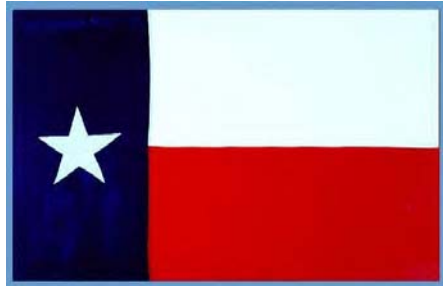




Fock 2: Cruel Cargo and Condiments

The Lone Star State is, of course, the second largest of the 50. Only 39 of the world's 200-or-so *countries* are bigger than Texas is. France, Spain, Afghanistan, and Nepal are all smaller. Germany and Poland **combined** do not equal Texas in size. If you added California and Colorado together, they'd still be smaller than Texas (though they'd be larger than Germany and Poland, which is some consolation).



The bigness of Texas is hard to ignore when you are driving across it. Much of it is less than stimulating driving, too. Wide open prairies and huge ranches extending to the horizon make for some good doses of perspective, but after a few hours of that, it's nice to catch a little variety.

To be fair, though, I'm told that Texas has great variety. The Austin area, for instance, is rumored to have beautiful hills and forests and the like. But, we weren't going in that direction, so we were stuck with hours of sameness. After Alf and I passed through Wichita Falls – we saw no reason to stop there – we found ourselves within pissing distance of Oklahoma, and we craved treading on untrodden soil.

It doesn't even seem like it should deserve mention now, but we switched over to air-conditioning at Wichita Falls. It was much more comfortable. Until that point, we had been riding with open windows, partly because it had been my understanding that running the AC hurt the gas mileage. Also, though, we did like the wind-in-your-hair feeling as we roared along the highway. And it was good hot summer air, and, as a New Englander you kinda learn to revel in that whenever you can.

It's like in Rochester, New York, where the winters are long and gray, and summers last about as long as one of Richie's best belches. But those summer months are *festive!* At least every fortnight, a major street or section of the city is closed down to traffic for a weekend and transformed into a carnival zone. The Lilac Festival, the Corn Hill Festival, the Park Avenue Festival, the East End Jazz Festival, and a few more at Genesee Valley Park, all cram the summer calendar. People get out and celebrate warmth and sunshine; they act like they might never see such phenomena again.

There were days in Winter and Spring in Rochester when I would wake up in the morning, and immediately know that something was different. My curtains were always open, and on those rare occasions when the sun was out, the room was damn bright. I would immediately begin to concoct schemes in my head: how to get out of work for the day, what to do to take advantage of this rare gift of sunshine. Of course, sometimes it was still 4^o out, but at least it wasn't a depressing and gloomy 4^o out.

But heat wasn't all that rare as we crossed the Deep South in July of '87. Neither was humidity. There was really no reason to revel in it that much.

Thing is, I had never had a functional air conditioner in any of my vehicles. They had all been creations of the 60's and 70's when A/C was considered a luxury option. They had the necessary heater and defroster, and I was content with those. Even Spuds, the dumb '86 Caravan, which I had bought brand spanking new, lacked AC.

I had never lived in an air-conditioned home, and neither the schools that I went to nor the one I had taught in were climate controlled. Here I was, at age 32, and I had hardly ever been artificially cooled! If I was hot, I might turn on a fan. If I didn't have a fan, I stayed hot. No big deal. Summer meant being hot.

So, I really had no clear understanding of that AC concept in a car. All I had constantly heard was that it **KILLED** gas mileage: like my normal 17.2 MPG would drop to 6.6 if I ran the damn thing, and with our 8000-mile route to cover, that would result in a lot of wasted gas money. Alf might've known better, but he didn't seem to care either way; he was getting into the rudeness of the sweat-and-roadfilm mixture of the summertime ramack.

But once we got past Dallas, it was gettin' a little too hot, even with a 75 MPH breeze charging in. Alf produced a very suitable rationale: the elimination of the drag coefficient that was caused by the open windows would probably make up for the excess engine labor of running the AC compressor. *It sounds*

impressive, so it must be true, I reasoned. We rolled with it, and life got less sweaty almost immediately. And, as it turned out, there was no great decline in gas mileage: about 1.5 MPG, or 50 miles per tank. So, over the course of 5000 miles, we could get ten tanks of gas, and be cool and comfortable, or we could get just nine tanks, saving about \$38, and be sweaty and malodorous. Some things are definitely worth the cost.

Anyway, Alf and I ventured on up into Oklahoma at about 3:00, looking for a late lunch. [Damn, five out of six words in the middle of that sentence were prepositions!] We took I-44 North across the Red River, and immediately veered off the highway onto the tiny road that Exit 1 had been built for. The Red River is the boundary between southern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas. It slithers its squiggly course for well over 600 miles from the stovepipe of the Lone Star State all the way to the Arkansas border.

The river seemed aptly named, because, with its bed of clay and the low mid-summer water level, it was just a ribbon of red, hardened muck. It looked like the surface of Mars. It was clear enough of weeds and such that we could believe that water had been flowing through there fairly recently, but it was totally walkable.

There was nothing at all to see along these initial roads. If anything, Oklahoma seemed even emptier than Texas. There was a good amount of food being grown around there, but half the fields were just empty, reddish-brown earth. Perhaps they were lying fallow. They looked rather fallid.

After a few miles, we junctioned with a numbered road – highway 70 – and angled west. There was a dot on the map labeled Devol, which appeared to be a town, but I don't remember seeing anything. The first town we actually drove into, Grandfield (population 1224), was a ghost town. Three-quarters of the stores were closed down, and the other quarter were soon to follow. It was eerie. We wondered if the 1224 was something other than people.

It took another 34 miles and a northerly turn to reach the big city of Frederick (pop. 5221). It wasn't what you'd call "alive," except in the sense that, unlike Grandfield, it was still breathing.

By mutual agreement, Alf and I eschewed the couple of franchise eateries that we saw – KFC and Pizza Hut – and sought out "local flavor." With memories of the white gravy, we knew we could be making a big mistake, but we needed to sample some succulent Sooner sustenance.

Harper's Restaurant was the place we picked. It was empty except for two old people, and one very old waitress. It smelled like a nursing home, and looked like your classic, undecorated, cheaply furnished, small town sub shop. Once again, we are easily the rudest things there. The food absolutely sucked, and the service wasn't exactly friendly. "Coldly tolerant" would be a better description; Granny didn't take a shine to us tourist types. My burger was really gross. Alf over-tipped, so I took back 60¢.

We happily fled back into Texas. A few hours later, we were sailing past Amarillo, hell bent for New Mexico. We thought about checking out the famous Cadillac Ranch, but when we missed the exit, we took that as a sign to just keep on going, and we just kept on going.

It was still another hour to reach the border, and we pulled into the last westbound picnic area in Texas at 9:05, just as the sun was setting. We hung out to stretch our legs and try to snap a couple of sunset photos.

It turned out to be one of the nicest sundown shots I've ever caught, complete with myriad hues of gold, a few meandering clouds, some silhouetted sage, and even a strand of barbed wire running right through the half-sunk sun.

We were not the only people in that Rest Area, though. Oh, no, no, no. A decent-sized U-Haul truck pulled in just



after the sun dropped from view. It parked at a table near the far end. A man and a woman got out of the cab. They had swarthy complexions. The man was on the thin side and the woman looked like she might've been a few months preggy. They walked directly to the back of the truck and unfastened the roll-up door. As soon as it began to rise, a dog sprang out, eager as hell to go piss and crap somewhere. That seemed pretty cruel to me: making a dog ride in the back of a closed-up truck.

But then the **kids** climbed out! Four of 'em: two boys, two girls, aged ten down to four, we guessed. Four kids and a dog. In a U-Haul. In mid-summer. I was speechless. I still am.

We cooked up our delicious supper on the portable propane appliance: seven bow-wows. Grilled woofers are the best woofers. Boiled ones, like Fenway Franks, or most other ballpark wieners, just aren't as good. Even Hot Dog Annie's, back in Paxton, Mass, doesn't give you the crisp and black edges, with the juice oozing out the sliced flanks, and that singed flavor as you chomp into it. You don't even need condiments when the doggie is grilled right.

Condiments are funny anyway. First of all, is it "ketchup" or "catsup"? Is there a difference? Well, come to find out that, no, there really is no difference. The word "ketchup" actually comes from the Malay word for "fish sauce," *kechap*. Pretty weird that we stole that word and attached it to a tomato puree. And "catsup" is just a bastardization of the previous bastardization. The bastards.

Mustard or Mayo? Is there a more divisive demographic than that? I know very few people who say, "ehhhh, either is fine" about that choice. It's about as split as Democrat - Republican, or Red Sox - Yankees, or morning person - night person. You get to some real hard-core, fundamental, cut-of-your-jib, essence when you get down to this. And Lord help you if you are a mayo man and you go to a mustard man's picnic, because chances are that he's said "screw those mayo freaks, I'm packin' 'stard only." Of course, he might bring three or four types of mustard: yellow mustard, brown mustard, spicy mustard, and custard mustard.

I am, and always have been, a mayo man. My first taste of mustard as a little shaver turned me off from it immediately. That ravenous big bite of my much anticipated ham samich at Aunt Peg's lake house just suddenly slapped my palate and stopped my munch momentum cold. *Ughhh, what's wrong with my samich???* And you can't even scrape it off because it seeps into the bread, leaving its bitter taste behind.

And another problem, I think, was my neighbor Johnny's referring to it as "mouse turds." I mean, I knew it wasn't, duh, but that was a tough enough image to shake to keep me from giving it another chance.

Mayo, on the hand, was truly love at first bite. Being as bored as a seven-year-old can get with bologna - actually, "baloney" to me at that age - samiches, I took a chance on mayo. Lettuce too. And Mom lightly toasted it. In an age of Welch's grape jelly samiches on Wonder bread, this constituted a major culinary project. One taste, with that nice mayo tang, and the light crunch of the lettuce, and the still-warm bread, and I became a mayo man for life.

To be fair, though, the word "mayo" is a generalization. What I was really weaned on was Miracle Whip Salad Dressing. We Whippers know the difference. There is a refined smoothness to The Whip that Hellmann's and the other true mayonnaises just didn't have. I never once used MWSD on a salad, though. Ugh, please. But mixed with tuna or chicken or turkey, or just spread on bread to caress my meat, The Whip can't be beat.

Rene, the chef at the Harp & Bard, once absolutely astounded me by *making* mayonnaise. I probably shouldn't have been so astounded, but it was early in life - I was only a sophomore in college - and I had never had the opportunity to ponder where mayonnaise came from. It was a fundamental food: eggs were eggs, meat was meat, veggies were veggies, mayo was mayo. So, when one of the waitresses came into the dish room and announced, "We're outa mayo, Rene," I, as barback and designated gopher, expected to be sent on a store run to get a big jar o' 'naise. But, instead, Rene, a good-natured, stocky and powerful man whose Austrian accent was Schwarzeneggeresque, [it's a good bet that that will be the longest word (20 letters) of these Blings] simply hefted himself up and casually replied, "OK, I go make some."

"*What?!?*" I ejaculated.

"What?" Rene asked back.

"You're gonna **make** mayonnaise??"

"Ya. Course," he smirked.

"You mean, like, *real* mayo, not some artificial shit?"

"Ya. *Real* mayo," he chuckled. "Where you think it come from? Cows?"

I had to admit that I had never thought about it. Mayo was just always in a jar when I saw it. It was never in pieces. It belonged somewhere on the Periodic Table of Elements: Mayonnaisium (My), right between Manganese (Mn) and Molybdenum (Mo).

Up to that point, the bar and restaurant staff had always regarded me as “the brain” of the place because, instead of wasting my down time on cigarette breaks or watching TV in the bar, I’d use it to read another Shakespeare play, or to rough draft my next paper. To me, it made more sense to do that stuff at work, where I was being paid, than to waste my free time on such things when I could be boozin’ or chillin’. Anyway, the Origin Of Mayo thing dented my brainiac image a good bit.

Pickles don’t do it for me, condiment-wise, unless they’re sliced really really thin. Then, I’ll have two, but no more.

So, obviously, I won’t do relish.

Horse Radish? I can’t even get past the name. Animal? Vegetable? WTF?

When you pile all that crap all over your food, what are you doing besides hiding the taste of the meat? I know, I know, spare me the “it enhances the taste” bushwa. It changes the taste bigtime. Give me a grilled hot dog with none ‘o the fixins, any day. That taste needs no help.

We chowed our seven woofies and made ready for the next state, New Mexico. To Alf and I, the change had already happened. Two miles back, the flat Texas plains had abruptly changed to a ragged landscape of valleys and mesas. Lightning flashed high in the cloud tops to the distant south, and we left Texas behind. I was in no hurry to go back. Stupid Texas.

And RR2K would have no part of the Lone Star State either. It probably would’ve if that ghettoshit hadn’t intervened, but what happens happens, and Soonerland became the path to Sacramento!

So, it was getting a bit late when Blue Man carried me into Oklahoma 13 years later. The moon had been an enjoyable companion already on the trip. The departure date had coincided with the New Moon, so each subsequent night, the moon rose as a gradually widening crescent. The first night, it was almost pencil-line thin. As it waxed, it became a bright white grin in the dark sky, and the grin got happier and happier.

I opted for a Rest Area sleep. I wasn’t really tired yet, but there was that travel-by-the-sun thing to adhere to. I didn’t mind missing the very end of Arkansas, but Oklahoma deserved a second chance.

Tulsa was first on the agenda for Thursday, July 6th. How’s that for a promising day? It wasn’t so much the city that gave me a rush of enthusiasm, as the fact that I was getting petty close to crossing onto the left hand page of the Rand McNally USA map. The fold would occur just west of Tulsa. The significance of that leap should not be taken lightly. There are large demographic imbalances east and west of the Mississippi, but the differences between left page and right page are even more pronounced.

The right-hand page – the eastern half of the United States – shows 31 states, plus DC. The left-hand page – which includes small insets of Alaska and Hawaii – shows only 19 states.

The right-hand page totals 171 million people (67.5%). Left has just 79 million.

The right-hand page totals 1.15 million square miles (31.5%). Left has a whopping 2.39 million.

The density of the right is 148.5 people per square mile. Left is a mere 33 (1/5 as dense).

What did that all mean??

OPEN ROAD, BAYBEEEEEE! Air to breathe and room to do it in.

[Yes, Alaska tilts the scales some, but not all that much. Even if you remove that big 570,000 sq.mi. state, with its 551,000 inhabitants, you actually get a higher percentage living on the right: 69%. How ‘bout dem apples, you toad sucker?]