

# Bad Roads and Sucking Toads

## Fock 2: Cheers to Maurice and Kirwin

Memphis deserves more exploration than I have given it. Maybe I'll get around to that someday. What I've seen it so far, though, really blows. The highway passes through an area beaten down by outdated industry. The railroad and the river used to fuel Memphis, as goods and produce from the heartland shipped thither by train and by boat for further redistribution. But trucks and planes have bitten heavily into that market, and for cities like Memphis, the river and rails just don't sing like they once did.

The neighborhoods that I saw were old, dingy, and cheerless. And this was on a bright sunny morning. Fences were crooked and damaged, and homes were small, boxy, and ugly. Factories and warehouses were disturbingly dirty, with some broken panes of dust-caked glass. The city didn't look dead, exactly, but it reminded me of an old gentleman who could no longer afford to get a new sweater or new eyeglasses.

The refineries, especially, made an impression. I couldn't help but picture the people who go to work in them every goddamn day of every goddamn year. This thought had also crossed my mind about the grim factories in south Syracuse, and even more so with the ubiquitous oil refineries along the Jersey Turnpike. Something about the flames that spewed from their tall exhaust pipes gave me the image of going to work in Hell. It must be hard for the employees of such places to travel to, and to walk into, such a bleak and suffering structure every day. Seeing the world in an optimistic light must be a deep challenge. It would be for me, at least.

But then there was the Mississippi River, the symbolic border between the settled east and the Wild West. This symbolism was not lost on me. There is very little spectacular scenery east of the Mississippi River. Many very nice spots exist, but there is really nothing extreme. The biggest mountains, the broadest plains, the most remarkable rock formations, the widest deserts, the highest high, and the lowest low all lie to the west of that natural divider. I suppose the most medium medium could be said to be in the east, but that's kinda stretching things.

Settlers and explorers must have marveled at the change in landscape after they crossed the wide Mississippi. And, for me, knowing what would be coming up, the anticipation mounted. So far, the trip had been enjoyable, but aside from the Blue Ridge Parkway, scenery had been pretty mild. My camera had seen little action – not that it mattered anyway since the few pictures I did take were destined for oblivion.

But crossing the Mississippi meant new horizons, new sights to see. This newly contrived route would angle Blue Man and me through virgin territory in Oklahoma and southern Kansas. Parts of the country that I had never seen before would soon be laying out before my eyes.

In the meantime, though, there was Arkansas. When we crossed this famous river, at the state line, we had already traveled 2554 miles. It sure is a long ride to Sacramento.

The name Arkansas is confusing. I never knew if "Ar-" meant "East" or "Son of" or "Screw" or whatever prefix Kansas would deserve. And why the hell is the "-sas" at the end pronounced like "-saw"?? The history of the name is, unfortunately, quite complex. In the shell of a nut, it goes like this:

Basically, semi-literate explorers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, whose forte was braving the wild, not spelling, wrote out various interpretations of what the local Indians called the area. To give a hint of how hard this must have been, the Indians themselves were the Quapaws, but it was pronounced OO-GAQ-PA. I don't know how they got that. The "-pa" part I can dig, but how "Qua" equals "Oo-gaq-" is beyond me.

Anyway, the natives of the Ohio Valley called those people the "Arkansas," meaning "south wind." Trouble was, explorers didn't know how the hell to spell that, so it was "Akansea" on one map, then "Acansa" on the next, then, eventually, "Arkansas." Then, Zebulon Pike -- whose name I mention only because I like the name Zebulon Pike (I'm sure he'll get mentioned again in Colorado) -- spelled it "Arkansaw" on his chart, which, unfortunately, triggered a controversy.

When the state was young, the two U.S. Senators from Arkansas couldn't agree on the spelling and pronunciation. One would always be introduced as the senator from "ARkanSAW" and the other

insisted on being called the senator from "Ar-KANSAS." In 1881, the state's General Assembly passed a resolution declaring that the state's name would be spelled "Arkansas" but pronounced "Arkansaw."

The pronunciation preserves the memory of the Indians who were there first, while the spelling clearly keeps in mind the French bastards who first explored it.

In fact, several Arkansas place names are really just stupid English corruptions of French words. For example, *Aux Arcs* becomes "Ozark," *ca va*?

I do like the flag, though; it is symbolic, but not tricky or cartoony. It's a diamond because Arkansas is the only place in the US where diamonds were ever found or mined, and it has 25 stars in the blue border because it was the 25<sup>th</sup> state. Simple. The three blue stars stand for some other shit.

Tennessee's flag, though, is one of my favorites. It looks modern, I think. It almost seems like it's trying to go 3-D. The official description that I found says: "The three stars on the flag represent the three different land forms in Tennessee: mountains in the east, highlands in the middle and lowlands in the west. On the flag these regions are bound together in an unbroken circle. The field is crimson with a blue background for the stars. The final blue strip relieves the sameness of the crimson field and prevents the flag from showing too much crimson when it is limp."

Heaven knows you don't want to show too much crimson when you're limp. People would talk about that kinda thing.



Tennessee is at the very top of the bottom third of US states in land area, and at the very bottom of the top third in population. It is barely larger than Ohio and Kentucky, but it is home to more people than Norway, Ireland, or New Zealand.

Arkansas, sad to say, earned the dubious distinction of being the Least Scenic State of Roadrage2000. Georgia and Alabama were Oz by comparison. Even I-40, the major highway that bisects the state, was cracked, rutted, patched, and beat up. This was not a country club and parkway state. It just came across as a functional, workin' man's state: the consummate blue collar and red neck haven. Nothing pretty -- aside from some, but not many, women -- was considered necessary.

The highway should be a priority for a state, especially an Interstate like I-40 that cuts across it and through its most prominent city. The road is that first impression that sticks with you. A poorly maintained highway reflects poorly on the state as a whole, making it seem ill-funded or badly managed. *If the highway is this shitty, damn, how bad are the schools??*

A smooth, new, dark, well-lined highway gives the immediate appearance of prosperity and efficiency. It may well be a crock, but the impression is undeniable. You feel like you've just driven into a land of luxury. The excess noise and jostling disappears, and you seem to almost float along. Even mediocre scenery looks better. It can't help but put you in better spirits and make you think, *hey, I kinda like this state.*

But Arkansas was not like that. Even the farms and ranches that bordered the Interstate were a downer. They were a classic case of feast or famine. You could tell at a glance which ones had good irrigation and which didn't: they were saturated and lush, or shriveled and crusty. The crusty ones outnumbered the lush ones, too, and that just made the highway ride seem even more depressing.

Well, good thing for me, anyway, that is was a Workin' Man's State, because Blue Man needed some workin' on. Arkansas was not chosen for beauty; it was chosen for function. This would be the pit stop in the long road rally. If it's kinda broke, get it fixed up here.

The window was the first thing. I had covered it with a plastic bag while I slept at Batesville, and I had been riding with open windows so far this morning, so there had been no major problems. Still, I was eager to get the damn thing fixed and resume the journey to Sacramento!

I had been told that Triumph Glass would open at 9:00, and that my window would be there by 10:30, so I planned my arrival accordingly. At the Arkansas Welcome Center, I paused and made a phone call to the shop. A man answered, identifying himself as Maurice. He seemed aware of the



imminent window delivery, but seemed amused by the circumstances that necessitated it. He gave me detailed directions to his shop, and a good E.T.A. from where I was.

Right at 10:30, I pulled in. Triumph Glass was not exactly a main street business. It was tucked in the middle of a row of buildings that were not much more than oversized huts. It was like a backyard shed on steroids: some cinder block, lots of aluminum, and no frills.

I don't think the tiny office even had a window. When I walked in, Maurice was crammed in behind a puny desk. He was the sole worker there. He was heavy-set, though neither fat nor tall, about 34, with dark curly hair. He didn't look at all like a Maurice; he looked more like a Jack or a Bill, but he was what he was.

The window had not arrived, so, rather than just sit there, I took a little ride around for a half-hour. Still no window at 11:00. Maurice seemed to hint that after lunch might be a better bet. His confidence in the driver's punctuality appeared low, being the day after a holiday and such. I understood, and said I'd be back.

Since I had time to kill, I figured I'd go buy some tires. There had been a tire store along the main drag, and, what the heck, Blue Man's sneakers were lookin' pretty worn, with some steel showing along the edges, so I decided to make the most of this pit-stop mentality and fix that potential disaster before it happened. Funny how there was **no way** I could afford new tires when I was at home, but out here on the road, it was just a casual flick of the plastic. I had a spare that was virtually new, so I bought three tires, and left instructions on which to put where and which oldie to leave as my new spare.

While the hung-over rednecks laced up Blue Man's new footwear, I had a scrumptious lunch for \$4.92 at the nearby Pizza Hut. The tire crew screwed the job up though. I made them do it over again. The guy at the desk had the nerve to give me attitude about it. I levelly told him, "Your guys threw out the wrong tire, put two new tires on the back instead of the front, left one crappy tire on the front to mess up my steering, and wasted a brand new one by mounting it as my spare. They couldn't have gotten it much more wrong." He was forced to become apologetic and summoned his crew chief.

The redneck shithead crew chief was all pissed off about having to do it again. I just sat there with a calm, "That's right, moron," look on my face. His bays were all empty, and he had three guys just sitting on their lazy asses in there, so they had nothing else to do anyway. They might have all been fine people, but they sure looked like lowlife screw-offs. Through the large window, I saw the reaction of the crew when they were told to re-do the job, and I'm sure bossman put it to them like "that fuckin' asshole out there is bitchin' that we didn't do his goddamn van jusssst right."

They got it right – or, at least, mostly right – the second time. By then, I just wanted to get out of there and return to Triumph Glass. BM seemed to ride much happier. He liked his new kicks.

Replacing the passenger window should have been an easy task. After all, I'd done that same job myself, once on the '69 Mustang that I called Sally, and once on the '66 Belvedere. Those, however, did not have decorative door panels, electric locks and window controls, or a solid frame all around them. Still, I expected a simple job. So did Maurice: "Half hour, tops," he told me.

His garage workshop was an oven: a cinderblock box with a corrugated steel roof. In several places, the foam insulation had peeled off in large chunks, and if it were not for the big cylinder fan propped on his workbench, this mid-summer Arkansas sweatbox would have been unbearable.

Maurice cheerfully announced that the glass had arrived, had me pull in, and let me stand there and chat with him while he worked. He preferred having somebody to shoot the breeze with while he zipped through the job.

We chatted about roadtripping – he had done the southwest National Parks too – and lots of other stuff, but his end of the conversation began to get more and more choppy as Blue Man fought him tooth and nail. If a van could squirm and scream, that's what BM would have been doing. It was like a wounded Civil War soldier, and Maurice was like a surgeon trying to dig out the bullet without using any anesthetic. From the very first step (the door handle) to the final snap-on of the door panel, Maurice had struggle after struggle.

I would have been kicking the vehicle, slamming my fist on it, and calling it every name in the Big Red Book Of Vulgarity. But not Maurice; he muddled through: "Yeah, when I went – **unnnhhhh!** – to Zion the first time, I – **mmmmmmphhh!!!** – couldn't believe what I was – **arrggghh** – looking at." He actually apologized that the job was taking so long. The ordeal had lasted more two hours by the time he buttoned it up.

As a bonus, he even gave me a can of his professional glass cleaner foam so I could keep cleaning the bugs off my windshield. Good job, Maurice! The world could use more workers like you!

It was a refreshing contrast to those lamebrains at the tire store. Those jamokes seemed all too typical of what the workforce has become: lazy, grumpy, always seeking the path of least resistance. I can't believe that they thought I would just accept whatever crap job they served back to me. It makes no sense. Do the job right the first time, and then you won't have to whine about having to do it again. Ignorant dungheads.

The Rochester automotive repair community had soured me on this industry already. They were unbelievable. Everything – and I do mean everything – had to be done twice. Even a simple oil change got screwed up; they didn't tighten the filter, so oil ended up spilling out all over the road and undercarriage as I drove.

One repair shop snapped the wood trim on the center console when they tried to remove the engine cover. Instead of admitting their blunder, they laid it back in place – didn't even bother to glue it or anything – and then, when it fell off and I had the temerity to actually return and complain about it, they indignantly asked, "Are you sure it wasn't like that when you brought it in?" I went ballistic over that one.

And it wasn't just repair people who dropped the ball. My NY driver's license was done wrong first try – they got my address wrong, *and* my name was misspelled -- so I had to go in a second time. The Vehicle ID number on my NY registration was entered wrong, so when the insurance company computer spit it back as a non-existent vehicle, thus negating my policy, I had to have those DMV bozos redo the whole thing. And, of course, then I had a do-over with insurance because of that.

Shoddy work, shoddy work. Really made me appreciate Maurice all the more.

Best Worker II, would actually not be encountered until after RR2K was done. I had never experienced a hard drive crash on a computer before, and I didn't really know what it looked like, so when my screen went blank, and I got that troubling "HIMEM.SYS is missing" message in the top corner, I wasn't really sure if that was a thoroughly bad thing or not. My guess was that "HIMEM.SYS" stood for High Memory Systems, and it seemed that if those had been misplaced, it would be bad. I knew it wasn't a good thing, but I wasn't panicking yet. I was hopeful that my 308 beautiful scenic digital RR2K photos could still be recovered. They were all stored on the hard drive, but I had not yet had the chance to process any of them or back them up.

Surely, Compaq Technical Support (CTS) would save the day. I made a call and actually got through to a human fairly quickly, which encouraged me. He gave me what he felt would be a solution, cautioned that it would be a fairly long process, and wished me luck. When I hung up, my laptop was compiling colors in a bizarre looking grid, changing green rectangles to yellow, and giving the appearance of progress.

But it was not be. An even more threatening Error Message appeared, and I was back on the phone to CTS.

After the requisite trolling through the automated menu and finger-tapping through the on-hold tunes, my call was connected and Kirwin Bradwell entered the scene. He sounded young -- almost even high school young -- and I immediately pictured some college student or grad student doing tech support work for his summer job.

We went over the dire developments of the previous hour, and he reassured me that he would do whatever it would take to get my pictures back. With that, he led me into the depths of my computer, and we tunneled around in there, shifting this and tucking that, doing the Reconfiguration Rag. But our first attempt didn't work, and much to Kirwin's surprise -- not to mine, because I was so totally clueless about what we were doing -- the screen display showed that another system file had gone missing. He was incredulous. We dove back in, trying a different tack. Then another, and another. Each time something else would disappear. Something was eroding my system from within, and things were crumbling.

Kirwin regrouped and zeroed in specifically on my photo files, trying to find them and salvage them before the camel's back broke. We were well past an hour by now, and his patient tone had never wavered. Each guided step was carefully articulated: "Type 'cd', and then a space, and then type 'dir', and then a space, and then go ahead and hit 'enter'". He never tried to race through or to get rid of me, never lost his tolerance for the gaps in my rudimentary knowledge. He even apologized to me that it was taking so long (much like Maurice had). I told him I appreciated his willingness to keep trying; if the tables had been turned, I would have thrown up my hands a long time before and said, "Well, looks like you're fucked, mate."

But Kirwin kept at it, clearly dismayed at being unable to rescue my photos. "We have to get your pictures back," he said a few times. But things were not looking good. It had to be over two hours into

the call (thankfully, it was an 800 number), when he ran out of ideas. He had already tapped into every resource available to him: his colleagues, the Compaq systems computer trouble-shooting files, and every DOS manual he could find. There was sincere disappointment in his voice when he finally said, "I think the only thing you can do is run the Quick Restore CD" -- which would delete all files and programs, and put the computer back in its just-bought state.

It wasn't that he was pissed at himself for not being able to accomplish his goal or anything like that. He was so apologetic to me. He sounded despondent, like a surgeon who had just lost a patient on the operating table. By that time, I think he felt worse about losing the photos than I did. He really felt like he had let me down. I didn't feel that way though; I knew that every possible rescue attempt that could have been made had been made. I almost felt like I needed to put my arm around his shoulder and give him a big "that's ok, fella, you did your best, you really did..."

The CTS offices are in southern Florida. If they were closer, I would definitely have taken Kirwin out for a beer. I was able to reload all my programs and such; the only thing I really lost was my pictures. Kirwin knew that, but still took that huge chunk of time to try to save them. I thought that warranted a raise. In fact, I emailed the CTS front office people, praising KB's efforts. I hope he got at least an "Attaboy" out of it.

Here's to you, Kirwin! Keep up the good work, buddy! If you ever need a reference, I got you covered.