



### Fock 3: Greater Enid

All that number juggling going on in my head should give you an idea of just how stimulating the actual city of Tulsa was (i.e., not very). But I loved some of the town names as I crossed the eastern part of the state: Muskogee, Wagoner, Broken Arrow, Red Bird, and even the small town of Okay (pop. 528), which would look wicked cool when listed with its state – Okay, OK. *I said I live in Okay, OK, OK??*

There would be little stoppage time today, or so I thought. The pit stops of yesterday had stalled momentum, and today was a day to make tracks. Sacramento was out there somewhere, and I hoped that it would be a good 700 miles closer by the time I kissed the road good night.

On the Muskogee Turnpike, the speed limit was 75, so that meant 84 worry-free MPH. There was a small sign on the shoulder along there somewhere that said, simply, “Drive Friendly.” I gave it the finger.

Another sign, this one near a tollbooth, indicated that there was a \$90 fine assessed for ducking the toll. That’s an odd amount to choose: why \$90, and not \$100? Wouldn’t \$100 be a better deterrent? How daunting is \$90? What costs \$90? Nothing! If it’s that high up in double figures, it’s gonna cost \$99.99, not just \$90. Why have a shruggable double-digit penalty when you can slap the offender in the face with ONE HUNDRED?

I didn’t duck the toll, but I did stick a ramrun on the bucket. There was no fine for that. At least, nobody mentioned one.

There was another sign out there that made reference to a “semi,” which got me to wondering. If something that is 53 feet long, 8½ feet wide, and 13½ feet high, with 300 horse power, and weighing 17000 tons, is a “semi,” what the hell is a FULL??

Actually, I asked a trucker that at the next rest stop. He was fairly amused by the question, and gave a not-very-certain answer: a “semi” is what the trailer of the rig is called, because it only has rear wheels, none in the front; the front is supported by the back wheels of the cab. OK, I asked, then why is the whole truck-and-trailer combination called a “semi?” He shrugged, “No fuckin’ idea,” and walked off.

Well, that was good enough for me. In Britain, such a vehicle is called an “articulated lorry.” Riiiiight. I’ll stick with “semi.”

Once past Tulsa, the route went directly west along the Cimarron Turnpike. Four of the major arteries into Tulsa were toll roads. I felt like I was back in Delaware, forking over money no matter which direction I turned. There really wasn’t much to see, though the spaces were becoming more wide open. Northeast Oklahoma was greener and hillier than I had expected, but things were rapidly becoming the flat and brown that I remembered.

Off the side of the highway, down where the exit ramps would take you, there were a lot of heavy farm equipment dealers, and a surprising number of mobile home dealers. Some of the latter boasted great deals due to bank repo’s, and I have to admit that a few of them were some nice lookin’ cribs.

One dealer, though, had a fenced-in back yard containing about eight mobile homes that were way past repair. Their frames were cracked, walls were falling off, roofs were caving in. One was just plain broken open in the middle. They looked as though they had been there for quite a while too. Again, I had to wonder. Why bother keeping them? It didn’t even look like spare parts could be salvaged from any of them; they were all pretty much stripped clean as it was.

So, I say, have some fun with those things! Don’t just leave them there to rot. Get rid of them in a crazy way. Go ten shades on mental on them with a chain saw. Or invite eight friends over, borrow eight sledgehammers, and have a race to see who can be the best one-man wrecking crew. Or put frantically-posed mannequins in the windows and then burn them all down. Or get a whole pile o’ dynamite and blow the fuggers straight to Mars. And videotape it from five angles so you can play it back on Christmas Eve. Have some fun! Sell tickets, give away free beer, hire a band, let the county come and watch you lay waste to these useless old boxes.

Richie used to do that kind of thing with his cars. He and I were both of the mind that we would be the final owners of our vehicles, and when we were done with them, well, we could do whatever we felt like doing before they got thrown in the trash.

One night, his big old black Mercury Brougham was slated for retirement. Richie always liked The Big Car ride, and this very used Brougham had served him well, but it was time for it to go away. He would not let it go gently into that good night, however, and planned a raucous farewell for it. It still ran, but it was noisy as hell, with a totally shot exhaust system, fumes just about pouring through the dash, some odd rapping noise deep within the engine, and brakes that scraped like badly scraping brakes.

So, Richie, Danny Mac, Bowie, Monzie, and I took went for a final ride in it. We started innocently enough, simply side-swiping a set of huge concrete blocks that lined the dirt roads behind the movie theater. As we headed off down the street, Danny Mac urged Richie to drive close to the curb. When he complied, Danny threw the passenger door open, slamming it into a telephone pole. The window shattered into a million Jujube-sized pieces, and most of them flew into the back seat, all over us. At the next light, Monzie jumped ship, wishing us luck, and heading off on foot to return to his car. We were not done yet though.

As Richie drove, we set to work on the inside of the Brougham, slicing and ripping its upholstery, and yanking out chunks of foam from every seat until we were left with little more than springs under us. We even stripped the driver's seat while Richie was trying to drive. We kept all the pieces in the car, though; we didn't want to litter.

We had left Richie's hometown of Dedham, and found ourselves in Walpole, in the empty side parking lot of some Cumberland Farms convenient store and gas station. Richie had produced two baseball bats from the trunk, and we were taking turns slamming dents into any surface that looked vaguely smooth. It was a riot. We were laughing so hard. The lot was pretty big, we were well away from the building, and there were no homes nearby.

Then a cop showed up. He saw us as he was driving by, and he whirled right around. He pulled up quickly and decisively. He was befuddled that we made no attempt to flee. In fact, we looked at it as a breather, and stood there leaning on our bats as we greeted him.

"What the hell are you doing???" was all he could ask.

Richie produced license and registration, and explained that it was his car, and we were just playing with it.

"You can't do that!" he protested.

I asked if someone had complained about the noise. He said no, but... but...

Grasping at straws, he demanded to know if we had been drinking. Oddly enough, for us, we had not been. We kinda foresaw the potential for such a run-in, and agreed that abstaining from demon alcohol until the ride was over would be a good idea.

The cop was out of ideas. What law were we breaking? Since nobody had complained, then we weren't disturbing the peace. We spoke with him calmly and logically, so we really couldn't even be called disorderly. We were just bashing our own car. So what? You can trash your own property, can't you? Isn't that one of the freedoms that our forefathers flipped off the British for?

He took another look at Richie's license. "You're from Dedham?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!"

"Well do me a favor, and go the hell back to Dedham."

We smirked our assent, and piled back into the car. It started with a growling cough, and rapped like a woodpecker as we drove off down the road, back to Dedham. In the morning, the Brougham got towed away for scrap, satisfied that it had given us one more fun and memorable evening.

So, if we could have that much fun with a car and a couple of bats, imagine what some reasonably-funded adults could do with eight decrepit mobile homes!

But, anyway, Blue Man and I drove on westward till we reached I-35, the north-south lifeline between Oklahoma City and Wichita, Kansas. I had no desire to visit either place, though. This westerly route would have to angle a bit sometime later today, but northwest progress was needed, not due north. The map said that Enid lay about thirty miles ahead, and I could not resist a visit to Enid.

Enid is one of those towns whose name is just catchy enough that you throw it out as an example in conversation: *Hey, look on the bright side: you could be living in Enid, Oklahoma!* Or *You'll end stranded in someplace like Enid, Oklahoma.* It's the equivalent of saying *East Bumfuck*, or some other euphemism for a remote and uninteresting place. I felt I owed it to Enid to check it out.

Enid -- far from being a sharp-eyed, clever young girl (who had been with the firm for only four weeks) -- was pretty lame. It was bleak, and wheezing. Farm equipment was keeping the city from gasping its last breath. Granted, I just skirted the city, as opposed to delving into it and sucking its marrow, but as I drove through the streets, I saw mostly railroad tracks, grain elevators, new and used

farm machinery dealers, farm machinery repair shops, machine shops, a junk yard full of old farm machinery, yards piled high with pipe, trucks that were both in use and out, truck parts suppliers, iron workers, and welders. I did not see blooming florists and prosperous lawyers and cute little knickknack shops. I don't remember seeing an OfficeMax or a CompUSA.

Enid was all about processing and servicing Farm Work. Get it into Enid and ship it on outa here. Or drag it into Enid and get the goddang thing fixed. As long as there are farms, Enid will survive. But unless those farms flourish, Enid will never thrive.

There was an Air Force Base just outside town, and little-known Phillips University had a sign posted somewhere, but you could tell that agriculture is the lifeblood of this place. Most of the fields had been freshly turned, and still held a fecund, rich, brown hue. It was a time to plant, I reckon. Enid is a city of more than 45,000 people, but my guess is that many of them reside well outside the city itself, in "Greater Enid."

Enid was my cue to turn north and begin a kind of a staircase effect that would lead me to Kansas. This route would cling to smaller roads -- two-lane highways and the like (the proverbial Path Less Traveled) -- until western Colorado. Countless small towns lay all along the way, offering glimpses of a daily life that I could barely begin to imagine, but yet was very much a part of this overall image of America.

As Highway 64 angled sharply right, it united with Route 81. My "head for numbers" immediately jumped on this anomaly: Highways numbering 8-squared ( $8 \times 8 = 64$ ) and 9-squared ( $9 \times 9 = 81$ ) were sharing the same roadway! And this was NOT the first time. Back in Virginia, along the spine of the Appalachians, from Staunton south to Lexington, I-64 overlapped with I-81. It had struck me as a mild amusement at the time -- just enough to make me jot it in the notbook -- but when it happened a second time, I went berserk!

Well, maybe not *berserk*, as such. Yelling "Whoaaa!! Did you see that??  $8^2$  and  $9^2$  together AGAIN!" to nobody in particular isn't really *berserk*. Just nutty. So I went nutty. It gave me a damn good reason to crack open another frosty cold adult beverage. And you thought a solo roadtrip wouldn't be exciting...

Leaving the wonder that was Enid, I saw a dead armadillo on the roadside. It was belly up. This must have been about the seventh one today. And almost all were belly up. Odd looking creatures, those 'dillos. Especially when they're belly up.

Then again, most animals look funny when they're belly up, because they are almost all designed to be belly down. Dogs, cats, horses, cows, wildebeests, giraffes, elephants, deer, rats, ducks, snakes, insects: all belly-downers. Birds are belly-down too, but you see their belly anyway. We humans are neither, unless we go prone (belly-down) or supine (belly-up).

Hey, when does a tummy become a belly? Do just little kids have tummies? And fannies? Fannies become asses. I used to have a tummy and a fanny, now I have a belly and an ass. What happened??

Can animals have tummies? If so, then I suppose this armadillo was tummy-up. It got its fuckin' fanny hit by a car. You don't hear the phrase "fuckin' fanny" much, do you? There is a certain incongruence there.

Just like when Suzanne, the cute but street-smart, late-20's, mother of two that I bartended with in Woburn, said one night: "And the baby went poopies right there on the fucking sofa!" Poopies. Fucking poopies.

So, clearly, there was a LOT to think about as I departed Enid.

Just up the road a couple of miles, there was a grouping that struck me, for some reason. There was the Garfield County Gun Club, which was right next to a small field full of brown cows, which was right next to the Brown Funeral Home. Maybe it was because the cows were brown, I dunno, but it just seemed like a process, somehow.

Once clear of the big city, Oklahoma got really empty. Route 64/81 was one lane in each direction, and was dead straight and flat. There were a few trees here and there, and some old farmhouses spotting the landscape too. It was a very comfortable, 65 MPH, cruise-controlled ride. Rand McNally promised nothing but sweet emptiness all the way off the top of the page. There were no scenic roads at all in this part of Oklahoma; not a green dot to be found. I couldn't disagree, but it was still damn relaxing.

And brown. Oklahoma turned out to be a very brown state, after all.

The tiny towns fascinated me. Nash consisted of six closed and broken houses. There was a crappy grain elevator that appeared to be functional, but otherwise, Nash had run down the curtain and joined the Choir Invisible.

A few more miles due west, there was Jet ("Pop. 100"), whose sign proudly proclaimed it The Goose Hunting Capital of Oklahoma. There were empty fields, then a very small cluster of very small buildings, then more fields. End of Jet. Don't geese like *water*, though? This place was arid. Extra dry. Maybe those people hunt the geese, but never actually see any.

Shortly after Jet, and about an hour northwest of Enid, as I surveyed the wide landscape, something off to the right caught my eye. There was a faint, whitish shimmering to the north. It looked almost like a mirage would look. The map indicated some sort of lake up thataway, but that didn't seem quite right: this was too white, and it didn't glitter like water would.

There was a sign for Salt Flats F.W.R., with an arrow pointing down a long, narrow road. I was past it before I could react. I wondered if I was missing something cool, or what. Then a couple of miles later, there was another sign, just like the first. It must have been the *you-missed-it-you-loser-so-here-is-your-second-chance* sign. Given that second chance, I took it.

The road turned to dirt almost right away. And this was a browner dirt road than I was accustomed to seeing. Most dirt roads are almost beige, with spots that look even grayish. This road was tan, bordering on brown. Most dirt roads look thin and peaked (that's the two-syllable pronunciation with the "pale and wan or emaciated" definition, not the more common monosyllabic version, meaning "coming to a peak", got it?). This one looked healthy. Imagine that: a healthy dirt road. I enjoyed it. Blue Man did too.

We rocked and rolled along, kicking up healthy dust behind us for a few miles, until we came to a gate. There was a sign and a modest lookout tower there also. Beyond the gate, the road plunged downward a bit, and then turned out of sight behind the tower's mound.

The FWR in "Salt Plains FWR" stands for Federal Wildlife Refuge, but the area seemed to be most noteworthy for what was in the ground, rather than what walked on it or flew above it. It is the only location in Oklahoma where you can dig for selenite crystals. How about that?

The tower showed little more than a distant overview of the very white plain, and the 8-9 cars that were parked down there. Well, if they could go down, Blue Man certainly could!

I pushed the loosely hanging wood-and-wire gate the rest of the way open, and drove on in. It was short, dusty, mildly downhill ride. The flat floor of the basin turned from brown to tan to white. Soon I was driving on solid, flat, packed salt, along a designated travel lane, to where the other cars were all parked. The Salt Plains were formed millions of years ago, when the salt water seas retreated, leaving this area cut off – kinda like a toad suck, but saltier – until it evaporated, leaving all its salt behind.

The weird thing is that the salt layer is only a couple of feet thick, and very liquidy mud still lurks underneath, and that is where selenite crystals have formed. Water seeps in once you have cracked the bottom layer, and you splash that against the walls of the hole to loosen the delicate, dark brown, crystals. Then you put them in the sun to dry.



OK, I can see that as curious thing to do, maybe something that you might do on a middle school field trip or something. But what was really weird was that this was popular! The eight or nine cars that were there must have all been full of people when they arrived, because it was like Family Outing Day. Parents, kids, little kids, all on their knees in the salt, leaning down, and reaching deep into their holes. It made my back hurt just watching them. They looked like some clothed form of burrowing pack animals. Each had staked out their own little territory, and were huddled around it, almost

protectively, as if it held secrets.

The really, really weird thing about all this was that **it was 100° out!** Maybe it'd be an interesting diversion around sunset, or early in the morning, or in Autumn, but midday in July? Owwww. *Hey, honey, it's 100° out and not a cloud in the sky. What say let's take the kids out to a flat, white, scalding stretch of ground and inhale salt for a few hours!* Man, there must be NOTHING to do in Jet. Just looking at these people gave me a powerful thirst.

But, you know, if I'm in the right mood, just about anything can make me believe I'm parched. Though who know me will attest to that. In fact, now that I mention it ... be right back.

Ahhhhh... :]

The final stretch of Oklahoma was straight northbound on a small, empty road named "8". The towns of Cherokee and Driftwood were behind me. A provisions stop in Cherokee stocked me well for the afternoon and beyond: 12 pounds of fresh ice, and plenty to chill with it. And another succulent fried chicken breast for only \$1.29. Yummmm. Good, classic, ramack eats.

It was 3:30 in the afternoon. There was still well more than five hours of daylight left, plus a hour to be gained by a time zone change. A lot more country to cover before this day would be done.

The Sooner State's last miles were totally barren. There was a bit more grass around there, and not quite as much naked brown earth, but, still, I have seldom seen that much land with so little on it. It was a perfect parting shot.