

The Keystone State: Doing the Scranton Dodge

Fock 1: Scranton Dodge, Phase 1

As BM and I rolled across the bottom of NY towards PA on this AM, an FM DJ reported the weather like a UV SOS: "It's going to be sunny, so cover up, and be careful." Yeah, yeah, it's common sense, and good advice, and yada-yada, but he made the sun sound so malicious. It was almost like a tornado warning: *Look out! The sun!! Hide!!!!*

But it got me pondering, and since I had ample time to ponder as the miles slipped along, I made it quality pondering.

Is it really the sun that is frying us to Extra Crispy these days? We're told it is, due to Ozone Warming and the Global Hole. But is that all? And are they right about the cause? What about all these electronic wavelengths and signals? Hasn't the concern about protecting your skin strangely coincided with the veritable explosion of signals that fill our atmosphere (and beyond)?

Some comedian – I believe it was George Carlin – recently did a routine about that. He pointed out all the various signals that beam through our atmosphere: radio, shortwave, television, radar, satellites, microwaves, cell phones, and so on – *billions* of signals at any one time worldwide. And a hundred years ago, there was nothing but empty air.

But let's take that a step further. These signals go through the air, yes. And they go through water, yes. And they go right through the plastic casings of the devices themselves, and right through the wooden walls that surround us, and the metallic vehicles that transport us, and the concrete and steel and glass buildings that enclose us. So, what's to keep all them signals, on all them ultra frequencies, from going right through *us*? Our skin, bones, brains, connective tissue, stomachs, livers, and our reproductive organs get silently and invisibly zizzzzed by them all the time, all day, every day.

So maybe at least some of the blame for the dramatic rise in cancers of all kinds should fall on those invasive signals. Are they really harmless? Would you choose to stand in a satellite dish and let them buzz through you for a few hours? Wouldn't you begin to wonder if they were doing you a little bit of no-good?

Haven't police forces been hit with lawsuits from officers who contracted testicular cancer from the radar speed detection devices on their laps? Isn't there concern about bad doings due to too much cell-phone to the head?

The sun has peak hours and strong seasons, and it only goes skin deep. But these signals are 24/7/366, and they'll keep increasing exponentially.

But big whoop, though, even if I'm right. This is not a trend that will be reversed, no matter what. Nothing I can do about it, and I don't think I even want to. I like my electronic gizmos too. Man will adapt.

So, anyhow, those ponderings got me up to the border of State #3, Pennsylvania, where a new concern took precedence.

It wasn't Pennsylvania itself that was the source of the concern. I like Pennsylvania. It's the Keystone State. And that's another nickname that makes sense. The configuration of the original thirteen colonies was a big curve, arching from New England down the Eastern Seaboard. Pennsylvania was right at the middle of the arch, just like the keystone, the wedge-shaped piece at the crown of an arch that locks the other pieces in place. It goes back to Roman Empire times, and the grand vaults of the Roman baths could not have been built without keystones, so they must be OK. Hence, The Keystone State is a good name.

You could consider that a bit pretentious, though, I suppose. You know, like PA was saying that the colonies would fall apart without it. Maybe it is a bit smug, taken like that, but it's still not as bad as that "Empire State" crap.

Pennsylvania has more people than Cuba, or Greece, or Belarus, or Illinois. Only four states are more populated than Pennsylvania, even though it is not even as large as Mississippi, or Nicaragua, or Laos.

Pennsylvania even still has two counties without traffic lights, which is pretty damn cool.

On many of my early journeys, I chose I-80 – the Pennsylvania Turnpike – as my westering or eastering route, and enjoyed the seven hours of rolling hills. It's a prime trucker route, and I quickly learned how to get along with trucks. It's not hard, really, as long as you show them the respect that they believe they're entitled to – in other words, as long as you get the holy hell out of their way. They get mighty cranky when you make them break their momentum, especially on uphills. And if they think you did it on purpose, just to screw with them, you better pull far away and stay there, because you will end up with a barrel-assing rig climbing into your trunk on the next downhill.

The high beam flash to give them the “all clear” to pull in front of you is a simple way to make nice with most truckers. It's a way of helping them out, or at least we like to pat ourselves on the back and believe that it is.

And I-80 has one of my all-time favorite road signs. As you roller-coast along the eastbound lanes, you see a sign that blandly states: “Mile Run – 2 Miles.”

There are also some damn cool town names in PA. Shy Beaver is one. Black Lick is another. Scalp Level. And, of course, the consecutive rural communities along SR-340: Bird in Hand, and Intercourse. No state has as many small towns as Pennsylvania.



Even PA license plates – tags, to everyone except New Englanders, it seems – used to be nice: blue, with yellow lettering proclaiming “You've Got A Friend In” across the top of the plate, and “Pennsylvania” across the bottom. Maybe a tad corny, but quite amiable. (Hmmm, amiable, Amish...? Coincidence??)

However, recently, PA tags have gone inscrutable. As Y2K neared, PA put a tiger on their tags. A tiger? A tiger?? In Africa? I mean, in Pennsylvania?? WTF is up with that? Is there cause for concern in those shady hills? That is, beyond banjo-plucking in-breds? The concept of preserving wildlife is noble, to be sure, but a tiger? In Pennsylvania??

And the trouble is, I bet 90% of the people who see those tags don't even think twice about it. People can be kinda dim sometimes.



Like I said before, Interstate 95 had been abandoned as a southbound route years ago in favor of I-81. Driving along the spine of the inland Virginia mountains is a much more scenic and sane way to travel to Florida and other points south. From New England, I-81's extra distance is a good trade-off to sidestep Baltimore and DC (as well as that pricey Delaware) and the nerve-fraying, schedule-wrecking traffic jams that come with those cities.

The only trouble with I-81 is that, if you come from the east or the north, you go through Scranton, Pennsylvania to get to it. I do not like Scranton. That city did me wrong.

It was in 1996. Max and I hit the road on February 28th for a fortnight's escape from winter's worries and bartending's beatings. Destination for Day One was “Somewhere in Virginia,” with the only definite agenda item being a stopover to visit Andy for supper in Scranton, where he was finishing up his theater studies at the U. of S.

The drive was going great. It was a nice late winter day with vivid sunshine, and brown grass was beginning to replace grayish-white snow as the predominant ground cover. The pavement was dry, the traffic was light, the tunes were boppin' and Max was purrin' like a kitten. Then, of course, came that stretch of I-84 through New Freakin' York that used to incense me. It was six miles of horribly-conceived paving that *thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thumped relentlessly*, transforming relaxation and contentment into aggravation bordering on rage. It didn't make you a damn madman, but it did make you damn mad, man.

What *idiots* thought this one up?? Did they really think it was a good idea? And what about the mushminds who approved it, and allocated who knows how much money to pave it that way? The bumps were clearly deliberate, as a stupid attempt at keeping drivers awake on that dark and empty stretch. But

it was awful! I was ready to snap, and I was on vacation, a man in Casual Mode. What did time-stressed truckers, on-the-road salesmen, and their ilk do?

That stretch was a total mood killer. It was so bad that I used to drive as much of that six miles as I could in the breakdown lane, crunching among the litter and scraps of debris, rather than subject myself and my van to that insane hammering. It was like a Highway version of the Chinese Water Torture: you just wanted to scream out, "MAKE IT STOP!!!" (Thankfully, it has since been fixed.)

But we got through it, and Max and I both settled back to resume enjoying the ride. We were well into Pennsylvania's easy scenery, and considerably ahead of schedule, about thirty miles shy of Scranton, when, with an odd **THUNK** sound, Max just shut down. We coasted to a halt at the bottom of a long hill. Despite fervid cranking, and obvious vitality in the engine, it would not restart. Checking under the hood, squirming under the van, and removing the doghouse (that's van lingo for the cowling that covers the engine from the inside of the van) all showed me nothing. I checked wiring and fluids and everything I knew how to check, but no obvious flaws or faults waved at me.

AAA – the real "don't leave home without it" – was summoned. Thankfully, I was into the cell phone thing by now, because this would've been one longass walk to get to any other phone. A couple of burly rednecks showed up with a flatbed tow truck, hauled Max up on top and asked where I wanted him towed to. Well, I had no freakin' idea, so I asked them what was around. I figured that their tow truck was probably affiliated with some sort of repair place, but if it was they never thought of it, because they started "brain"-storming about what was around. They finally locked onto the idea of a downtown dealership, Scranton Dodge, and proceeded thither.

Scranton Dodge was already closed for the day, but Chris, the mechanic who was still lingering inside offered to take a look at poor Maxie. A sudden snow squall had just sprung up and it was snowing and blowing hard, but Chris looked like he didn't even notice it as he examined Max. He quickly ascertained the problem: the coil wire, though still apparently connected, had come loose at its contact point. He rigged it up with a new contact in a matter of minutes, and charged me very little. In gratitude, I overpaid him, and said goodbye to Scranton Dodge.



Andy and I had a typically bogus Ground Round meal – Scranton was not exactly teeming with epicurean delights – or much of any kind of delights either. What an armpit of a city. Ugh. Even the "nice section" that the two rednecks proudly towed me through was, at best, ordinary. Granted, flowers and trees in full bloom and color would probably brighten up the overall blahness, but this place would still be weak. Andy referred to the Scrantonians as "white trash," and it's easy to understand that, given the trashcan of a city they inhabit.

We took a good two-hour conversational cruise down around the equally blah city of Wilkes-Barre and back, then I bid Andrew a fond farewell, and eagerly steered Max southward toward warmth, sunshine, golf, beaches, and ... *uh-ohhh*.

Not even thirty miles out of Scranton, all of Max's electrics suddenly went kerflooie. It was as if somebody had just flicked a switch: the tunes died out, the lights immediately dipped to candle strength, and the engine began stuttering like Ken in *A Fish Called Wanda*. "**WTF!?**" I wailed. This was not a good beginning to a two-week roadtrip.

Fortunately, I was near an exit, so I killed my useless lights, and, to my surprise, the engine revived! The van was now driving fine, as long as I ran nothing electric. So, lightless, heatless, and tuneless, I drove the few blocks to an Econolodge parking lot, where I figured we could hunker down for the night before having AAA tow me back to – where else? – Scranton Dodge in the morning. So I turned off the ignition, pulled out the key, and began to climb in back to get the bedroom ready.

Then it occurred to me: the engine was *still running!* Well, WTF, Max?! First you won't run at all, and now you won't shut off. What's up, buddy? You are one confused van, Maxie. Oh, he sounded great too: a contented whirr, almost too quiet to hear, so smooth and peaceful, like he could run forever. But I needed him to stop whirring.

Recalling the problem from earlier in the day, and figuring that if a disconnected coil wire will kill the engine once, it should do so again, I pulled the plug, and, with a gasp and a shudder, Max stopped breathing.

I crawled back into the sleeping quarters and settled in for a nice night of 18° slumber. Yeah, I know I could have stayed *in* the motel. But why spend \$50 or more of good vacation fun money just so I can check in at 1:00 a.m., and check back out again at 6:00 a.m., when I'm already armed with blankets, sleeping bags, winter clothes, and a comfy bed? Sure, a *bathroom* would've been a nice amenity, but it wasn't worth fifty bucks. Besides, rest area sleep was the Plan For The Van anyway, so it wasn't like this was an unusual hardship.

Morning arrived, so did AAA (different driver this time, thankfully; I couldn't have handled those rednecks at this early hour), and soon Max and I were back at Scranton Dodge. Chris the Mechanic was there again, and a trifle miffed that the van he had fixed had come rebounding back to him. Somehow the alternator wires had crossed and fused. Darn the luck. At least it was unrelated to what Chris had fixed, so he felt better about it. He promised me it'd be ready to roll by noon.

I passed some of the time by going for a run around the city. Ugh. It is a cheerless place, made all the moreso by icy winds, and by a multitude of hills for me to drag my cheerless out-of-shape butt over. People eyed me with puzzlement as I trotted on past. Runners must be an uncommon sight in Scranton.

At one point, I jogged past a public park. It was empty, being midday of a schoolday -- and nippy out to boot -- and there was a flyer posted on the little sign board. It was promoting an upcoming event in that park: Helen Keller Day. Call me cruel if you will, but my mind was kept entertained for the next couple of miles by images of the kinds of games that would be played at that outing.

Though I tried to take turns that would lead to more aesthetic areas, I always ended up by old factories and such, some deserted, some still sadly active. There was some Historic Landmark place, where crumbled walls and old timbers from the very first something-or-other still stood. I stopped and checked it out -- read the plaques and everything -- but I can't recall what it was, so I guess it wasn't all that impressive. Some big steam engine, or foundry, or some smelting thing, I dunno. It did indicate, though, that there once was a time when Scranton was a place of some significance, and even a prominent pulse for a particular industry. I think all I had really wanted was to stop running for a while, so I feigned interest in the Landmark while I caught my breath.

Sated with the city's sights, I returned to Scranton Dodge, where I peeled off the outer layers of running clothes, and walked into the shop in my fairly snug running pants, and a sweaty and close-fitting T-shirt. The woman behind the counter, Betty, took notice.

I had met Betty very briefly the night before when I first entered to recruit assistance. But since Chris fixed me up so quickly, I had departed without returning inside. Now, I was back, and Betty, a friendly and pleasantly-ordinary-looking woman in her 40's, was taking a shine to me. She began telling me about what her likes and dislikes were on TV, showing me pictures of her vacation, and letting me in on the best places for nightlife ... if I decided to spend the night in Scranton. I was very amiable and listened politely, but I shuddered at the thought. No, thanks, Betty, old girl, this van had better be well clear of the Pennsylvania border by nightfall.



By the time Max was back underneath me, I had decided that The Spirits Of The Road were conspiring against my worthy steed and myself, and rather than testing their wrath, we would cut our losses and return home.

But Max must have had other ideas. He secretly puffed up his pride like an insulted teenager and sneered "no, I can do it!" As we hit the fork for the Interstate, I was surprised when I suddenly saw us on the southbound ramp instead of the northbound ramp. OK, Max, but you better be sure, old hoss.

He was. For the next 4000 miles, the gallant van ran like a true champion. He must have enjoyed getting away from winter's woes too.

However, even though Max's engine was dandy, the tunes were a problem. Before I had even gone ten miles, I noticed that the right front speaker was not emitting sound. Damn loose speaker wire had fallen off again. Oh, welllllll, there are three more speakers. Not to worry.

By North Carolina, the CD Discman had developed a fatal case of the hiccups: blanking out for a half-second or so, every ten seconds or so. That was even more perturbing than the *thump-thump* stretch through New Frikin' York. But, no problem: there were 100 cassettes in two shoeboxes in back. Go to tape mode and listen to some old reliable Miscs.

Just south of Atlanta, though, shortly after Max had burst through the Quarter Million Mile barrier, I noticed that the tape had stopped playing. It also wouldn't FF or REW. Broken deck. So much for tapes. Gotta go to Radio Radio.

Of course, Max never did have a radio antenna. This had never been significant before; I always had tapes! Now, however, it became a factor. Near cities, I could get reception, but this, remember, was south central Georgia. Country tunes, gospel music, and preachers spreadin' The Good Word over the airwaves. Praise the Lord and send us your money. And that was only near the cities, which were infrequent. Other than that, the dashboard device merely put out the empty *hisssssssss* of static.

But we were not done for! No, no! Walkman to the rescue! For the next twelve days, all tunes were provided by that little personal stereo that had seldom seen the light of day in the two years that I had owned it. Like a pitcher called up from the minors and responding with a string of late-season shutouts, this Walkman rose to the occasion, keeping the mind flooded with music for all occasions – and that kept me happy.

After a day or two of Walkman life, my ears even got accustomed to having those tiny speakers nestled in their outer folds. Three thousand miles of music on a Walkman: definitely the Unsung Hero of Roadtrip '96.

A roadtrip without tunes does get boring. Especially solo. You need music to sing aloud with. Roadtrips unfetter the stressed and stifled spirit. The roadtripper is freed of the shackles of familiarity, and the constraints of What-If-Somebody-I-Know-Sees-Me. There is an answerable need to bellow badly-pitched notes out the open window; to unleash one's all-too-confined soul in ill-keyed song; to croon to the unsuspecting passing landscape; to wail screaming guitar noises, to drum feverishly on the steering wheel, and to dance your fingers across the imaginary keyboard that tops your dash; and to do all of it totally oblivious to the open-mouthed stares from your fellow motorists.

When your windows are down and your speakers are gushing enough sound to entertain a city block, your singalong is not as noticeable, nor as eye-catching. But when you're wearing a Walkman, you forget that the rest of the world cannot hear what you are hearing, and you not only look a bit foolish, but, without the true music to accompany you, you also sound really, *really* bad.

Sometimes, I'll be singing along to some great tune while sitting at a traffic light, and I'll become aware of the driver in the adjacent vehicle gawking at me. I will pick a particularly vigorous moment in the song, whirl to face him or her, and sing the next line of lyrics with extra gusto. The reactions have been diverse: from bursts of laughter, to disapproving scorn, to harsh derision, to bitter outrage. I just keep singin' and pull away when the light changes.

I don't EVER do that in my hometown, though. No effing way! That behavior is generally reserved for ramacks, when I am far away from familiar faces and surrounded by people who, quite frankly, just don't fucking matter.

Other than those sound-related setbacks, that '96 ramack was fantastic. There were running tours of Charlotte, Atlanta, Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Fort Lauderdale, and several in Key West. There were flat, smooth, sunny beach runs on Hilton Head Island (SC) and St. Simon's Island (GA), and some great early spring trail running on the twisting paths throughout Duke Power State Park (NC).

City touring on the road is often done on the run. Negotiating the traffic of an unfamiliar city makes sight-seeing too harrowing. Walking takes too long and covers too little ground. So I run. I park somewhere mid-city, change in the back of the van, and light out on the sidewalks to see what this new urban setting has to offer. And if I happen upon a cool tavern or so along the run, I make a mental note of it and return to it later. Small eastern cities suit this approach best; they don't sprawl like west coast cities do. In real big cities, you just tour a section. I know I sure as hell don't need to get lost and have a short run turn into a long run. That always sucks seal sack.