

Rialta Diaries

By Thomas A. Nolan



Prologue

My wife, Carol, and I decided that 2007 was to be our year for a cross country trek in our 2004 Winnebago Rialta, a 22 foot RV. Since we're both retired it seemed that finding a contiguous three or four weeks wouldn't be too hard. However, with our various board and commission meetings, grandchildren's school activities, and my writing workshops, the earliest we could start that block of time was the second week in October – even then we opted out of several events. Anyway, we finally agreed on a start date and Carol began planning our route and locating the state and federal parks that would be our nightly stopovers. I started preparing the Rialta.

I wanted new rubber on the machine for this trip, partly because the old shoes had 21,000+ miles on them and partly because they were terrible tires. I soon discovered that only Continental, the manufacturer of my current tires, and Nokian, a Norwegian company, produced the odd sizes that the machine required. About the tires: the Rialta comes from the factory with 195/65 R16C tires on the front and 215/65R16C on the rear. This means they couldn't be rotated front to back to equalize wear. The bigger problem was actually replacing the tiny, but heavy-duty front tires. I was unable to locate a Nokian dealer who could get that size even though the company allegedly made them. Sensing that this would be a continuing problem, and reluctant to return to the Continental line, I asked my mechanic to check and see whether the rear tires would also work on the front. Turns out they do, even though the manual that came with the vehicle says they won't, so I ordered four of the larger tires.

While waiting for the new rubber, I began making small storage modifications to the interior. The Rialta comes with a closet in which to hang clothes. I don't know about other campers but neither Carol nor I generally bring clothing that requires

hanging so I built a set of shelves into that compartment. There is also a ledge above the refrigerator that has all manner of connections for a TV, an item neither of us thinks essential when camping, so I partially enclosed it in order to give us extra storage in that area.

The day before we were to leave, I went through the water purification process in the course of which I filled the holding tanks to overflowing. Purifying the drinking water system meant draining and refilling it three times, each iteration requiring that all faucets and the toilet be activated for a minute or so to circulate everything. The result was a full (to overflowing, yuk) blackwater tank. Emptying them would have to be handled on the first leg of the journey.

October 11, 2007 – Day one

I spent part of the morning on my computer locating dump station possibilities along our route. I remembered that *Flying J Truck Stops* had stations and located one about 250 miles into the trip. During the search I discovered that *Petro Stopping Centers* also provided facilities. Armed with this information and a sloshy mess in the toilet, we set out on our way west, leaving the driveway at 10:15.

Just South of Scranton we located one of the Petro places and, in a hard rain, pulled in to dump the tanks. After cruising the expansive lot several times without locating the dump station, I went into the building to use their facilities and to find out where to purge mine. Since it was raining buckets, and since I'd be spending about ten minutes in it, I bought a rain suit for fifteen dollars that included a hooded jacket and pants. I put the jacket on before returning to the Rialta with a key for the dump station, that cost ten dollars because I wasn't also getting gas.

"We have rain slickers," Carol reminded me.

"They don't have pants," I responded.

At the station I positioned the machine to access the sump and got out. It seemed like the rain was even harder but I had my new waterproof hoody on so I went to work. In order to connect the hose I had to get on my knees in an inch of water, and do the same to close the drain, so by the time I entered the camper again, my jeans were soaked.

"Why didn't you wear your new rain pants?" Carol asked.

Not having any possible retort that made sense, I remained quiet, took my wet jeans off and put on the rain pants.

The rest of the day we traveled through Pennsylvania and most of Ohio in rain of varying intensity.

An aside: service areas on the Ohio Turnpike are like airport terminals, they are absolutely huge! With showers and food courts available, Carol and I theorized that one could find a quiet corner and take up residence there.

We left I-80 a little east of Toledo, heading for the **Mary Jane Thurston State Park**. After hunting the back roads of northern Ohio for more than an hour, during which Carol pointed out several places where we "could ask", we found ourselves in Grand Rapids. Our map pinpointed this tiny hamlet on the Maumee River very close to the park, so we stopped at "Rapids Marathon and General Store" to ask a cordial gentleman named Tom sweeping up outside the place. Our exchange went something like this:

"Hi, may I ask you a question?"

"I reckon." Smiling and leaning on his broom, "If ya ask nice."

"How do we get to Mary Jane Thurston State Park?"

"Well, you go down Front Street," pointing to the well-lit street down a slight hill. "Take the road past the firehouse and the court. Take a hard left 'bout a block further on, unless you want to take a swim in the old quarry, then turn right at the stop sign and it's about a quarter mile down that road on the right."

We found the place easily but the campground was full. Carol wanted to find someone in the park to verify what the sign said. I mentioned that it was almost ten PM. After some more discussion, we decided to go back and ask Tom if there were any other campgrounds nearby. We had, by this time, been on the road for eleven and a half hours and were not looking forward to any more. He thought about it, asked some of the patrons then looked in the phonebook for one he thought was a little west. He had no success.

Suddenly his expression changed. "Are you self-contained?" When I said we were, he pointed to a parking area across an unused railroad line about fifty yards from where we stood. "Semis sometimes park there," he said, "The only problem is the sheriff might object." Just then a sheriff's patrol car stopped at the intersection. Tom hailed it and explained our situation. The officer said there'd be no problem parking overnight where Tom suggested so we pulled into our free campsite next to the Maumee River by an old railroad trestle and walked into town.

Front Street was probably half a mile long from the stop at Rapids Marathon to the ninety-degree left turn at the other end. At 10 PM it was deserted except for one teenager skateboarding in the middle of the street in the business district. The actual business district was probably a football field long with closely

spaced streetlights cutting parallel rows on either side, their pairs of hanging globes giving the place a European flavor. At the end of this section were a firehouse, town hall and another brick building that could have been a law office, or something equally prestigious. The town was plastered with posters advertising their annual "Applebutter Fest" preparations for which had apparently begun today (we missed the peeling.) I wished we had no agenda on this trip so I could be here for the rest of the festival weekend.



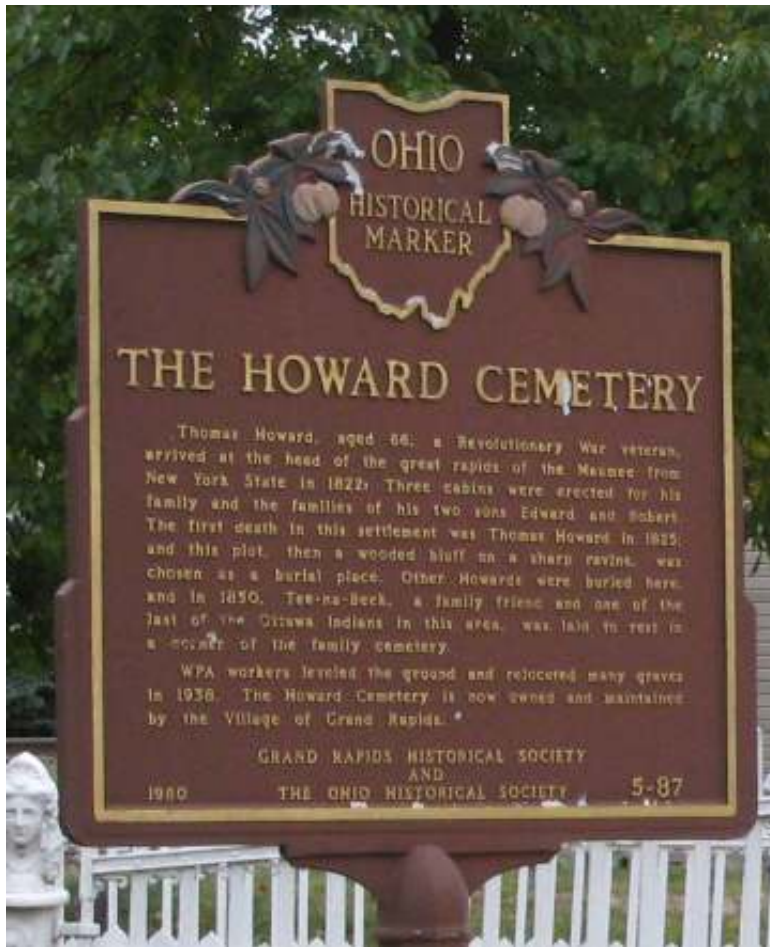
We went to sleep to the sounds of traffic on US 24 across the Maumee.



October 12

We woke this morning at about 6:30. I took a photo of the street before morning traffic showed up and then took a shot of the trestle over the Grand Rapids of the Maumee. Meanwhile Carol went for a walk. Thinking to catch up with her at some point, I began my own explorations.

Turns out there's a short canal around the rapids, not in use anymore, that now is the centerpiece of a linear park extending all the way to our unrealized destination from last night. I didn't walk it, choosing instead to take another look at the center of town. On my way back, I saw Carol emerge from the park and cross the street to a tiny cemetery with a historical marker in front of it. The marker and gravesite were of Thomas Howard, a revolutionary war officer who was the town's founder. His family and an Ottawa Indian friend are also buried here.



We left the town after breakfast, on our way to somewhere around Des Moines, Iowa, 550+ miles away. To avoid the boredom of the Ohio Turnpike (I-80) as long as possible, we opted for Ohio 20A most of the way to the border. Leaving Ohio on I-80, we continued onto the Indiana Toll Road (EZ-Pass works there) passing through that state and Illinois pausing only for the usual pit stops.

Thirty miles southeast of Des Moines we located **Elk Rock State Park** on Red Rock Lake, about six miles North of Knoxville. For eleven dollars we were able to occupy a site with electric, our little Rialta's first time on a shoreline (that's RV talk for an extension cord), and reload our drinking water bottles from the nearby tap.

This park has an entire camping area designated "Equestrian" and one that bars horses completely, with a \$116.00 fine for violating the rule. I think the "extra" \$16.00 was the price of an equestrian site. The non-eq area was empty except for one other small camper. The equestrian area, on the other hand was almost full. I road my bike to the gate to deposit our registration and felt much improved after the effort. ("Much improved" requires some explanation, I guess. Beginning on the first day of our trek, my right hip joint started aching. This has progressed to the point that it takes some determination to walk until I've been moving for a while. Thank God, or

pharmaceutical research, for ibuprofen; I've been living on Advil. This aging body is paying me back for years of mistreatment.) I made a fire and cooked some stir-fry while Carol cooked the rice on our stove. We ate at the picnic table under a display of stars rivaling Cape Hatteras.



October 13

After a morning shower and a hot breakfast we walked the mile or so to the equestrian campground. It bustled with all the normal morning activities common to a crowded camping area, kids on bikes and scooters, adults cooking and drinking coffee; except for the presence of a couple of dozen horses tied to hitch rails. One heavyset man in his fifties, near a strikingly beautiful pinto, greeted us and we chatted for a bit. He and most of the others were from Minnesota, traveling home from a Missouri campground, which he said had box stalls for four thousand horses and was three-quarters full when they were there.

We stopped at the dump station to purge the tanks and refill with drinking water, then took Iowa 92 west rather than get back on the interstate. We had a small shopping list building: windshield wipers, replacement rubber gloves for the tank purging process, actual winter gloves this big dummy neglected to pack, extra stick-on hooks, and Windex. We figured today was a good day to get them. This took a bit

longer than it might have because Carol refuses to enter any big box store if an alternative exists (she refers to Wal-Mart as "The evil empire"), so we searched a good amount of Knoxville, Iowa looking for a locally owned store. We finally located an acceptable business and were able to get what we needed. We continued our way west.

At Council Bluffs we picked up I-80 again and crossed the Missouri into Omaha, Nebraska. We got a state map and some park info in the visitors center and were told the Nebraska game in Lincoln was in the fourth quarter and that we'd probably hit heavy traffic there (you gotta love division 1-AA football), then were on our way to North Platte and our next overnight.

In North Platte we located and rejected Buffalo Bill's Ranch, and spent the night on the side of one of the several park roads at **Lake Maloney State Park**. (Another Aside: Small world variety - Our neighbor, friend and cat sitter, Bob was raised in Nebraska and as a child, fished with his father in Lake Maloney.)

October 14

Since entering central Ohio a couple of days back, we have been seeing thousands of acres of dry, standing corn (Carol refers to it as 'dead corn') on either side of the road. It's like every farmer from Ohio to Nebraska had planted only corn. Finally, in western Nebraska we started noticing that the south side of the highway was planted in 'dead corn' while the north side looked like prairie, with native grasses on the ever more prominent hills and cottonwoods lining the dry washes.

Speaking of dry, there ain't been much of it lo these many miles. We left New York in the rain and it continued during each driving day until today when we started across the Rockies on I-70. There it turned to wet snow. I dreaded the thought of hauling my raggy old body out into the mess to put on our tire chains (I actually had the forethought to buy some before we left even though I forgot my gloves) but my dread turned out to be needless. We made it across the highest point without the 'chains' directive and started back down.

On our way down the western slope we stopped in Frisco, drawn by the Starbucks sign. The coffee shop was inside a Safeway supermarket so while Carol replenished our groceries, I had our two travel mugs filled for fifty cents each and was given a card that allowed me to download a song from iTunes. You just can't beat that kind of deal. We stayed in the parking lot and ate our lunch before continuing toward our destination, one of a couple of state parks near Grand Junction.

I'm sitting writing this outside our little home with my mini-Mac plugged into the outside outlet, no precipitation evident finally. Carol's out scavenging for firewood, something she's done whenever we camp. The park is the Colorado River

State Park, Island Acres, the eastern most end of a 30 mile linear park. Here the river is about the width of the Wallkill back in New Paltz. I-70 traffic is a constant noise about a quarter mile away but that doesn't bother us. We have a site with electric, water, and sewer for eleven dollars. Not too shabby.

I made a fire with the scavenged wood, and after dinner we sat by it gazing alternately at the flames and the zillion stars framed by the dark cliffs until



finally we admitted that it was just too chilly to sit outside so we went to bed.

October 15

This morning we needed to turn the propane heater on to warm the cabin while we ate breakfast. We showered in the park's warm shower rooms, five quarters for five minutes. After dressing, disconnecting the camper from the facilities and buttoning it up for the next leg of the journey, we moseyed around the grounds for a while, enjoying the trails along the river. It was almost noon by the time we pulled out of the campground.



Cisco gas station 2007



Cisco gas station 1981

After a stop in Grand Junction, we took a short detour to Cisco, Utah, where we'd stopped with the kids twenty-six years ago. The murals depict the Colorado, a mile or so west of the station as it wends its way toward Moab. Curiously, the 2007 derelict building is in the same location as the 1981 but they are different buildings. The older one is wood sided while the newer looks like cinder block and the murals are definitely different. Apparently the station was rebuilt sometime during the past twenty-six years and then it burned. I remember talking to the owner back in '81, as he sat in an overstuffed chair alongside his shop, about how running a station in a non-existent town. He told me there was a large hotel just a couple of hundred yards down the road but it caught fire several years back and burned to the ground. The town

economy was built around the place and when it went, people left. When I asked why they weren't able to save the building, he looked up at me and said, "See any water around here?"

Back on I-70, we traveled through magnificent sandstone cliffs, colors varying from deep ochre to light tan. I had forgotten how truly beautiful rocks can be.

We exited at Salina in the middle of a convoy of eight identical Semis pulling double trailers with strange shaped tanks. We'd tucked in behind number five as it pulled onto the interstate about 30 miles East of Salina up in the mountains. On our way down in this convoy we saw many more of the same rigs going in the opposite direction. By the time we stopped to eat lunch and fuel up, we'd seen probably fifty of them, counting both directions and never did see where they were going to or coming from. After lunch we continued West on US 50 through Utah into Nevada and our next stop, **Great Basin National Park**. The trip through Utah gave us a sense of the real wilderness that is this area. The tree population thickened substantially as we entered "Fish Lake National Forest" and thinned out again as we descended into the Black Rock Desert.

As we left the town of Delta, where 50 is joined by US 6, a sign immediately after the last Sinclair station read: "Next Services 83 Miles" it would have been more accurate had it read: "Next Sign of Human Life 83 Miles" for with the exception of the occasional grazing steer, we saw nothing of the fauna persuasion. I checked our odometer when I saw the mountains in the distance and again when we started climbing into them, 68 miles.



View from the Border Inn parking lot.

We made our final fuel stop of the day at Border Inn; the gas pumps and motel are on one side of the border and the convenience store and restaurant are on the other so we filled up in Utah and peed in Nevada.

We are at Lower Lehman Creek campsite, space 10. My Eagle Passport lets us camp for half price. There are some benefits to being old.

I volunteered to take the self-registration envelope up to the kiosk and soon was reminded that walking up even a slight hill at 7500 feet can be an interesting experience for a sea level type. Carol is making dinner, the generator running so she can use the microwave, while I scribe this record. Our plan is to spend two nights here before continuing to Yosemite, the first of our three National Park destinations in California. There are some caves that we will explore tomorrow in one of four guided tours.

October 16

I didn't mention this earlier but our water system has been acting up in strange ways since the morning at Elk Rock State Park in Iowa. We have very little water pressure, hot or cold, in the galley, there is normal hot water but no cold in the bathroom and the toilet works fine. After puzzling about this the last couple of days I think I've finally figured it out. Some of our water lines are frozen. The hokey way the water system is configured has the troublesome lines running very low near the outside wall; the one functioning tap comes almost directly from the water heater. Now that I think know what the problem is, I don't know if I can fix it. Right now I'm running all the bad taps open to see if the tiny movement of water will free the freeze. One more episode in the saga of my love/hate relationship with this machine.

Getting back to the trip, we spent a delightful day at this park in the mountains. After a hot oatmeal breakfast we drove down to the visitors' center and chatted with the owner of the café and gift shop there, enjoying her hospitality and good coffee. We bought our tickets for the 1100 cave tour; Carol bought her Senior Pass, being officially a senior citizen this year, so we got them at half price. Unfortunately new regulations ban cameras in the cave so I couldn't get any pictures. The cave had formations I've never seen in other tours, tiny helectites that defy gravity (they weave in and out from the side wall of the cave horizontally), a sheet-like formation the guide called drapery, and another he called bacon that when backlit really looks like a giant strip of the stuff.

After the tour we went back to the café and had a great lunch, then drove to Baker and bought firewood. By the time we returned to number ten Lehman Creek, it was precipitating quite heavily, rain mixed with snow. The whole episode lasted maybe fifteen minutes then the sky cleared so I went out and made a fire. The brief storm had dropped the temperature a bunch making the warm fire a great place to sit around.

I'm writing this inside the camper as water drips from the taps. We talked about getting a very early start tomorrow, coffee and out as soon as we get up, then stopping at Ely, Nevada to replenish stores and dump the tanks before continuing on US 50, billed as the Loneliest Road in the USA.

October 17

We got an early start this morning, on the Loneliest Road by six-thirty, even drank our coffee from travel mugs. Our first stop was Ely (pronounced Eelee) where I fueled up and dumped the holding tanks. Before leaving the campsite I had dumped the remaining fresh water and drained the system since it wasn't working anyway, so we are now a rolling desert. We ate breakfast at the Silver State Restaurant, got our first Loneliest Road visa at the Historic Hotel and Casino, topped up the propane tank at Suburban Propane, then hit the road for Eureka, 77 miles away. The trek varied from cruising on flat scrub prairie where we were able to see the few cars approaching from several miles away, to winding through arid hills of juniper-studded Navajo sandstone, the neutral ecru lending itself to the loneliness. The occasional Bristlecone Pine that was probably a seedling before man invented God, appeared high on the hillsides, providing a rare change from the endless juniper.

In Eureka, we got our next visa stamp at the restored Eureka Opera House. We spent a little time looking at the photo gallery of folks who'd played the house: Juice Newton, Eddie Rabbit, and Utah Phillips are the ones I recognized. The town looks relatively prosperous, at least on the restored main street, with a distinct western air. Resisting the temptation to tour the other restorations, we climbed back into the Rialta and made for Austin, 70 miles west.

We found this little former mining town at the end of a series of switchbacks that marked the western descent from the Toiyabe Mountains Wilderness. Unlike Eureka, Austin has not aged well. We parked across the street from the Lander County Courthouse, where our little book says we get our next visa stamps. The first order of business, for me at least, was locating the restroom. Afterward we looked all through the two-story building and couldn't find anyone. The county sheriff's office was right next door so we went in to ask where to get the little book stamped. The young, overweight man in the sheriff's uniform told us from behind a locked door, the Shell gas station would do it. He didn't seem alarmed, or even surprised, when I mentioned the empty courthouse.

We got our stamps and some more fuel at the Shell station while steeling ourselves for the ride to Fallon, at 112 miles the longest leg of the five-town journey.



Concerned about what lay ahead, Carol asked the attendant if he had any idea about the weather toward Fallon.

"Only weather I know is what this tells me," he said in a Mexican accent, pointing at the little device that recorded the temperature and humidity in his part of the building. "It isn't a good idea to try and get a forecast of the weather west because it only stresses you out, and it may never come," he added with a broad smile. My plan-ahead wife had to settle for that, since there was no internet access immediately



available for her to check Weather.com. We did hit some snow flurries along the way but nothing that caused any problem.

Fallon is the largest of the five towns along the route, with a modern and substantial downtown. It is the first place in Nevada that we've seen dairy herds and land that looks like it would support vegetable farming. To get our stamp we searched out the Churchill County Museum and Archives. We spent quite a while walking through this eclectic collection of historical stuff: cameras, audio equipment, firearms, western clothing, archeological displays, regional geology, wheeled vehicles from a covered wagon to a Chrysler 300-J, to name just a few. As we were leaving, a thundering herd of middle school kids arrived, lots of them Native American.

Our fifth and final stop on the loneliest road, the town of Fernly, a short distance from Fallon was a series of strip malls and car dealers. We located the Chamber of Commerce, a scruffy little cottage on a narrow side street, and got our last stamp from a woman who had no apparent interest in telling us about Fernly. Thirty miles later we were crawling through Reno rush hour traffic on I-80 heading for California.

We passed through California Customs without difficulty - declaring that we had no citrus seemed to do the trick. However, on the way over the Sierra Nevadas, we hit wet snow. I was running dry in all the tanks and the fuel was less than a quarter full, which made the front end light and a little squirrely. Combine that with the absolutely abysmal road and suddenly the trip became a whole lot more exciting than I would have wished. The machine was dancing a bizarre tango on the bumpy surface even though I'd slowed to about 35. At one point I turned the wheel and the beast kept going straight. I managed to ease it back in control, and shortly thereafter pulled off the interstate to fill up with outrageously expensive California gas.

We left I-80 for good at Auburn, intending to find an available state campsite for the night on California 49 south, our road to Yosemite. The road snaked up and down the hillsides, passing through towns with names like: Cool, Coloma and Lotus. It was getting dark when we saw the familiar brown tent symbol on a signpost near Lotus and turned off 49. We couldn't find the campground so we turned around and got on what I thought was 49 again, but turned out to be a parallel road west of it that took us to Shingle Springs. At Shingle Springs, we picked up US 50 east and found our road again at Placerville, but no campgrounds, public or otherwise.

Finally, searching the AAA campground guide for California and Nevada, I located a KOA halfway back to Shingle Springs. I steeled myself for the upcoming dialogue and

showed Carol that this was the closest camping for many, many miles.

Some explanation is in order here. My former flower-child wife has such disdain for commercial campgrounds and the monster motor homes that occupy them that she refuses to acknowledge the fact that our small, streamlined machine is in fact an RV, manufactured by Winnebago, instead calling it a camper, the designation given to our two earlier Dodge Vans that I converted for camping. Reminding her that campers generally don't have microwave ovens, generators, connections for electric and water, etc., is an exercise in futility. As a result of this aversion, we have 'camped' in some pretty odd places: truck stops (don't ask me how that's better than a commercial campground,) highway rest areas, service roads on state park land when the park was closed for the season, and the parking lots of convenience stores.

To my surprise, Carol was so weary that she consented to the KOA almost without protest. However in a last effort to avoid a commercial park, she suggested we spend the night at a 'Park and Ride' she saw just off US 50 within half a mile of the KOA. I ignored her.

October 18

The following morning, after spending the night at a camp that cost the same as a motel room, we started south on 49 again. The goal this time was Yosemite National Park's Upper Pines Campground, Site #1. I gauged the distance at about 150 miles and god knows how many hours of corkscrew turns. We'd tried to get an early start and had managed to be on the road by eight. CA 49 didn't disappoint, giving us another snaky drive for a couple of hours until we left it for 120 east. About a half-hour later, we began a climb that required all my concentration on the shoulderless two-lane mountain road. After we entered the park boundary it was another hour or more before we arrived at our camp. I learned later that Yosemite is the size of Rhode Island.

We settled into our campsite a little after two pm, having been lectured on the bear in the camp problem and initialing a statement that we understood and would take appropriate precautions. We rearranged the location of our food and scented toiletries so that they were all in cabinets.

Aside: The things a person will do to avoid a chance meeting with a black bear are pretty intriguing. I met a guy tonight at the bear proof trash dumpster who had walked all the way up from his site just to deposit his coffee grounds, which by the way were still in the coffee pot.

After making camp we took a shuttle bus (thick as ants at a picnic all through Yosemite Valley) to the visitor center to look around. We got more maps then walked to The Ahwahnee, one of the two valley lodges, for a guided twilight stroll where we learned a couple of things about climate variability and wildlife in the park. One interesting point was a small grove of Giant Sequoia behind the lodge. These gigantic trees grow naturally at altitudes above 6000 feet, but the grove we were standing in is on the valley floor, an altitude around 4,000 feet, so someone had to have planted them. Their growth will be stunted we were told, as I looked at trees that Carol and I together could not encircle with our arms. Whoever planted them did so around a hundred years before we stood on that ground.

What strikes me as I look at the granite walls bracketing this valley, is how starkly visible the incredible mass of this magnificent planet becomes here. I've been into the Rockies and the Alps and not experienced anything close to that.



October 19

Our second day at Yosemite and a definite laundry day; a shower would be nice also. We rose in time to make coffee, dress and take ourselves over to an eight o'clock 'coffee with the ranger' meeting at the Lower Pines Campground amphitheater. The ranger, Christine, was brewing coffee and had a box of fresh donuts available for the taking. The small group just chatted, no special program or theme evident. Folks did talk about bear sightings and Christine said there are about twenty-five bears in the valley this year, where usually there are only six or seven, due to the drought conditions making food scarce in the high country.

After the session we prepared to do laundry. We decided first to check the facilities to make sure they were still open since so much was closing for the winter, so we walked from Curry Village to Housekeeping. Once there we discovered that the laundry was open but the showers were not, bummer. We caught one of the shuttle buses back to camp and drove the camper up to the laundry. Since we were the only ones there I cranked up the generator and let it run the entire hour and a half. That let me use the microwave to cook a spaghetti squash for dinner and to charge the battery on this trusty little computer, not to mention the camper DC. I made breakfast while Carol handled the laundry and we ate while the dryers did their work.

We decided to attend a ranger geology program at two but were a little late getting to it. The ranger at the desk, Christine, our coffee buddy, told us where they were headed so we hurried to catch up with them. Hurried is probably not accurate, since we stopped along the way to observe and photograph an 8-point buck resting among the trees beside the busy path, and spent some time locating a woodpecker that we kept hearing; but eventually we found the group. Most of the attendees were middle school kids, about thirty of them. We'd been seeing this group around the valley, from some extended field trip I'd guess. Anyway, the ranger was relating the Indian legends we'd heard yesterday on our twilight walk to the mostly bored group. When she began to talk about the makeup of the granite walls, she sounded like she was talking to a bunch of first graders.

We left the group, returning to the village to visit the Ansel Adams Gallery where prints of many of his Yosemite photos were on sale, priced from \$275 up to \$1,000. There were several of his originals, priced from \$8,000 to \$80,000. I spent a lot of time trying not to drool all over them. Carol dragged me out of there, opting for the village

store to get postcards and a Yosemite sticker to add to the population growing on the back of the vehicle. We are also still in the market for a new coffee pot; our thirty-



year-old drip pot has begun to leak around the lower end of the Bakelite handle. I tried unsuccessfully to tighten it a few days ago, now we just fill it on one of our IBM acquired cafeteria trays and let it leak. Unable to find a suitable replacement in the store, we shuttled back to camp to mount our bikes for a trip to the Mirror Lake trailhead. It felt good to get back on the bike after several days away from it and the valley is much easier to negotiate on two wheels with bike paths going everywhere.

Mirror Lake is bone-dry this time of year, a bed of sand and rock. We read each of the educational placards along the route, learning about the early exploitation of it for tourism and the current efforts to return it to a more natural state, whatever that means. Once again, the walls of the valley in the waning afternoon light drew my attention. I don't want to babble on about the awesomeness of them, I've likely overdone it already, but I can totally understand why John Muir kept returning for ten years. We met people last night who have been coming here every year for over half a century; it's that kind of awesome.

Back at camp, I shot some pictures of the shadows on the walls and watched raptors riding thermals high against the cliffs. When evening and the half-moon arrived, I got a few shots of it. Tomorrow we are on our way to the south end of the park and the Mariposa Sequoia grove.

October 20

It rained a bit last night, enough to puddle the chairs we left out by our campfire but not enough to wet the ground under the fuller-leafed trees. As a result, the cliffs were draped in mist giving the place a whole different aura. As the mist began to lift, the peaks appeared and disappeared like they were playing a mammoth game of hide-and-seek.

We ate breakfast, washed the dishes and buttoned the machine up for travel. On



the way out of the campground I dumped the holding tanks (YUK!) so we'd be riding empty. We stopped three times on the way to the village so I could take pictures. I think I'd go broke if I were still using film.



We left on CA 41 toward the south entrance to Yosemite and the small campground at Wawona, a first-come-first-served campsite. When we arrived, Just before noon on this Saturday morning, the sign said Campground Full. We investigated and found three unclaimed sites so we claimed number seventeen: one night for seven bucks because I'm old. Once we chained the bikes to the picnic table to remove any doubt that it was occupied, we headed further south a few miles to our target, the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias.

We fit ourselves into a suitable parking space near the trailhead, stocked up with water and cameras, and began our walk among the big trees. These sequoias are to big as Niagara is to waterfall. The oldest are 30 feet in diameter and nearly 300 feet tall. Getting close to them gives one a perspective similar, I imagine, to a squirrel looking at a full-grown sugar maple. We remained awestruck through the entire two-mile hike

from 6000 to nearly 7000 feet. At the end of our trek I realized that, had we not spent several days at high altitude, that hike might not have happened.



Upon our return to camp, I built a small fire and Carol made hot tea and coffee. We sat by the fire for the next half-hour or so just lost in our own thoughts. I went inside then and uploaded all the photos to the computer. Carol followed a short time later and we prepared for our first dinner out since starting this journey. We dined at the Wawona Hotel, treating ourselves to a wonderful meal and a chocolate bread pudding that bordered on heavenly. After dinner we spent an hour in the lounge of the hotel listening to Tom Bopp play the piano and sing show tunes and songs from the forties and fifties.

We're at the camp now, tired and happy. Tomorrow we will be once again in civilization.

October 21

We decided a few days ago that we wouldn't be able to camp at both Death Valley and Joshua Tree without straining our travel plans, so we opted to skip Death Valley. This morning we left our Wawona campsite with the temp just at freezing; it was twenty-six when we got up according to a neighbor. We both wanted a hot shower so the options were, a truck stop or commercial RV park. As I mentioned earlier, one of Carol's idiosyncrasies when we camp is the need to stay with public - county, state or federal - parks, where mine is whatever makes things easier, so we had a little disagreement about it but worked it out so that whatever we saw first would suffice.

As we headed south toward Fresno, Carol came up with a new idea. Turn north at Mojave and find a motel for the night then tomorrow morning drive through Death Valley and continue to Joshua Tree, arriving at our reserved site in the evening. That sounded good to me so we made that our goal for the day.

On the way through Fresno we saw what may be the largest RV sales and service place in the western world. Since we needed something to keep our freezer door shut (I don't remember if I mentioned that whatever closing mechanism it has, broke), and we still needed a new drip coffee pot, we whipped off the exit ramp and eased our way past acres of huge RV's finally passing through an archway and past a reflecting pool to the parts and service area. I opted to park with the few automobiles in the lot rather than embarrassing the little Rialta by parking it in amongst the giants. Inside this mega

parts store we found what would work to keep the freezer door closed but no coffee pot. We'll keep looking.

We continued through Bakersfield, Tahachapi, and Mojave, turning north to the Navy town of Ridgecrest. Does it strike anyone else as strange to have a Naval base in the middle of the desert? It was early enough that we went through the town without stopping, hoping to find lodgings in Trona, twenty-two miles closer to Death Valley.

Trona, it turns out is a mining town, looks like borax or something like that. The mine buildings cover a couple of miles along the road with the town proper appearing to have the largest buildings.

The only motel in the place had a restaurant that had been closed by the health department. It was really seedy looking, with a couple of pickup trucks parked in front of doors 1 and 3. We couldn't locate anyone to talk to about a room (I think we were both thankful for that) so we turned back to Ridgecrest and are now ensconced in Room 106 (though only the six remains on the door) of the first motel we saw, the Rose Garden Inn and Suites. We were in 146 but when I turned on the faucet in the shower, using the vice grip pliers attached where the handle would normally be, there was no hot water. When I returned the 146 key to the innkeeper our barefoot innkeeper said he'd checked his own hot water and it wasn't working either so the whole building is probably out. There is a Rose Garden in front of the office.

(10)6 is in a building across the narrow side street. It is tastefully decorated with spackle-patched walls and a dab of mint-colored toothpaste on the bathroom floor under the sink, but the shower was hot. We had only one chair at the table in our room until I located the second out by the unfilled swimming pool. Apparently the previous tenant liked to smoke and since it was not allowed in the rooms, chose to put a chair outside. This smoker was a little sloppy because there were four or five cigarette burns in the seat.

The restaurant out front of our motel is closed because it's Sunday. The fact that there was no place within walking distance made us immediately hungry, so we hopped back in the trusty(?) house on wheels to search for food. At the main intersection we turned toward some bright lights. The lights were on various closed restaurants and at least six familiar motel chains that we could have called home for the evening. Sometimes it pays to turn the corner.

October 22

Our bed in (10)6 gave new meaning to innerspring mattress, but we slept pretty well nonetheless. We got an early start this morning, foregoing breakfast for gas station coffee and peanut butter crackers, so we could make the long run north to Death Valley and back south to Joshua Tree.

The exotic, varied landscape of Death Valley National Park provided a lot of 'oohs' and 'aahs' as we traveled from 4000 + feet above sea level to 200 + feet below. I could readily see how early morning or late evening light would make the mountains an inspiring photographic experience. We stopped briefly at Stovepipe Wells, which is at sea level, to pee and get more coffee then continued down to Furnace Creek, over 200 feet below sea level. We fueled up at almost \$4.00 a gallon, bought our park sticker at the general store, and got back on the road. Even after we left the park we drove through fifty miles of non-human inhabited countryside. I say that with some confidence having seen not one scrap of litter by the side of the road for that entire distance.



At Baker, I topped off the fuel tank and we got on I-15 westbound toward Barstow. We were forced to go through California Customs again on I-15; it's the prime route from LA to Vegas. When I told the friendly inspector that we were coming from Death Valley, he waved us on with a smile. At Barstow we stopped at a handy Starbucks for refills and then turned east on I 40 toward Ludlow. Leaving I-40 at Ludlow we found ourselves on 'Historic Route 66' heading toward Amboy. We turned south, toward Twenty-Nine Palms, just before reaching the town.

An aside here: We saw, in the trip from Barstow to Amboy, at least a dozen mile-long freight trains, most heading west, so many that half of them were stopped, waiting for the ones ahead to clear the track. I've never seen that much rail traffic in such a short time/distance window.

We refueled again at Twenty-Nine Palms and continued west until we saw the sign for Black Rock Canyon Campground. We made the left turn and five miles later pulled into site twenty-nine and parked the machine in a relatively level spot. I switched the fridge to propane then went outside and built a fire, helped greatly by the strong wind. We sat for a time watching the day wane, Carol with a cup of hot tea, me with a can of Heineken.

The campground host came by, a chatty man our age eager to tell us all about being a host camper. He and his wife sold their home eight years ago and bought a large motor home. They've been hosting at various places ever since. Their stint is usually one to three months in a place; he said they reject anything longer. They've done federal, state and county parks, forest service sites and in January they'll be heading to the University of Arizona's wilderness research site. He mentioned areas in Montana and Maine, among others.

The Maine location put them at the edge of a remote meadow where they watched a doe nurse her fawn while they sat out front of their RV drinking morning coffee. He said the doe got so used to them being there that she would be no more than fifteen feet from them, nursing her fawn. He also said a yearling buck, probably last year's fawn, was hanging around and made friends with their dog. Often he'd see the buck lying in the shade of their awning right beside the dog. It would get up and leave when they came outside.

When I asked how long they planned on hosting he said they originally figured eight to ten years before settling in one place, but they reassessed recently and decided on ten more, at least. When he left we talked about what it might be like to travel that way. Who knows? We may be doing that some day.

Tonight the moon is waxing toward full and the air is so clear that the moon shadows are sharp and eerily beautiful. It's too cold, with the constant wind, to sit outside comfortably but I'm tempted to grab a sleeping bag and curl up on the picnic table to watch the stars.



October 23

I got up a bit after six this morning, put on coffee and built a small fire with no help from the wind this time. Carol poured the coffee into the travel mugs and then started walking up into the hills behind our campsite. She watched the dawn from the hillside while I watched the hills behind her glowing with the coming sun.

I washed last night's dishes out on the picnic table, the way we used to do it in camp before investing in a machine with indoor plumbing. I had finished the dishes and was sitting by the fire sipping my second cup of coffee by the time Carol found her way down from the hillside. She cooked apple pancakes for breakfast after which we just lazed around the camp for a few hours.

Before the trip started I asked Carol to buy me a yoga mat like she has and to teach me some yoga on the journey. This morning was our first yoga session and it was good to get back to something I'd stopped over thirty years ago. Needless to say, my flexibility is wanting as is my balance, but it was good anyway. I may actually add this to my day, off and on.

After a light lunch we tried out a hike that was to include various nature markers. We were basing it on a brochure that had to be returned to the "toy ranger" (Carol's name for the impossibly young man behind the desk.) He said it would tell us what to look for at each one. The trailhead appeared to be off the parking lot right near our site. Taking our cue from a sign announcing Hilltop Nature Trail, we started up that path,

brochure in hand, looking for marker 1.

We traveled quite a distance along this clearly delineated trail finding nary a marker along the way. We scanned our maps and couldn't see where we went wrong. Keeping key landmarks in sight we continued along this markerless route, joking about carrying a laminated one-of-a-kind guide book that was totally useless. After about a half mile trek through yucca and Joshua trees we came upon the intersection of several trails with a single marker that said Trail and had an arrow pointing to our left. On the opposite side of the marker was the word Campground and an arrow pointing in the direction from which we'd come. Not willing to take the left turn at that point we continued straight and within a hundred feet or so came upon a small marker engraved with the number 2. Further on we came to another with the number 1 on it, and finally to a parking lot. It became clear then that we had taken the half-mile trail that led to the hilltop trail, even though the sign didn't indicate such. The parking lot we left from was not the one talked about in our laminated guide. Once we looked more thoroughly at the not-to-scale map we understood our error. We had a nice walk, however, and returned the guide to the toy ranger at the center then walked back to camp.

Later that afternoon we drove to the north visitors center, the one closest to our camp, and located a park sticker for the back of the machine. We asked about maps but they had none different from what we already possessed. On our way into the center, Carol noticed a small shop across the wide street that announced showers. She went to investigate while I added the sticker to our national park collection. By the time I'd joined her she had the information needed to secure us showers on Thursday morning, as we turned toward home. The shop also had a wealth of bumper stickers, several of which we liked but we confined ourselves to just one, paid for it and left.

We needed some provisions so we drove into Yucca Valley. Carol shopped while I sorted photos on my computer. She had not taken our canvas bags into the store, hoping that the groceries would be packed in plastic so we could have some garbage bags for the galley.

Once back at camp, Carol stored the food and I built a fire. Dinner and scrabble ended our day.

October 24

We rose late this morning, almost seven. I started the coffee using the new filters Carol had purchased on yesterday's provisioning trip. The idea is to make cleanup easier by not having to dig loose grounds out of the drip basket. While the water was heating I lit the morning fire then went back into the camper and poured the hot water into the pot.



Outside, that magic morning glow was just appearing on the hillside behind our site so I sat by the fire and watched. As I was about to get up and pour the coffee Carol came out with our two travel mugs full and joined me by the fire. Soon after finishing that first cup I recognized that a trip to the restroom was in order and traversed the short distance (did I mention that our site was the first one up the hill from the restrooms and drinking water spout?) to that building. A tricked out Jeep Wrangler rested in front of the men's room, a machine clearly meant for this country. A sign on the side of the driver's door read Bart Davis, Photographer with several other words which I didn't try to read due to the increasingly urgent messages from my bladder. Inside the facility a pudgy man in dark red shirt and black trousers with a Buck knife sheathed in black hanging from his belt was washing a hat in the sink. Various other items were strewn about the counter and a black necktie hung over the partition to the urinal that I used. To make conversation while peeing, I mentioned that it was a pretty morning. That simple statement allowed me to find out that Bart was 67, retired three times, currently a manager at the new Home Depot that was about to open in Yucca Valley, a professional photographer that had sold desert photos to National Geographic and Four Wheeler, his Jeep had 200 hundred horses and a six-speed manual transmission (I think I remarked that it was a nice machine at some point), the only time he'd gotten stuck with it was pulling off a major highway to eat a sandwich and burying it in soft sand, a highway patrol friend pulled him out but he'd done that many times for them and for the sheriff, the police in the area were very friendly. It took me a while to get back to camp.

We decided that on a series of nature walks further south in the park, so after breakfast and cleanup we readied ourselves to travel deeper into the desert of Joshua Tree National Park.

Our first stop was Hidden Valley, a former rustler's hideout where there was sufficient vegetation to graze purloined steers. We naturally had some trouble finding the trailhead and instead walked into the desert a ways, following the trail left by a mountain bike and enjoying the exotic rock formations. We noticed an unusually large number of park ranger vehicles and a search and rescue truck in the lot when we arrived and determined that they were involved in a training exercise that included getting someone down off a large rock outcropping. I decided to position myself in the rocks for a money-shot that I could perhaps sell to the park service, so I grabbed my Nikon and the bag and climbed a little way so that I could get a good view of the rope with both rock and sky as the background at several points. When I found a location I liked, I sat and waited ... and waited ... and waited. I waited for nearly two hours while workers at the top fiddled with ropes and workers at the bottom rigged anchors and pulleys. Carol made lunch and brought it up to me then managed to locate the actual Hidden Valley trailhead, where the rescue folks were working it turns out. I decided that I waited so long that I didn't want to miss the shot so Carol took the nature walk alone. She returned an hour later and still no action. Finally, I realized I'd wasted half a day trying to get a shot that maybe would take another half-day to get, so I left, frustrated.

Our next stop was "Skull Rock" a quarter mile nature walk according to the papers we had. We found the trailhead this time and walked about a mile-and-a-half, taking the trail up to the skull rock and the road back to our Rialta.

Finally on to the Oasis Visitors Center, a little east of Twenty-Nine Palms, where we bought postcards for the grandkids and walked part of the paved Oasis walk. Strange that the Indians who lived here called it Mar Rah meaning water place, or something

like that. Taking note that 'mar' is water in their language, I recalled that 'mer' is sea in French and 'mar' is sea in Turkish and I imagine some variation of it is sea in Spanish and Italian. Makes one wonder a bit.



We decided we needed an internet fix and located the Yucca Valley library which granted us guest passes for their computers. I cleaned up the trash on my primary account, checked the others and found a paypal transaction on the wordsmith account. After signing off I called Steph to make sure she had access to it and to alert her that the transaction was there.

We're back in camp now as darkness (if you can count the incredibly bright moon as letting it be dark) falls and our evening fire burns. This is our last night at Joshua Tree and I really want to get a moon shadow shot. I noticed that the western sky just above the mountains was glowing with a red-brown haze as the sun set. It looks like those wildfires near the California coast are making themselves known even this far east.

Among the several varieties of birds we've seen, quail are the funniest. They run from one bit of cover to the next chattering in chirpy voices all the while and they have that neat comb that looks like a fishhook with a little ball at the end; one has the impression that they're chasing it when they rush across the clearings. Others, besides the ever-present raven, are jay-like, some with iridescent blue on wings and head, offsetting the dark charcoal back and lighter gray belly; or colored a deep dark red instead of the blue. The thing that strikes me about them is the way they fly. Once airborne they soar for some distance losing altitude slowly then flap their wings once, twice at most, to gain altitude before going into their glide again. I imagine that the economy of motion is essential to conserve energy in such a harsh place.

October 25

This morning we saw the first evidence of the California wildfires in a red brown haze dusting our normally vivid blue sky. Rather than our usual morning fire, we packed

the little beast up while we waited for the coffee to brew then sat at the picnic table to plot our course. The first order of the day as we broke camp was to dump the tanks, which I was able to do with surprisingly little hassle. We had decided also to refill the fresh water tank to see if the several days of warm weather had cleared the perceived ice jams in the lines.

I filled the fresh water tank and then turned on the pump and opened all the taps, expecting to purge the air from the lines and have the water flowing freely - pump is running but no water, or air out of the taps - hmm?! I exited the machine to discover water running out of one of the purge valves. Quick thinking as I am, I dashed inside and flipped the valve to the other position, reasoning of course that since it was apparently open my action would close it and solve the problem - still no air or water from the taps. Outside again I see that the water is still draining from that valve. I elicited Carol's assistance as a watcher, went in and turned off the pump, which is the feed for that valve and the water stopped draining. Realizing finally that the valve was the problem, a new problem since our freeze, I gave up and purged the tank. Our appointment for much needed showers was next on the agenda.

As I mentioned earlier, across from the visitors center a small trading post sells backpacking, rock climbing and other camping gear, bumper stickers of all types, books about the desert and incense and hemp sandals. They also have great showers, which we used.

The guy who opened the shop needs some recognition here. This longhaired, bearded bear of a man in an open shirt that once had sleeves, sunburned arms, tattered shorts and hemp sandals, rode in on an old Toyota Tacoma that had obviously seen a lot of desert running. It was jacked up enough to clear rough ground but not crazy, with a paint job that resembled desert colors, a place welded to the tailgate for a spare gas can, and a shovel and axe clamped to the side rack. After apologizing for being twenty minutes late opening the store, he took a call from his girlfriend on his cell phone, told her to call the store cause his battery was low, and told us to take the 'Duck' shower because it was bigger than the 'Moon' (the pictures on the two shower doors outside) and when someone snuck into the duck ahead of us, gave us an extra token for an extra 7.5 minutes of wonderful hot shower. It didn't take long to feel squeaky clean for the first time in almost a week.

We bought another bumper sticker to add to our collection then headed east. Our initial idea was to traverse the park to the south entrance and pick up I-10 then go back north in Arizona. I thought about the wildfires and evacuations and suggested that 10 might be pretty crowded so instead we took US 62 east, a more direct route and very sparsely traveled.

A note about secondary roads out here: flash floods can make the many dry washes into raging, if short-lived torrents so the roads that cross these washes actually run into and out of them rather than over them with culverts to let the water pass below. It seems a smart accommodation to the variability of the weather in this remote region and also makes a fun roller coaster ride along the way. We were again faced with the desolation of the high desert as we drove. Many settlements on our route were vying for the designation of 'ghost town' with boarded up motels, abandoned gas stations and homes with roofs falling in.

We made excellent time, easily maintaining 70 mph along most of the route. In Parker, Arizona we fueled up at a place called Terrible's that had its own coffee brand. The coffee was good. We turned north to pick up I-40 about twenty miles above Lake

Havasupai City, a sprawling resort area with incredible amounts of new construction going on. There's something bizarre about the way people continue to try and bend an area to their will instead of enjoying it for what it is. The strangest thing I noticed as we drove through was a golf course, green patches in the middle of the red sandstone desert and even a tunnel under the road so that golfers could play through, so to speak.

Once on I-40 we had a relatively uneventful trip to our destination, a state park, Homolovi Ruins, outside Winslow (yes the "standing on the corner" Winslow; there is even an exit off the highway that highlights it). Our only detour was for an apparently serious accident on the road through Flagstaff. We got off the highway and onto Route 66 for a few miles until we were past the point of the accident then returned to I-40.

We got to the park at about six pm mountain time, without the little saving time/daylight time flip in Arizona it's the same as pacific right now. All the sites we found in the campground have water and electric which costs \$7.00 more. We told the campground host that we couldn't locate a non-electric site and she told us all the sites had hookups and if we didn't want to pay for them don't use them. Simple enough and demonstrates a level of trust that I keep forgetting does exist in some parts of our great country.

The moon is full tonight but not, Joshua Tree magnificent. Either the lights from Winslow get in the way or the haze from a controlled burn well to our south has something to do with it. Anyway, the full moon looks like it does back home. Tomorrow is a laundry day so we probably won't get too far. We'll camp somewhere in New Mexico, hopefully in Chaco Canyon.

October 26

This morning we went to see the Homo'lovi Ruin after breakfast and were fascinated by the potshards and stones left on sections of the walls, thousands of them distributed about the site. We surmised that it was a Hopi ritual, since they consider these ruins sacred places.



On the way out of the park, I asked the ranger at the visitor center about the mysterious clusters of stones and shards. With a sad smile he explained that tourists picked things up and instead of putting them back where they found them, placed them among others on various rocks. It kind of reminds me of a fountain with one coin soon accumulating many more. Interesting and sad in a way that people are so insensitive to a place that they don't feel the need to keep it the way they found it.

Our goal today was laundry in Gallup, NM then on to Chaco. On the way east on I-40 we decided to tour the Petrified Forest/Painted Desert area so we exited at Holbrook and made our way to the south entrance of the park, looking for a second cup of coffee along the way. We didn't find the second cup until the far end of the park but we reacquainted ourselves with the wonders of huge trees made of stone and the many-colored layers of sedimentary rock that define the Painted Desert.



Back on I-40 with our Painted Desert sticker for the back of our camper, we struck out east once again toward Gallup. It was after two by the time we reached the city, far later than we'd intended when the plan first formed. Proximity to Chaco was a draw that we couldn't resist and we were worried that spending too much time on mundane chores in Gallup would make enjoying our favorite canyon impossible. We both decided that we could go one more day with the clothing that remained and could therefore postpone the laundry. After a stop at a Safeway to pick up some provisions, we headed for the canyon by the shortest route. Our dash clock read 3:20, we had about 70 miles to travel to Chaco, and Carol wanted to get to the visitors center before it closed at 5:00.

We managed the first 50 miles at a good pace, turning off AZ 9 onto 57 at 4:12 where the left turn pointed to Chaco Canyon 20 miles. The sign at the beginning of the dirt road read, "Rough road, may be impassible, proceed at your own risk." Proceed we did.

The machine rattled and bounced its way along the road at an insane speed, jarring everything in it, but we arrived at the visitor center at 4:51, in time to pick up our sticker and get the requisite information brochures. We also bought more postcards for the grandkids, reasoning that they should know about one of our favorite places in the world.

We are settled at site 18 in the campground, bypassing the nostalgic site 5, the place where the only tree in the campground resides and where we camped so many years ago in our blue '81 dodge van. We did see a coyote in about the same place I'd encountered one on my bicycle back then. I found a couple of scraps of wood at the site and made a small fire while Carol walked around the area. Once the fire caught I began writing this.

It always surprises me how quickly the air cools in the desert. I was sitting in the late sun, enjoying the light traveling along the cliffs across the canyon. As soon as the sun dipped low enough to put me in shade, the temperature dropped probably 20

degrees and I had to get another shirt on to keep warm.

The moon came up over the east canyon wall a short time ago and I managed to get several pictures of it while it was still low on the horizon. After I put the equipment away and went to the men's room to unload the beer I'd had while waiting for the fire to take, I saw what would have been a beautiful shot, our tree silhouetted against the darkening sky bracketed by two cliffs. I knew that by the time I got the gear out, the light would be gone and so would the shot. Sometimes life's like that.

On the way back from the men's, I said hi to the man in the handicapped site, sitting with a tiny, ugly dog in his lap. He invited me in and we had an interesting chat about camping and Chaco. I told him that we were on our way back from a tour of the Eastern California parks and were stopping for a few days in Baltimore to baby sit grandkids. It turns out he and his wife use to live in Baltimore. Small world strikes again.

Carol is plotting our course for tomorrow while I write this and listen to some unusually loud people in the next site over. Tomorrow is definitely a laundry day.

October 27

We were up this morning before dawn, made coffee and rode up to Pueblo Bonito in sub-freezing crispness, to take some pictures of the sun hitting the walls of this sacred place. I was able to position myself so that I could get the setting harvest moon to appear right between two of the spires. I took many shots before and during the sunrise, freezing my butt off and loving every minute of it. While it doesn't have the majesty of Yosemite, there is something about the place that keeps drawing me back. I think walking among the ruins of a sophisticated culture that existed here a millennium ago is probably it. I can touch the same ground, see the remains of their buildings, hear of their astronomical charts carved into the mesa that sits alone on the flat canyon floor. This is our fourth visit and probably not our last.



Shortly after eight we were in the visitor center chatting with a volunteer ranger who was about our age. Carol asked why there was no longer any emphasis on the Sun Dagger up on the mesa and the ranger said that there's so much else that's been

uncovered about the culture that the mesa has taken a back seat. She also said that she is one of the few people to have actually been up to the site and seen it as a grad student doing archeological fieldwork. She volunteers here and was supposed to leave by Thanksgiving but is now staying till Easter.

Soon we were on our way out of the park on the actual marked exit. It was rough and wash-boarded enough to rattle our teeth but in no way did it approach yesterday's trip up 57. We reached US 550 in fairly reasonable time, with only a little more than half dirt road in the 21-mile trip. Driving south through Albuquerque we connected with I-40 eastbound. We needed to do laundry and wanted to reconnect with the internet and refill the propane tank so we planned to stop for the night just outside Tucumcari, at Ute Lake State Park, less than 350 miles away.

All along this couple of days in the high desert we were treated to distant hillsides where widely spaced scrub juniper masquerade as cattle, and forests of three foot high creosote shrubs, in wide rows five or six feet apart look like they'd been planted by some ancient farmer. Where the juniper gets enough water to become trees, the occasional cottonwood, leaves colored an autumn yellow, signals even more moisture in the soil. Sometimes a snakelike line of them defined a wash.

Albuquerque was way too big to be searching through to find a place so we decided to bypass it and see if a large truck plaza appeared that advertised laundry facilities, none did so we got off at Santa Rosa and found a Laundromat next to a seedy motel that advertised free internet. The washing machines and dryers were modern and quite efficient; we used three washing machines and two dryers. But the free internet turned out to be tenants only. While I waited for the wash, Carol went for a walk into the main part of town, a few blocks away. Fourth Street was closed to traffic for repaving but had some shops that she was interested in seeing so she headed in that direction.

As I began writing random thoughts in my journal, a young couple drove up in a faded blue 1970's vintage Chevy Impala. A woman in her twenties, very overweight, long black hair and dark skin, Mexican/Indian descent probably, and a tall, powerfully built man about the same age, tattooed arms, calloused hands, clearly Caucasian, came in with loads of laundry and two small children, a beautiful four-year-old girl with her mother's complexion and a light-skinned baby about six months old asleep in a carrier. They brought in five large trash bags of clothes and a plastic hamper, all washed it turned out and just needing to be dried. Once everything had been unloaded from the vehicle, the man drove away.

I pictured the couple five years ago, high school football star and beautiful cheerleader - I imagined her slender and her now pleasant pudgy face angular with the high cheekbones of her ancestors - both from poor working class families. One of the nights of passion, unprotected, their intercourse creating that beautiful child and sealing their future. Sometimes, perhaps less often than it appears to me, the frustration of that fate manifests itself in irrational anger directed at each other and the children. While I didn't see any demonstration of affection between the adults in my brief observation, neither did I see any of that anger or harshness.

Watching the woman interact with her daughter, I saw gentleness and tolerance, none of the frustration cum anger I'd come to expect. The incident that stands out most in my mind is watching the woman sort and fold the mountain of clean clothes. The little girl started to pull something out of the basket to fold it like her mother. The woman smiled and said, "You want to learn to fold clothes?" and stopped her own work

to show her daughter how. She let the eager girl try several pieces, helping just enough to assure success, until the little one tired of the task and began to pull articles from the basket, asking her mother whose clothes they were. The woman first told her then soon had the little one guessing for herself. I could have watched all day.

An aside about Santa Rosa: this derelict of a town, with stores boarded up and pawnshops and twenty-four hour bail bondsmen, lays claim to one of the great state parks in New Mexico, Santa Rosa Lake State Park. We camped there sixteen years ago on our tenth anniversary trip. The hilltop campground overlooks the lake. We both remember moonless nights when we lay on the picnic table and counted the stars. The most intriguing feature of the park is solar heated water in the bathrooms. The taps have only hot water and hot water flushes the toilets also. We found that, in order to shower during the daylight we had to flush all the toilets so the water would be cool enough to wash without being scalded.

Since we found no suitable internet service and no propane we moved on to Tucumcari, a substantially larger and noticeably more prosperous town (five exits off the interstate instead of three) and began searching for an internet café – which would handle two addictions at the same time – and propane, oh yes and actual fuel for the Rialta. We were almost out the other side of town before I found either. In fact the gas station I stopped at was the last building in sight to the east. It had both gasoline and propane, and Carol got a wireless internet connection from the newly opened Quality Inn next door. While I got our various tanks filled, she downloaded her emails. We decided to enjoy the hospitality of the Quality Inn for a bit, so with laptops in tow we went into the lounge and had wine and beer at happy-hour prices instead of coffee. Both of us got our internet fix and a drink before turning north on US 54 toward Logan and Ute Lake, twenty miles away.

Another aside: driving east with the afternoon sun at our back, our elongated shadow in front of us, I became fascinated by the merging of our shadow with that of the huge Kenworth and Peterbilt tractors we passed, a kind of high speed shadow puppet show, our distinct avatars merging into one as we closed on each other.

In our all too frequent 'find the park in the dark' mode, we located the southern entrance to the park, primitive campground it said, which was okay as long as we had a place to pull in off the road. We couldn't find the campground at all and almost drove into the lake looking for it. Back out on 54 we continued north, saw a sign listing the park ten miles farther, then saw another sign three or four miles later that pointed to another section of the park. Not to be fooled twice we bypassed that one looking for the ten-mile entrance. In Logan, we saw a sign for a left turn to the park; it wasn't ten miles yet so we drove by. We were out of Logan when it occurred to my nimble brain that the ten miles didn't necessarily mean 'straight ahead'. A U-turn later we were driving back looking for the park sign, which we missed and U-turned again to come at it from the south. Finally, we turned left and within three miles, located the main entrance. We had our choice of full hookup for \$14.00 or none for \$10.00. All but two of the 60 or so sites in two separate campgrounds were empty. The full hookup area was completely empty so we picked a site there and splurged for the full \$14.00, even though we didn't use it.

As we settled in for the night, we turned on the lights and the one over the table didn't work. Since it has two bulbs and works on two switches it seemed to me that the lamps were okay and it's likely that a wire had jostled loose sometime in the last couple of jarring days. All the fuses check okay so that almost has to be the problem. Unless

I can locate it easily, the problem will have to wait till we get home. I did manage to spray WD-40 on the sticky passenger's door and fix that so my macho maintenance image is semi-intact.

The moon came up orange this evening, a gigantic pumpkin in the sky over the lights of some town to the east. Pollution does have some scary kind of beauty about it.

The fridge is being finicky with this new propane load.

October 28

We rose at about seven-thirty and spent time enjoying hot showers and walking around the place. I did a little yoga in the warming sun while Carol explored the perimeter. By the time we were done washing the dishes and trying to figure out the problem with the fridge it was noon. We left camp and continued north on 54, passing from New Mexico to Texas, "Proud Home of President George W. Bush" according to its sign (Carol screamed) and on through this corner of the Lone Star State and a smaller corner of Oklahoma, making our first stop in Liberal, Kansas. On our way through the big T, we passed two enormous feedlots, one on each side of the road. The pens on the right sloped up, and apparently over, a small hill in the distance and each pen was well populated with beef. The place on the left was a shallow dish with pens going up all sides, which Carol said looked like a football stadium. I'm estimating it at about the same population as one of two huge college stadiums. I think we were looking at well over 100,000 cattle.

In Liberal, we found a supermarket and picked up more supplies, they don't sell beer on Sunday in Kansas, no surprise there. We also located a large Ace Hardware store and picked up many more of our highly valued hooks. By the time we finished, it was five pm and Meade State Park was only thirty miles away, so that became our stopping point. We found it with no trouble, it being daylight and all, and picked a site next to the beautiful lake and watched the sunset. The fee schedule is a little complicated but I think we had it figured out. Our site with electric and the entry fee cost \$17.50. It's still better than a motel.



I sit here now, shortly after dark, listening to our neighbor, who occupies the only other non-vacant site in the place, playing the harmonica by his fire. There are ducks out in the lake whose call sounds like someone's cackling laugh. It's so funny both we

and our neighbors laugh every time we hear it.

Our fire has died down to coals and it's pretty dark now so I think I'll close up for the night.

October 29

Up early this morning. We made coffee, dressed and packed the Rialta in time to be out of the campground and north on KN 23 by six am. Carol mentioned often how pretty the Kansas route signs are with the number inside a sunflower. We rode through wispy morning fog patches that took me back to early morning drives as a teen in upstate New York.

It didn't start to get light until after seven, with the sun just beginning to show itself when we pulled into Pratt, the largest town between Liberal and Wichita, and parked in the crowded lot of the Servateria Café. For the first time in a long time we had the choice of 'smoking or non' offered.

We picked the 'non' and sat in a large, high-ceilinged room with one other couple, who left shortly after we arrived. Our waitress, the youngest woman there working or not, took our order. The food took an unusually long time to arrive and when it did, Carol's one scrambled egg to go with her hotcakes wasn't with it. Since Carol was in the restroom I mentioned the absent egg, which the waitress verified by glancing at the check. She returned with the egg about the same time Carol did and we dug into our meal. While we were eating, seven men right out of Farm Journal seated themselves at a large table some distance away, followed shortly by two others who sat closer to us so the once cavernous room began to feel less so. I enjoyed my Spanish omelet and Carol her hotcakes, enhanced by the fact that we didn't have to do any dishes I suppose. Our meal complete, we waited for our young server to total the check and bring a container for the second of Carol's two very large hotcakes, and waited, and waited. Finally, I rose with the check and took it to the register. Passing our girl on the way I requested something to contain the hotcake. Her tip reflected the level of service.

Back on the road, driving into the low sun, I watched Kansas change from rangeland to farmland noting how the relative abundance of moisture yielded substantial trees both in size and density, then the trees were gone and huge tracts of wheat and grass spread away on either side of us, interrupted at infrequent intervals by a small, oasis-like grove protecting a farmhouse and outbuildings. The only other thing appearing in that treeless vista was the occasional oil well pump, endlessly repeating its slow bow.

The Kansas leg of the trip went relatively quickly, letting us slip from Kansas City to Kansas City, Missouri by about one-thirty central time. I saw a sign for a tourist center at the first exit off I-70 and headed for it to pick up information about the state park system. We had moseyed farther off our path than I wished and still hadn't located the place so we decided to turn around and find another. Preparing for a left into a shopping center, I looked to the right to check traffic and there it was on the corner. We parked in the almost empty lot and were met by a man walking away from the building with a sheaf of papers under his arm. He was probably my age, with a hint of a mild stroke or Bell's Palsy immobilizing the right side of his face. Once he determined we were looking for the tourist center he turned around, saying it was closed on Monday but inviting us to enter. Pushing our protests aside with a friendly smile, he unlocked the door and led us in. We learned he was retired, a volunteer at the

place and had just been doing some paperwork there. We told him we were looking for information on Missouri state parks and he found us a pamphlet listing all by location and accommodations, along with a campground guide for the state. I picked up a Missouri roadmap from one of the tables while he guided us around the building. He said it was once a bank and led us to the vault area where a local artist had set up a civil war display with weapons and uniforms from both sides in glass cases, paintings of significant battles in the vicinity and an interesting series of photos using civil war reenactors on the actual battlefields. The man mentioned that his grandfather was in that battle, didn't note which side, but did call it the Civil War rather than the War Between the States. We thanked this friendly Missourian for his help and hospitality and headed back to the Rialta.

As I rounded the corner of the machine I noticed that the black water holding tank was leaking. Shaking my head, I informed Carol that our next stop would be the nearest dump station. We got back onto I-70 with no trouble and continued east. About ten miles out of the city I saw signs for a Petro Truck Stop. Leaving the interstate we had actually two choices, Petro or TA. I knew from the beginning of our journey, that Petro was likely to have a facility so we tried that first.

I found the dump station and emptied the tanks. Unlike the place in PA this station was free for anyone to use at any time. On the downside the rinse water was turned off so I wasn't able to rinse the hose the way I'd like. Holding the hose back in place, I broke the snap that secured it in its cubby. I closed and secured the panel then drove to the fuel pumps to fill up. With the various tanks emptied and filled, ours and the Rialta's, we got back on the road pointed toward St. Louis. Carol briefed herself on our camping choices along the way while I negotiated the lightly trafficked highway, setting the cruise control at seventy-five.

I guess it's because of the time we spent in the desert that I kept noticing the indiscriminant use of water along the way. I saw several park fountains spraying beautiful mists of water in graceful arcs, something I probably wouldn't have taken much note of three weeks ago.

After a half hour of map and pamphlet analysis, Carol had several choices picked out on the eastern side of the state. Our only criteria at this point in the trip, was that we be parked in a site while there was still daylight. We stopped at a highway rest area at milepost 161, just before the first of her possible sites, to discuss the alternatives (and of course to use the facilities). It was just past four, too early I thought to stop for the night, so we agreed to drive to Dr. Edmond A. Babler Memorial Park on the outskirts of St. Louis, a little more than an hour's travel time away. Our plan called for us to take exit 210 south and east on US 40/61 then off that on five miles of tertiary roads to the park entrance. We figured that we'd easily be there by five-thirty. We got lost.

Our first mistake was leaving US 40/61 at the first of three possible opportunities. It looked easy enough to just follow this small road as it changed from Olive St. to Easterman St. and then to locate a road named BA – both Kansas and Missouri seem to identify their tiny roads with letters rather than numbers – where we judged the entrance to be. Easterman led us to a choice of two right turns, one before and one after a railroad crossing, neither one appeared on our map. I took the first one which wound its way south and eventually forced us to cross the track to a T. I thought we were too far south so I turned left at the intersection. This, we discovered, was Wild Horse Creek Road and it showed up on our map. We followed it for several miles, passing palatial homes on both sides of the road but not finding our entrance road,

which we reasoned was on our left. It wasn't because we were going in the opposite direction from what we thought. Carol noticed a sign, as we passed an intersection, that pointed to the park back the way we came. Hanging a U-turn at the first available spot, we headed in the correct direction, the sign indicating that our goal was a mere 5.5 miles further. Three miles along the way another sign told us to turn left which we did, onto 109. Very soon road BA appeared on our right, with the additional name Babler Park Road. We took that turn even though no park sign told us to. The entrance was two miles further. It was six-fifteen and getting dark by the time we found the campground and parked the Rialta at site 31. It occurred to me that the signs we saw were visible from only one direction, in other words you had to be going the preferred way down the road to even read the sign directing you to the park - very strange.

October 30

We left Babler Park at about seven-forty-five am, in time to experience some of the rush hour traffic entering St. Louis. On our way to I-64, our eastbound path, we looked for a Starbucks to provide us with our second cups of coffee. Instead we discovered, by following some locals into a strip mall, a delightful little coffee shop that served superb dark roast coffee along with a monologue on how to properly roast the beans. I bought the coffee while Carol sat in the Rialta downloading her e-mail by virtue of the free WiFi signal this little shop provided. The server brewed a new pot for me so it took long enough that she was able to complete the process.

Unfortunately, while I waited for the brew to complete and listened to the roasting lesson, I began an optical migraine episode. The jelly-like blur usually starts small and grows in the center of my vision, gradually migrating to the right side. There's never any pain involved, just a loss of clear vision for ten minutes or so. By the time I paid for our drinks I was well into the migraine so I sat in the machine with my eyes closed until the jellied blob moved into the periphery on the upper right of my sight line.

We made slow progress into the city but once in the midtown area, in sight of the great arch, the traffic cleared enough to let us resume a normal road speed while crossing the Mississippi. After that we slowed again through some areas featuring business parks until finally the traffic thinned and we were on our way.

All through southern Illinois and Indiana, we continued to see large expanses of farmland much like Kansas and Missouri. One striking difference was the appearance of new growth in many of the fields. I can understand winter wheat - we saw that the day before in the two aforementioned states - but I was seeing corn, and what seemed to be new, greening grasses. The way the corn looked it could have been volunteers from the last harvest, maybe the same for the grass. I'm guessing the unusually warm autumn is responsible.

Between Louisville and Lexington we knew we were in serious horse country. Lush green, meadows enclosed by dark brown or white, three-rail fences with a half-dozen or so beautiful horses grazing in each, appeared along both sides of the road. One of the last ones we saw sported the sign "Thoroughbred Retirement Farm" making me wonder what famous names were nibbling bluegrass on the other side of the rails.

As we drove east the flat farmland changed into rolling hills and thickly treed hillsides with hardwoods well into their autumn wardrobes. The hills became steeper and longer as we approached and finally, in Eastern Kentucky, rose into the Appalachians. We'd passed through three states in the course of the day on our way to

our stop for the evening in Beech Fork State Park, fifty miles southwest of Charleston, WV.

We got off the interstate at Huntington - it turns out a couple of exits too soon - and started south. After a dozen miles on route 152 and nine more on an unnamed, winding mountain road, we arrived at the Beech Fork Lake Marina, stopping just before a sign reading, "Road Ends in Water" with no sign of a campground. Back along the unnamed road we wound, and decided to drive further south. We entered the tiny hamlet of Wayne in the midst of their day-early trick-or-treating, and stopped at a local store to ask directions. The very helpful store owner directed us five miles yet further south, past a Walmart and a small white bridge with an H&R Block office on the corner at which we were to take a left. We found the turn with no trouble but faced another dozen miles of winding, unnamed mountain road. We reached the park as dusk turned to dark, self registered in the third of the four separate campgrounds in site #2, and plugged in. I made a small fire in which we disposed of the miscellaneous cardboard we'd accumulated. While the fire did its work, Carol and I sat nursing our beers, enjoying the reappearance of the night and recognizing this as our last night in camp. With the moon rising late we were able to see a great array of stars in the clear sky.

When the chill finally got to us, we adjourned to the interior and ate substantial spinach salads for dinner after which we engaged in our final scrabble game of the trip over our second beer. Carol won.

In order to get the earliest possible start we washed the dishes and prepped the coffee pot so we could pour our java and be gone shortly after rising, then crawled into bed.

October 31

We were on the road by seven this chilly mountain morning. As part of our self-registration packet last night we got a campground and an area map along with directions to the park (not much help to us last night of course) that had people leave the interstate at exit 11, instead of 1 as we did. We decided to reverse these newly found directions to return to I-65 as efficiently as possible. It should be no surprise that the directions took us over another winding mountain road; it did have a name though. It appeared at one point that we'd missed a turn but we were on a road where there was no possible way to turn the camper around so we kept on going. At the highest point on the road we encountered the settlement - I don't know what else to call it - of Bowen Ridge. Both sides of the narrow main street sported small, rundown cottages. A bait shop, a church and a general store bracketed the town. We drove through it in the dark. Down the hill traffic joined us from various side roads, until we were a regular convoy heading, I hoped, for the interstate. A few minutes later our convoy arrived at a stop sign. I took the right turn, partly for expediency because the way was clear, and partly because I thought it would lead us to I-65. Almost as soon as I made the turn I knew in my bones it was wrong; it just felt wrong. I U-turned at the first available spot and came back by the road we'd entered from, noticing that the line of vehicles waiting at that stop had grown substantially. Not more than a mile later we were at a traffic light with signs to the interstate directing us to a right turn. A few minutes past seven-thirty we pulled onto the eastbound ramp and accelerated into the morning traffic.

We crossed the Kanawha River within half-an-hour, watching the early mist rise from the water and the world of Charleston wake up to its business day. After breakfast

at a Cracker Barrel somewhere around Charleston, we rolled up and down the mountains toward Maryland. The roadside foliage still had the glitter of morning frost with the occasional DOT mower gathering it in along with its intended target, leaving behind only the dark green of the mown grass.

By mid-afternoon we were at the end of I-70 in the city of Baltimore. Carol wanted to get some folders for the upcoming Unison Auction and we both wanted another cup of good coffee so we wove through Baltimore streets toward a Starbucks we knew about. At the corner of Loch Raven and Taylor we turned into the strip mall where our coffee shop waited, bought two small dark roast coffees and sat at one of the two outside tables to drink. Carol called our daughter Wanda to verify the location of a Staples where we could get the folders she needed. The store was only a few blocks from where we sat so we hauled ourselves and our half-finished coffees back into the Rialta and rode up to it. Completing our transaction - two hundred pocket folders for auction goer information - we turned east again along Taylor toward the Haskel residence and the official end of our vacation.

Our clock read a little after four-thirty when we parked in front of their unused garage. I once again tried the non-functioning propane setting on the refrigerator, the definition of insanity I'm told, without success. We walked through the unlocked back gate and entered the house without being accosted by Bartleby, their excitable lab. It soon materialized that the great yellow dog had escaped and was roaming the alleys. When he wandered into view I called and he came to me, enthusiastic and smelling of whatever garbage he'd been into.

Jamie had a class that evening so we had dinner without him, although the terrific veggie burgers he'd prepared kept him in our thoughts. After dinner Miranda, Wanda and Carol went trick-or-treating, Miranda as Tinkerbell and Wanda and Carol as Mother and Grandmother.

Epilog

The Rialta is parked in the alley in front of their garage and our vacation trip is officially over, though we won't be home for another several days. It's been a great ride for us. The machine's failures just didn't matter in the course of our journey; we adjusted and were fine. I have lots to do to put it back together and I'm not certain how to do it all, but I do like a challenge.

The countryside we went through and the folks we met along the way both give me hope for our future and a level of frustration at the ignorance of some people.

One of the more noticeable elements of Middle America's Bible Belt is the proliferation of mega-churches and adult superstores, a truly intriguing combination.

-END-