



Fock 1: Sooner Here Than Stupid Texas

Reaching this point in Roadrage2000 meant that there would be more and more land to see now, and that the cities would be smaller and fewer. It had already begun, of course. Arkansas, like Oklahoma has fewer than 50 people per square mile. Since leaving the northeast, roads had not been what you could call “crowded” anyway, but they were about to become downright empty. There are not even as many Oklahomans as there are Chicagoans.

Only 18 states are bigger than the Cheater State, and they all lie west of the Mississippi. [Georgia, ranked 21st in land area, is the largest state east of that river, if you’re wondering.] So, that means that plenty of unoccupied space lay ahead. The difference in Alabama and Mississippi and Arkansas, though, was that the unpopulated spaces still were covered with trees, so you did not know how alone you were. Once I awoke in Oklahoma, the forests had begun to change to plains. The ground flattened, and the sky widened.



The state name comes from Indian words for “red man.” So, here we have a state that is named for the very people that those cheatin’-ass Sooners displaced. Their flag is totally dedicated to Native Americans too, with a Choctaw blue coloring, and an Osage buffalo skin shield decorated with eagle feathers, and a calumet (peace pipe) and olive branch crossing in the middle. It commemorates the peaceful cultures that they shoved into oblivion. Nice touch. Is that gesture supposed to make up for taking all their land? That’s as lame as that gold one-dollar coin that the US minted in the 1990’s, with the Indian woman and baby on the front. Ostensibly, it was a tribute, but it just struck me as throwing them a bone and an

insincere “sorrrrry.” [I do love the eagle design on the back of those coins though. Sharp. And I use them often, especially as tips. Bartenders often turn up their noses at first glance, thinking that it’s just a quarter, but once they see the gold and check it out, they invariably think it’s pretty cool.]

But this flag thing, on top of the nickname thing, was giving me an acrid dislike for this place. No wonder it was the 46th state admitted to the Union; the feds even accepted the voids of Utah and Wyoming before they finally said, *goddamnit, we have all the land around them, so I guess we have to take those cheatin’, false-startin’ sumbitches too.*

Oklahoma was State #45 for me. Not on Roadrage2000, of course. But in the overview of when and what number, this state was first breached in 1987, by Alf and me, as we broke in brand new Max with a tidy little 8000-mile ride. Oklahoma was State #17 on that trip, but it was only #15 on RR2K. If the summer of 2000 had been about padding the stats, I could have had many more: Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, and Florida all lay within an easy half-hour detour from the route so far.

In the early days of ramacking, any reasonable sidestep that would enable us to say, “Idaho? I’ve been there!” – or some variation of that -- was definitely worth the effort. But stat-padding has lost its thrill since those halcyon days, partly because there are no more virgin borders to cross, within reason. Alaska, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Newfoundland are all that remain of North America. If New England was still home, Newfoundland might be in the Notbooks by now, but that would be a bit of a trek. Now that I’m a southern boy, though, faggetaboutit. I suppose I *could* drive down through Mexico to Guatemala, but, well, fuck that shit. Mexico was depressing enough. More on that later.



In '87, however, there were still some states that I had not been in yet, and our brief foray into Oklahoma knocked another one from those ranks. It was also a monotony breaker, not that we expected the Oklahoma landscape to be radically different than the Texas plains we were crossing.

It was a Saturday in mid-July, and Alf and I had spent the morning in Dallas. The wake-up was at a rest area near Myrtle Springs, which is a half-hour east of Big D. The stalls in the craphouse were the height of immodesty: tiny partitions, and no doors! The only thing worse that I had ever seen was the old National Guard Armory in Boston where we ran winter track meets when I was in high school. Those were lined up along the wall with no dividers of any kind; you made your download and did your cleansing for all to see. It was bad enough having to use it myself, but the worst part was trying not to watch my neighbors strain and push and tidy up. I need a beer now just from thinking about it. Glug-glug-glug. Ahhh. Not enough though, for such a vile memory. Glug-glug-glug-glug-glug. Ahhhhh. Getting' there, but I may need another one in a bit.

Anyway, I don't understand what's up with these Texans. How can you not have doors on your shitters? Can't you afford doors, you ten-gallon-hat-wearin' fuggers?? As bad an impression as the decrepit I-40 made in Arkansas, this crapshack immediately caused my esteem for the Lone Star State to plummet. Stupid Texas. Is this supposed to preserve the Wild West, where men shat boldly among one another around the fire and compared the size of the logs? WTF?

Anyway, we broke our fast at some truck stop called Beacon Bingo. The place was packed with real, honest-to-God rednecks. Cowboy hats, truckers, and even the women looked like 18-wheeler jockeys. The Georgia Satellites supplied the music on the jukebox, while an old milking bucket served as our table lamp. We hoped there would be showers available at this truck stop, but no such luck. On many a ramack, a truck stop has provided a rejuvenating S-S-S stop for a mere four dollars or so. Not this time, though; we would be staying rude for a while longer. My hair felt like hay. Nothing a quality meal like biscuits and gravy couldn't help, though. But the gravy was white! What was up with that? This New England dude had never experienced white gravy before. It was all creamy too. It looked more like melted mayonnaise or vanilla pudding, or Yak Snot Fondue, or ... well, let's just say that it didn't look like gravy. Thank God I didn't order grits.

Texas was certainly turning out to be different.

Dallas had plenty of differences within itself. Lomo Alto Boulevard, for instance, was a row of gorgeous mansions, easily worth a half-a-mil or more, each. They seemed awfully close together, though, which made me juggle my value estimates a bit. Yet, one right turn later, we were driving in a ghetto. They were just a block apart. It was weird. I imagine that having the have's and the have-not's in such close proximity, without some have-some's as a buffer, has led to an incident or two. Those rich folk probably raid those crack houses all the time, looking for a discount deal.

We parked downtown and did a little lookaround on foot. The downtown area was not very busy, this being a non-work day. The city seemed to be teeming with new buildings. There was glimmering glass and glinting mirrors on tall walls in all directions, and the bus stops were nothing short of beautiful.

But there was a sign car driving around, and that bugged me. That's all I can think of to call it. It was a billboard – maybe ten feet long, by eight feet high, by a foot-and-a-half thick – with wheels, and a cab to sit in and drive it around the city, so everybody would get a look at your ad. This was in 1987, mind you, and I had never seen one of those before. I immediately prayed that this concept would not catch on. The thought of already-congested urban streets being further clogged by these rolling advertisements was horrifying. I pictured hundreds of them flooding the cities, relentlessly hurling ads at you: in your car, on a bus, walking down the street. There would be no escape.

Picture yourself sitting at a sidewalk café, enjoying the pleasant Spring air, digging the flowers on the trees, and the gentle breeze, as you sip your lunchtime beverage. Then, this obnoxious sign car with some garish Toyotathon ad parks at the curb next to you. How much would you want to kill the driver? How much would you want to blow up a Toyota dealership? How much would your day be *ruined*??

Goddamn sign cars. Thankfully, the public seems to have rejected those intrusive vehicles, because they never did proliferate.

Anyway, this was Dallas, and we were feeling a bit cowboyish, so Alf decided that he needed to do a little hat shopping. There was a haberdasher that specialized in Texas-style accoutrements, so we strolled on in. It took less than a Sacramento second to realize that we were out of our league here. The stuff was excellent. Very impressive boots, vests, jackets, and even pants, all in beautifully designed leather or brushed suede. And all priced for the high roller. The hats were the best of all, though. I'm sure the lone clerk – I'm sorry, I mean "sales associate" – who was manning the store could tell at a

glance that we would not be making any purchases today, and he kept a wary eye on us as we surveyed the garments.

Alf played the role of hat shopper well, though. He evaluated the lines, the angles, the creases, the feathers, and even made a show of analyzing the inside liner band. He would nod approvingly at certain features, and give pursed-lip disapproval at others. He appeared to be a man who knew hatly things. Still, I think I saw the clerk cringe whenever he put one on.

They were all marvelous lids, but none actually looked good on Alf. They all seemed to dwarf his head. After he put a particular one on and looked in the mirror, even he commented, "Did this hat just get bigger?"

I'm sure we each would have bought a hat if they had had bargain basement prices, but too often, you buy something like that on a trip, and then you never wear the damn thing when you get home anyway. Cliff's twin brother Jack had this beautiful, light-colored, tastefully banded-and-feathered, brushed cowboy hat that he bought on a vacation, but the only thing it ever adorned was the top of his bookcase.

I mean, you can't wear that around Boston. You're not gonna wear it to your office. You're certainly not going to wear it to Lewis' or any similar establishment. Friends and strangers alike will just give you a *what's with the fuggin' hat?* look. If you're not a cowboy, and you wear a fine, high-priced, cowboy chapeau, you just look phony, like you're trying to be J.R. or something.

You can get away with a cheap or less ornate one, but you still get questioned. My black leather cowpoke hat has had long periods of inactivity, mostly back home in Boston, where it just didn't fit with the Me that everybody knew. Away from Beantown, though, it saw plenty of action.

It's an Attitude Accessory: my Party Hat. When the black cowskin sits atop my cranium, my outlook naturally brightens, and it is a visible sign to one and all that this guy is here to have some fun. You can't show up wearing a cowboy hat and not be noticed. So, if you want to make a discreet entrance and blend in, leave the hat at home.

People look at the hat, size up the accompanying attitude, and give you a mental thumbs-up. "Hey, cool hat" makes for a good conversation starter; there is the assumption that a cool story rides underneath the visor.

And such icebreakers have merit. "Where you from, Cowboy?" was the greeting tossed my way by that sweet, silver-pants woman in New Orleans. Her own sparkling silver cowgirl hat seemed to indicate that some common attitude ground was to be found here. (Her shiny string bikini top didn't hurt, either). I'm sure she was expecting Houston or San Antonio as a reply, so when I laughed "New York," she seemed just a trifle puzzled. But, attitude is attitude, and she rolled with it very well. She never asked my name all night, and I never asked hers: Cowboy and Cowgirl were our names, and that was that. It was more than sufficient.

My hat compels me to be in good humor. When a glint in the eye resides under that curled rim, people warm to it well, whereas a scowl under the black hat would just mean bad news, avoid, keep your distance, beware, danger, Will Robinson. So, I smile more, which is a plus. :]

But there were no such common man hats in this store, so we nodded politely at the clerk, and, to his relief, departed.

Like any city, Dallas has its homeless. As Alf and I strolled around the downtown, we came across two shaggy men seated in a large stone doorway. One sat on the step, facing straight across the street. He was blind. His empty hat was on the ground beside his foot. The other man was sitting next to him, but watching us as we came along the sidewalk towards them. This guy looked reaaaalllly hurtin'. Neither of them was speaking. When we got close, the hurtin' dude reached down and picked up the blind man's hat, and held it out to us.

At first, this didn't strike me as odd; I had expected to be tagged for a handout. But when I looked down to politely decline, I did a double take: the hat was not open-side-up, as a money basket would be, it was crown-side-up, like a hat would be. We looked at the hurtin' guy as if to say, "you'd probably make more money if you flipped that over," but he just nudged it toward us, like he was motioning us to take it. WTF? He didn't say anything, and neither did we. The blind guy just sat there, inert. Hurtin' Dude motioned again with the hat -- *take it, take it* -- and we just looked at him, confused. Stupid Texas.

When we happened upon a pawnshop, we went in to check it out. I had never been in a pawnshop before. I'm not sure if I've been in one since. The guy behind the counter looked normal enough, but appeared strangely nervous. He was about 35, kinda thin, and looked a bit weaselish. Alf and I didn't talk much because this guy cast a very uncomfortable tension throughout the room. But we

didn't want to just cut and run either, so we took a few minutes to browse, hoping the atmosphere would lighten up some. I wandered over by the big glass case near the register, and I saw a couple of blues harps in there. The man had edged his way to the register area too, kinda sidling along as if we couldn't see him. It was weird.

I leaned over the counter a little, to get a better look at the harmonicas, and the clerk reached down to slide open the back door of the case. I figured he had anticipated my harmonic interests, and was going to offer me a look-see. Instead, he rested his hand on the grip of a handgun that was lying in the case next to the harps. I saw this, but didn't move. Neither did he. Finally, I looked up at him. His hand began to wrap around the gun.

"How much for the harmonicas?" I asked, with a *what the fuck is your problem?* tone in my voice.

"Fif'een dollus," he replied, not moving his hand, and looking me right in the chin as he spoke. There were two different sizes of harmonica there, though.

"Which one?" I asked, pointing at them, and still leaning over the counter.

"Bo'f'um," he said, still staring at my chin.

We left.

Stupid Texas.