

Driving Across America

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St. Louis Gateway To The West

Most people would drive this 1,300 miles from Delaware to Oklahoma in two days or less. It takes me four. I dawdle, stopping frequently, leaving the high-intensity interstate highway to sample two-lane state roads and small towns. I take short hikes in wildlife preserves. I park and walk in cities; in some I have friends to visit.

The sun is coming up on day four. I have driven a thousand fair-weather miles from Wilmington, Delaware, heading West across Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, drifting South to cross the mighty Mississippi river at St. Louis, Missouri.

I begin this near my journey's end because St. Louis put cross-country travel on the map for Americans. Its signature soaring silver arch speaks for its historic role as Gateway To The West. St. Louis served as point of departure for a feat of transportation that expanded the nation's sense of itself as stretching "from sea to shining sea." In May of 1804 the Lewis and Clarke expedition set out to explore the vast, uncharted wilderness of the Louisiana Purchase. Thirty men went by canoe, horseback and on foot from St. Louis to the Pacific Northwest coast and back, losing just one man (of appendicitis) in all that perilous journey. They returned to a hero's welcome in September 1806, having been given up for dead. The wilderness itself had just been sold to us dirt-cheap by that most civilized of nations, France. For a mere \$15 million the United States doubled its territory and

expanded its potential exponentially.

The Louisiana Purchase and other 19th Century bargains and conquests made this nation what it is today: a land of opportunity whose enormous size is in conflict with its culture of personal freedom and individual enterprise. Two centuries after Lewis & Clark we have evolved a transportation bias many see as leading this nation and the world in the direction of catastrophe. That bias favors private over public transportation. And here I am with my hands on the wheel of a personal automobile, exercising one of America's most cherished freedoms, one that has evolved into a necessity peculiarly resistant to rational solutions to the problems it creates.

Putting Americans Behind The Wheel

Who in 1904 would have guessed that real-live horses and the railroad's Iron Horse would be left in the dust so quickly by the recently invented horseless carriage? Our box of faded family photographs yields one of my paternal grandfather saluting his young wife and her sister in a 1904 Oldsmobile. A collector's page on the *Internet identifies that Oldsmobile as one of the world's first mass-produced cars: 425 in 1901; 3,924 in 1903; and 2,233 in 1904. The 1904 model pictured cost \$650, a much larger sum than its present-day dollar equivalent of \$13,500 might suggest.

*1904 Oldsmobile (<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~adamw/19041.htm>)

I have read (but can't believe) that there were only 8,000 automobiles in the USA in 1904 and

fewer than 150 miles of paved roads. More to the point is that Henry Ford's ambition to put Americans behind the wheel succeeded so quickly. His Ford Model T started rolling off the assembly lines in 1908. Fifteen million had been sold by 1928 when the new improved Model A was introduced.

By the 1920s my grandparents were driving from Oklahoma to Canada in a luxurious Packard touring car. How could they afford it? Was it Uncle Harry's money? My grandfather (called Poppy) grew up in a New Jersey orphanage. He brought nothing to his marriage but the job prospects of a bright university graduate. He had no gift for seizing opportunity. I can still hear him saying as a sad and lonely widower: "When I should have signed the paper, I didn't. When I shouldn't have, I did." Still, he was a devoted, hard-working husband and they lived very well. My grandmother (Mommy) was a physician's daughter from Colorado. Her uncle Harry was a shrewd investor, married but childless. In 1906 he made Mommy his heir on condition that she and Poppy join him in Indian Territory, which became the state of Oklahoma in 1907.

My own guess is that long before he died in 1938 (when Mommy did inherit), Uncle Harry helped the young family lead a genteel life in this small mining boomtown out in the middle of nowhere. Various old photos attest to that aim. One from the 1920s shows Mommy and her Twentieth Century Club lady friends posing in kimonos they must have made themselves. But that's another story.

The Packard was a Sunday car. Its weekdays in the garage loosened the wooden spokes. Their fearful clatter would have spoiled the ritual Sunday drive so Poppy drove first to the river to join other motorists in polite chitchat while their wheels soaked tight. He was a mechanical genius so repairs would not have been a major expense. That came in

the 1930s when a scapegrace son, my father, cost a bundle in car-related escapades and accidents. We won't go there (a phrase used nowadays to cut off discussion).

My mother's family weren't conspicuously prosperous or socially ambitious, yet they too had cars. When my mother (born 1920) was still a toddler, her parents took another couple and their child for a ride in a Ford Model T. Women and children sat in back. Another car ran into them. No one was hurt, though when the dust had settled, each mother was found to be holding the other's child! Sad to say, when my mother was fifteen her mother was killed by a collision her father survived.

People from Oklahoma were called Okies then as they are now. I am an Okie in that sense. My mother's people were Okies in another sense. They were from nearby Kansas and Missouri, farmers and merchants who headed out West, looking for ways to survive the twin catastrophes of Dust Bowl drought and the Great Depression. Impoverished refugees from everywhere crowded into California, looking for work. The crisis demanded an unwelcoming name, as in "Why don't you Okies go back where you came from?" Immigrants from any state were stigmatized as Okies.

No wonder some of my relatives settled for Idaho while others drifted back to this area. John Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath remains the classic depiction of the migrant Okie experience. What would Japanese students today think of that 1939 novel or its severely beautiful film version of 1940? I'm thinking now how those Depression era Okies needed money for gas to take them all the way to California. A horse-drawn migration was clearly out of the picture by then, even though horses might have been fuelled by wayside grazing. Could that serve as a telling anticipation of today's transportation dilemma?

A Thought-Provoking Passenger

I wish I could say we won't go there either. But my passenger insists on a digression. If that person had his way, my faithful little Toyota would refuse to add even one more mile to its present 223,568. Why? Because a car with a conscience would recognize that the automobile has become quite possibly "the single most environmentally destructive device on the planet." My passenger is that dread environmentalist alter ego, The Grouch, quoting from One With Nineveh: Politics, Consumption, and the Human Future by Paul and Anne Ehrlich (Washington DC: Island Books, 2004), p. 226.

The Ehrlichs are distinguished scientific thinkers, not vulgarian purveyors of sensational doom and gloom, yet their book is not for the faint of heart. The problems they identify and analyze are worldwide in scope as are the solutions they suggest. We really can't go there – it's way too far – yet The Grouch insists that we catch their drift.

"Both Europe and Japan have fast, efficient, and convenient public transport systems both within and between cities. High gasoline prices may be the most important cause of the relative shortage of gas-guzzlers, however. The taxes that produce fuel prices more than twice as high as those in the United States are acceptable to Europeans and Japanese, whose cultures may not tie self-image and freedom as closely to the personal automobile as does American culture.

Nevertheless, additional berserk car cultures seem to be developing in parts of the world as diverse as Australia, Mexico, and China, and the restraints that once were found in places such as England and Japan are breaking down as more and more square miles are devoted to automobiles rather than people, agriculture, or nature. Indeed, in Japan there are now special four-wheel-drive parks where,

for a fee, people can trash their SUVs by driving them over a rough course." pp. 121-122.

Anyone tempted to think that "berserk car culture" is a bit of a verbal/judgmental stretch might want to watch more American television. There, pristine wilderness is used to illustrate the maniacal hard-driving capabilities of each "new generation" of personal vehicles. The gorgeous landscape in the ad is treated to a savagely luxurious rough ride for reasons that need no explanation. I'm sure the intended message hits home in Japan as well. Advertising has globalized us all that way.

The sad thing is that the vast majority of viewers won't know or care to be aware of the horrific damage done by speeding up slopes or across desert flats in cars and trucks designed for rough-and-tough comfort, control and uninhibited expression of that paramount American value: freedom. That freedom gets more inventive every year. All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) are selling like hotcakes. They may not be comfortable, controllable or crash-dummy safe; but they are crash-dummy brainless and family-friendly too. One sees very small children in crash helmets roaring around on playtoy-size ATVs. The formative potential of early delight being what it is, should a child's introduction to nature be empowered this way?

Meanwhile, environmental advocates like the Sierra Club urge hikers to wear ordinary walking shoes when possible, since heavy tread boots cause serious erosion in natural areas already under stress from huge increases in visitation. That brand of personal freedom is hard to advertise effectively. It looks to the future. Its sense of urgency has to do with responsible conservation, not immediate gratification.

Among those offended by that degree of care are groups advocating for freedom of choice

as freedom of motion anywhere it wants to go: ATVs, dune buggies, power skis, snowmobiles – you name it, someone is out there ready to ride. The first President Bush’s famous dictum comes to mind here: “The American way of life is not negotiable.” Now that his son is firmly in the driver’s seat for another four years, any idea of *giri/ninjo* balance is in for a mighty rough ride.

The Ehrlichs relate such questionable freedoms to the concept of flawed goods (p. 118) : “Another instance of a flawed good is the mass of personal automobiles, especially sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and ‘road candy’ (high-priced, high-performance ‘special’ vehicles), that choke American streets and highways. In 2002, 15.7 million households owned one car, 22.6 million had two cars, 10.2 million three cars, and 4.1 million four cars. Thanks largely to such numbers, an area of the United States larger than the state of Georgia has been paved.”

When You Get There: Don’t Jump!

Enough! Let us accept the fact that driving across America is just one of many tragically flawed goods related to the difficulty of managing my country’s mania for personal freedom. I know it well. In spite of The Grouch’s principled opposition, I have crossed the country coast to coast in many directions and up into Canada twice. And I’m the 55 mph slowpoke who did without a car in his twenties and thirties. Now, at sixty-four, I’ve driven something like 400,000 miles, and that’s far less than millions of Americans my age. What can this mean? What does it say about the culture of mobility I live in?

Surely size has something to do with it. Vastness cries out for exploration, as distance does for speed and speed for invention of speedier ways to get wherever. It doesn’t really matter if, as the poet Gertrude Stein so

famously said, “when you get there there isn’t any there there.”

Of course there used to be there there – first wilderness, then local character where now “development” sprawls its tedious charmless sameness unendingly. We won’t go there for damn sure.

Besides, I’ve got to get moving. It’s four in the afternoon. I lingered too long in St. Louis, visiting my old friend Pat. She was born there eighty years ago, knows the city like the back of her hand, and shares it well accordingly. I’ll have to drive steadily to get to my mother’s house by ten. That’s all right. No summer day could be lovelier. There’ll be a full moon too, shining all the way.

I always look forward to this final leg of my journey, the spacious, easygoing stretch of Interstate 44 that angles South and West across Missouri. This highway curves gently from side to side and smoothly up and down as Ozark mountain vistas lead to the foothills and rolling long-grass prairie of my Oklahoma destination. At times the road ahead is visible for miles, rising and falling in rhythmic response to ancient upward thrusts worn down and reshaped through all the ages since.

Missouri has plenty of prosperous farms and ranches, but the landscape is defined by its hardscrabble Ozark rocks. Like the reddish earth, they favor the warm, red/orange end of the spectrum. The ambient light has a gritty dazzle. Forest and prairie are at their greenest now, though a person attuned to the lives of plants can tell that the flora here is designed to survive two extremes of windy thirst: icy cold winters bare of snow; and scorching hot summers short on rain.

Mid-America’s ancient Tethys Sea left vast limestone deposits whose drama (for me) is gorgeously upstaged by metamorphic rocks in a variety of colors. Many a chunk of flint or chert encrusted with subtiles of moss and

lichen would merit a place of honor in a garden in Japan. Last year I stopped to venerate an old favorite far too large to move and therefore safe from my great love – only to find it bearing a message in fluorescent orange paint: I LOVE YOU GIRL. Most such declarations appear on bridges and highway overpasses, though this area's dramatic high bluffs pose a natural challenge to adolescent passion.

Oddly enough, one never hears of a love-crazed youth found shattered on paint-spattered rocks below. Maybe the need for some such poetic justice lies behind the legendary lovers' leap of small towns like my own. As a lone lorn adolescent, I was troubled by the narrative poverty of our legend. Even the lovers had no names. I made sure no one saw me creeping to the edge of our precipice on all fours. Standing upright was out of the question. Even before I learned to drive I knew that my motor skills were not what they should be.

Mujo And The Road Ahead

I shudder to think what might have happened if early delight hadn't taken me out of the romantic mainstream to a place whose kind of natural beauty became the love of my life. It was the first of many such solitary haunts I grew up with in the Ozarks. Surely everyone revisits such a place in memory, one whose hold on lifelong affection demands a lover's privilege of living always in the present tense. We really must go there.

So here we are in the late 1940s, driving to Cave Springs for a family picnic. It's not that far as the crow flies, but very far in terms of getting there on a scorching summer day some years before air-conditioning became a fact of life. These hills just East of town are still wonderfully wild, defended by the rocky ferocity of these last few miles of country road. The tires are punished alarmingly, even at slow

speed. We can't out-run the Martian storm of dust we raise. It engulfs and fills the car with reddish haze in spite of windows barely cracked in the stifling heat. Grownup voices wonder aloud why we ever come to this horrible place. One young heart beats fearfully fast. To him, this purgatorial passage is sweet with anticipation of paradise ahead.

At last we are crossing the bridge, leaving the road to bounce with slow violence across an abandoned pasture waist-high in drought-stricken weeds. Grasshoppers leap every which way. Others fill the air with a whirr and whine that fades into silence as we pass into the woods.

We roll the dusty windows down. We breathe freely, see clearly. A pair of rocky ruts leads us gently down into a shallow ravine. Something glistens in the forest shade ahead. The car slows to park, a door pops open, a child jumps out, quickly outrunning shouts of caution.

Don't they know that caution here is all about seeing without being seen?

Safely out of sight, he moves softly along the narrow animal trail. A box turtle shuts up tight. Swift tiger beetles sparkle through rays of forest light. A snake slips away – the same now swimming warily off shore, curving across the water top as easily as on land?

The stream runs clear and clean and cold, refreshed by spring-fed sources all along its tangled banks. The flow is a gentle, soft-spoken murmur, riffling over pebble shoals, swelling over rocks, slipping into pools so transparently still the current must be read in the motions of fish.

Summer's glaring sun seems a world away from here. It filters down through high, over-arching trees. Light here leads a more reflective life. So does a child just getting beyond the need to catch and collect piecemeal curiosities; a child increasingly aware that a

world this strangely beautiful needs to be learned and loved as a whole.

Here is the shallow cave that gives the place its name. The spring has worn a basin in the rock. Hands just naturally cup to taste and smell its ice-cold purity. Peppery crisp watercress outlines a shallow sunlit pool where silver minnows flash. Damselflies glitter softly back and forth, wings black, bodies electric green. Metallic green bees rock the speckled orange boats of jewelweed massing in the shade onshore. The leaves are somehow blue as well as green. That same uncertain magic touches both kinds of sumptuous black butterflies that flutter in and out. The pipevine swallowtail's restless sheen turns blue to green and back again. The larger, more leisurely spicebush swallowtail is powdered blue and green with equal uncertainty.

The cave mouth pool joins the mainstream by filtering through a narrow beach. This is the place to look for shell imprints, gifts of that ancient sea; to enjoy the musical *clink!* of rocks let fall. The stream glows softly green and blue where it deepens in the sun. Even a child can see that this water's brilliant liveliness is all of a piece with its rocks. Now (in this older, *mujo*-haunted now) this place demands comparison with a gem whose brilliance can be entered bodily. Of course the body suffers, as any body does in love with a rocky place. The water is aching cold to wade, the flint and chert fragments painful to walk, yet wade and walk barefoot one must. For a child alone in paradise, this is a place for all senses, no matter what the cost.

Here and there a large old tree leans out low over the water, inviting heart-pounding climbs. Ghostly white sycamores mix their aroma with the water's mysterious perfume. Some are the forest giants here, with hollow boles so large the brave can enter in. A few survive spring floods by clinging to rocky

shelves with marvelous desperation, wreathing "old fantastic roots so high" they cradle the dreamer and the spy.

The largest, wariest fishes haunt the flood-scoured pools below. A wide-mouthed monster lurks there now, that sudden-swallower, the sculpin. He lies so still among rocks so perfectly akin that the catch of the day is catching sight of him. The child, intent on that puzzle, hears but doesn't appear to hear the kingfisher's rattle of alarm. He knows but doesn't want to know that the bird is swooping away downstream because of another sound, a voice he hears but doesn't want to hear.

It's time to go. Where are you? It's time to go now.

Memory rejects that, even now, *mujo*-aware and all.

It's going on ten o'clock. The sun has set. The moon has risen full. We stand in its light, the Grouch and I, looking upstream from the bridge on that little country road, a slight detour at journey's end. The road is paved. Suburbia is well on the way to vanishing all that was. The woods are gone. A concrete dam has drowned the cave and spring. A mock Victorian gazebo stands watch over a white plastic boat in the shape of a swan. *No Trespassing* signs are posted all along the stoutly possessive fence.

This must be what it's like, half a world away, for those who revisit the vanished rustic charms of the Musashino Plain or the richly wild variety of the Niigata Prefecture wetlands.

Mujo. Am I right to think of it as another, more difficult journey?

END

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