

Bad Roads and Sucking Toads

Fock 1: Volunteer and Bluegrass Reveries

Arkansas was not part of the original route. Of course, there was no "official" route to RR2K, but not one of the drafts, or options, or Plans A, B, thru Z had involved any passing through, exploration into, or even acknowledgement of The Natural State. There was no appeal to it, no lure whatsoever. As far as I can remember, my map did not even have Arkansas on it; there was just some odd, unnamed void in the middle of the country that all the highlighter lines and squiggles moved around. One of the few fairly definite things about Roadrage2000 was that it would NOT have anything to do with Arkansas.

I mean, why go through Arkansas? The state exudes bland. Area, 27th. Blah. Population, 33rd. Blah. State Bird: Mockingbird, just like Mississippi, and Florida. Yawn, new bird, please. No coast. No famous lakes. No major league sports. No mountains. (The Ozarks? Be serious.) No noteworthy National Parks. Nothing.

A chance to see Little Rock? Bah. Not like it's New York or L.A. or Chicago; who gives a rat's rectum about Little Rock? Even the name says unimpressive: a pebble, not a boulder. I'd rather see Burlington, Vermont any day.

Arkansas is not even a necessary prelude to some other feature attraction. You drive through Virginia to get to Washington, DC. You drive through the Mohave Desert to get to Las Vegas. You drive through Alabama and Mississippi to get to New Orleans. And you drive through Arkansas to get to -- what? -- Tulsa?? It don't work.

Maybe it was the heat, or the stress of the break-in, but I could have had my window reserved in Dallas, or Houston, or Memphis – fine cities all – and I had to go and blurt out "Little Rock." Sheesh. Memphis would have been a great choice; Graceland would have been a fine addition to the log book for this most excellent ramack. But no. Little Rock it was gonna be.

The day actually started out in Mississippi, as the unspectacular but cozy rest area near Batesville was as far as I got on Independence Night. Hard to believe this was only Day Six of RR2K. It was fairly early in the morning when Blue Man stirred; there was still a good distance to cover to get to the middle of Arkansas by the appointed hour.

Back roads certainly would have been more direct, but those skinny red squiggles just didn't look fast, and there was a perceived need for expedience, so I-65 North to Memphis, then I-40 West to Little Rock was the route of choice. If nothing else, it added another state to the list.

Tennessee was not virgin territory. Previous ramacks had crossed it vertically, horizontally, and diagonally. None of them ever spent any significant time in the Volunteer State, though. It just was never a destination, and it never held my interest enough to make me linger.

Technically, Arkansas was not virgin ground either. Dugg and I once parked Spuds there for a few hours, and tossed and turned through a sweaty, late night, mid-summer try for shuteye. We had swung northwest after we left had Tupelo and Eb's batting cage behind. By the time we approached Memphis, it was damn late, damn hot, and damn humid, damn it.

More on principle than anything else, motels were out of the question. Feeble funds were definitely an issue, but mendicancy aside, a roadtrip meant living in the van, and enduring whatever summer swelter fell across our paths. By definition, a true ramack involved no money exchanged for lodging.

On most nights on such trips there would be some trace of a breeze, or some cooler air in some high elevation, but this particular night was malignantly muggy and there was not a hint of movement in the air. I drove on into the night, as Dugg tried to grab a few winks in the back. While we drove, the wind through the open windows helped, but when weariness from the day's excesses made my eyes too heavy to stay open, I just had to stop and try to sleep.

I had tried to placate my eyes by allowing them to close one at a time, in the hopes that they would be content. I'd close the left one, and try to keep the right one open. But, inevitably, the right eyelid would blink shut and stay shut. Closed eyes must be heavier than open ones because my head would then nod forward in the basic You're Going To Crash Now position.

Urban Memphis has few “comfy” looking spots, especially late at night, so we crossed the river into Arkansas, and parked at the first spot that presented itself. Then we lay as inert as possible in the back of the too-small mini-van and tried to pretend we weren’t sweating our nuts off. Opening the door, or even the windows, was out of the question; legions of skeeters buzzed rapaciously outside, lusting for our alcohol-enhanced blood.

It was a miserable attempt at sleep, and we failed utterly. We were back on the road before sunrise, so we never actually saw Arkansas. With the breeze flowing, Dugg and I took turns driving and napping, as we rolled back into and across Tennessee.

One roadtrip actually involved an attempt at exploring Tennessee and Kentucky. I had come down from Rochester, en route to Baton Rouge, and chose a course through the three C’s: Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. For whatever reasons – primarily my cooler and chiller -- I was really zoning out on the southern Ohio farmland.

I will credit Cincinnati with giving me a little wake-up call, though. As I crossed the bridge over the Ohio River, the local radio station was blaring about some Beach Party, with Ski-Doo giveaways. WTF? Did I miss something here? This is the Ohio/Kentucky border! There’s not a beach for 500 miles or more! Well, I guess they can still have a Party though. In fact, I had to admire their pluck.

“Pluck” is a great word. It’s one of those words that, whenever you hear it used, you say, “Ooo, yeah, I gotta use that more.”

And plucking your chicken or eyebrows doesn’t count. That’s a verb. “Pluck” is just a so-what-whatever verb. But, as a noun, it has, well, pluck. It has what it is. A rarity in a word.

It’s good to have pluck, most would agree. Though being plucky is usually not enough to make you rich or famous, it will get you some respect, or, at least admiration.

Pluck is a lot like “moxie.” *He showed a lot of moxie by going for the green from there, Phil. You bet, Ben, ya gotta admire his pluck.*

Neither pluck nor moxie is quite the same as balls, though. They’re just shy of being ballsy. Plucky means you’ll give it go, even if there is shit in your way. Ballsy means you’ll go after it, even if you know the shit that’s in your way can kick your ass to Iowa and back.

Anyway, by Louisville KY, I was looking for new sights to see. I had already done the Lexington-and-Mammoth-Caves thing a couple of times. Rand-McNally showed me a spot that looked interesting, called **The Land Between The Lakes**. It’s hard to say that without kind of bellowing it and reverberating

it throughout the castle. It sounds like something out of an old fantasy novel, some spot on a map of Middle Earth where Frodo and Gollum have to go to buy beer. **The Land Between The Lakes**. So, I went there. It was only a 300-mile detour. And I bought beer.

The **Land** wasn’t great, but it wasn’t a waste either. It was pretty flat, but very green and fertile. Quite pleasant, actually: a nice place to go if you live near it, but not

worth a long ride, if you know what I mean. I did take a nice swim in Lake Barkley (one of **The Lakes** that **The Land** was **Between**), and saw a herd of buffalo. Freakin’ buffalo. Now, if anyone had told me that I would see buffalo in Kentucky, I would have told him to take another shot of Goldschlager. But there they were: a whole herd of the ugly fuckers, with lots of young’uns too. Hope for the future. Yeah, that’s them in the picture, looking like big brown lumps. Exciting life, being a Kentucky buffalo.

The Land Between The Lakes was about forty miles long, and it crossed the border from Kentucky into Tennessee. My course had zigged a good bit west, and zagging back to Nashville was in order. A glance at any map – except maybe a map of Asia – would show that heading due east was not the most expeditious route to Baton Rouge. Going southwest to Memphis, and down along the Mississippi River would have made a lot more sense, and probably would have been a great route. As a plus, I could have gone through the town of McKenzie, TN. But they left out the “A”, so it wouldn’t have been the same anyway. Bad enough that Mackenzie, British Columbia didn’t capitalize the “K”. And I could have taken that Graceland tour to boot.



No, the navigator set a course for Nashville for one reason only: to be able to drive the full length of the Natchez-Trace. However, there was a lot of Tennessee to see before that road would be reached.

Erin, TN, for instance, proved to be waging a spirited battle for the town's sheriff. The lead singer from The Cure (Robert Smith) had the more colorful signs, a bit surprisingly. But if I were candidate Woody Chandler, I would have been a tad irked at the missing letters on this campaign sign. [He said "Wood". Heh-heh.]



In the even smaller town of Dover, TN, a golden opportunity was narrowly missed. After more than a 1000 miles of rain-free, summertime, often nighttime driving, Blue Man had done his best to wipe out the insect population. Bugs of every imaginable color had left stunning and lumpy patterns all over his hood and grill and bumper. At one gas station, I even noticed a small *bat* stuck in the grill. Many of those bugs had made clearly audible SPLAT sounds at impact, and their guts were strewn in all directions.

And, speaking of splatting bugs, don't motorcyclists get smacked with those all the time too? I mean, *whammo*, a big heavy moth cracks off your face guard?? And what if you don't have a face guard, or a helmet? Don't you end up with bug guts all over your head? Ughh. Man, windshields sure were a good idea.

ANYWAY, so I pull into Dover, TN, with the van a hideous collage of vile insect residue, and I see a sign: "Cheerleader Car Wash, Dover HS, 9-3pm." Oh, yes!! Let's see those southern belle types cringe and grimace and go "ick" and "oooo, grosssss" as they scrub their way through this crust! Cool!!! I don't care what it costs, I'm there. Then I looked at the clock: it was three-forty. Damn!!! I did drive to the school, just in case they had hung around, but it was indeed deserted. Shit.

I tried to soak up all the local flavor of north central Tennessee, since my route was now well off the Interstate system, and down in the trenches with the local yokels. It was difficult to take it all in: the rickety porches on mobile homes, the rusted pick-ups in overgrown grass, scruffy scavenger-looking dogs, various vegetations growing in little patches on people's property, crooked or cheap lawn furniture, satellite dishes with rebel flags hanging from the edge, big propane tanks in the front yard, small barns housing garages and body shops, trash in abundance, and a whole lotta clay everywhere, sometimes even bulldozed into piles for no apparent reason or purpose.

If you live out in these parts, the best thing that EVER happens to you is getting your driver's license. The next best is getting your own car. The third best is getting in that car and driving your ass out to someplace where things actually *happen*. If you're fourteen around here, you are just shit outta luck, my friend. You ain't got Jack Shit to do with yourself. You have no immediate neighbors, and no way to get anywhere, even if there was someone worth getting to, which there isn't. You better hope you can get porn on the Internet.

Kentucky, at least, had a few places worth stopping. On the very first Rude Brothers road trip, and on that ill-fated '92 OT trip to NOLA, we had stopped to take a gander at Churchill Downs in Louisville. It was all locked up and everything, but it was pretty cool to look at.

Patrick and Neal and I found a small, dark, and dirt-cheap bar nearby called the Wyandotte Café. Clearly, it was a locals' place. There was one character there that we thought was hilarious. He was over 50, short and pudgy, with a really round belly – almost to the point to looking pregnant. His clothes were not tattered or scruffy, but they were dingy. He looked like he spent at least part of his daily life in, or near, a gutter.

He was obviously lit. His mouth and jowls were scrunched up into an almost-revolting smile, and his eyes were squinted. He looked like Yoda, and he totally stole the show, though I'm sure he no idea



that he was being so entertaining. He had the classic drunkard's face, eyes, expression, posture, "stride", and romantic moves. What a trip. He seemed intent on hitting on every woman in the place, not that there were many. They all seemed to treat him with the same initial surprise, which would encourage him, then they couldn't ditch him fast enough or bluntly enough. We drank Falls City Beer; it wasn't great or awful, just cheap: 95¢ each. Less than a buck for a 12-ounce bottle of beer! That's a victory.

Not far south of Louisville, there is Mammoth Caves National Park. This place is cool. The caves are mammoth (hence the name – there are no woolly mammoths within, at least none that I saw), and the grounds are extensive. The underground passages form a labyrinth 350 miles in length, with an unknown amount more that has not yet been explored. What has been found is already three times as long as any other known cave. Up on the surface, there are 130 miles of hiking trails through beautiful, forest, and hilly trails.

During the Civil War, the cavern at the main entrance was used to house troops and to store supplies. Something like 300 men were barracked in that cavern. Once away from the surface opening, the sandstone mountain that the caves lurk under insulates the passages to a steady 54° regardless of the high or low temperature of the outside world. I imagine light was more of a touchy issue, since lighting devices back then relied on fire, which produces smoke and fumes. Still, better than freezing your Rebel ass off.



The guide for our visit was a thin young woman with a long, light-brown ponytail. She was respectfully quiet as we toured, adding to the already spooky atmosphere of darkness and shadows. The caves were clean and dry. They did not have the preponderance of decorative displays – flowstones, stalagmites (up) and stalactites (down) – that Ruby Falls or other, smaller cave attractions had. The impressiveness here lay in the size and depth and convolutions. Our guide referred to the 19th century explorers of the area as having "cave water in their veins," and told of even the most seasoned spelunkers disappearing down passageways and never being heard from again. She fed the atmosphere well.

Outside, each of us went for a run on the trails. We separated and went three different ways. You gotta have your Alone Time. Neal and I stuck with the 40-minute plan, but Patrick didn't come back till after an hour had gone by. He didn't get lost; he just got so enthralled with Nature that he kept runnin' and runnin'. Can't blame him. It was really nice there.

I can't say I ever saw any blue grass in the Bluegrass State. And yes, "Bluegrass" is one word, and, yes, it is green. But, in the spring, bluegrass produces bluish-purple buds that, when seen in large fields, give a rich blue cast to the grass.

Once it matures, it greens up, but at least there is some truth to the nickname.

I had to find a special place in my heart for Kentucky once I learned that the first cheeseburgers were served there, in 1934, at Kaelin's in Louisville. Mmmm... cheeeeseburgers.

But, anyway, that's Kentucky, and we were talking about Tennessee.

And the only reason we were even bringing up Tennessee is because the very southwest tip of it – Memphis – fell on the new RR2K route to Sacramento!