promotion for Samsung.

19... did we pioneer the selfie

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**ONLY IN AMERICA...**

**22** ... do we make our missions marketable

**SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA**

Chris Bley, 40, has fused his two passions, rock climbing and environmental protection, into one very savvy business. As the owner of Rope Partner, a company he launched in Santa Cruz in 2001, he employs climbers and other outdoor enthusiasts to service wind turbines. Driving around America, he says, “I noticed turbines were getting taller, so I knew that they’d need people who are unafraid of heights to maintain them.”

Today, Bley has 50 workers, a number that grows as wind energy’s use expands. “I tell [people] my office is 300 feet in the air,” said employee Terrence Green in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. Now try topping that.

**23** ... will a passerby stop to teach a homeless man to code

**NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK**

Handout or hand-up? Last summer, software engineer Patrick McConlogue gave homeless Leo Grand a choice between the two, offering him either $100 or two months of coding lessons. Grand, who’d been living on the streets since losing his job in 2011, went for the instruction. McConlogue, 23, provided Grand, 37, with a basic laptop and three coding books and tutored him for an hour in the mornings. After three and a half months, Grand had learned enough to create Trees for Cars, a smartphone app released in December that helps commuters organize carpools. “I dig the mental challenges,” Grand told tech website Mashable. Meanwhile, McConlogue has launched a mentoring group to match experienced programmers with aspiring coders.

**24** ... do we hold the key to everything

**ESTES PARK, COLORADO**

If you’re looking for a key to Buckingham Palace, you don’t have to cross the pond to find it. Simply check in to the Baldpate Inn on Twin Sisters Mountain, owner of some 30,000 keys, which hang in a room where they’re organized by state and country with a descriptive tag on each. Among them are signposts of history, such as keys to one of Hitler’s desks, to Dr. Frankenstein’s castle in Romania, and to the U.S. Capitol.

Drivers traveling through the Navajo reservation en route to the Grand Canyon may be startled to see massive faces staring at them: a quizzical child, a wrinkled elder, a laughing woman. These portraits are the work of Jetsonorama, or Dr. Chip Thomas as he’s known at his day job as an Indian Health Service physician. Since 2009, he has taken and enlarged photos of tribal members, which he prints and mounts on buildings. His aim: to make onlookers pause and appreciate the Navajo. “People said they’d driven through the reservation but didn’t have a sense of the residents,” says Dr. Thomas, 57. “Since I started my art, I’ve heard about visitors stopping to look, meeting locals, and being invited home for a meal. It’s a bridge between cultures.”

For a video of Jetsonorama making art in the desert—plus other videos and photos—download the Reader’s Digest app for your iPad or Kindle Fire.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAMONA ROSALES