

ROCKIES and ROLLIES

Fock 2: The Peak, The Keg, and the Moose

RR2K didn't veer as far north as Denver, though. Again, virgin ground was sought.

So, when we reached Pueblo at 1:25 a.m., a northerly route to Colorado Springs and Denver was not considered. Colorado Springs had been fun, for sure, in prior roadtrips, with Pike's Peak and The Keg being the chief attractions.

Pike's Peak nearly took us out in that '82 visit. Trekking down on a bigtime scenery hunt and inspired by the rocky wall that we saw from Denver, we made it our quest to summit Pike's. The climb was gradual at first, as we launched onto the course of the Pike's Peak Marathon. The air was clean and the sky was blue, and the gently rolling roadway curved out to the towering crags of stone that are the Peak itself.

The second half of the Marathon is a killer, though, as the ascent steepens drastically towards the 14,000-foot mountaintop. We were just cruising along smoothly when The Roadhouse began to show signs of effort. By the 11,000-foot mark, he was gasping badly.

As the road nears the summit, it goes through some switchbacks, and it was right at one of these, that the noble van said "Uncle." It quietly stalled, and sat unconscious on the dirt road. Trouble was, we were pointing upwards, just above a 120° turn, and would have to try to negotiate that *backwards* without power steering or power brakes. And the further trouble with that was that the dropoff from the outer edge of the switchback was eye-opening. I guess Pike's Peak was going for the natural look by putting up as few guard rails as possible, but this one seemed a little risky, especially given the way we would have to approach it.

Van drivers get good at using their mirrors. It's necessary, with the huge blind spots that those rolling boxes can have. The Roadhouse had good, bigass, side mirrors, like a much bigger truck would have. It also had a blaring airhorn on the roof, with a switch just above the driver's head, making the horn a very convenient weapon against the no-minds and apple-sauce-brains that frequently cross one's path. A good blast of that horn would shove anybody out of your way. If Norm No-Mind had been zoning out to his Carpenters 8-track, and was forgetting what gas pedals were for, or if Vic Veggie was still knuckle-deep up his nostril seven or eight seconds after the light had turned green, The Roadhouse would cozy up close, slap on the brights, and let loose the Trumpets Of The Seraphim. At night, with the van headlights flooding the inside of a smaller car, the effect must have been akin to having a runaway 18-wheeler about to take a bite out of your rear bumper.

The mirrors on The Roadhouse were like windows on the world; you could see *everything* in those big suckers. Plus, they had those cool round parabolic mirrors that pretty much let you see the ground under the van as you drive. But, in this instance, on this switchback, it was rather disturbing to strain to get the ground level view and see nothing but the other side of the valley, forty miles away.

Richie was outside guiding me, giving the old "Yeahhh, plennnty o' room! Keep it comin'!" crap and waving all airport-like while I'm in the driver's seat trying to figure out if I had done anything to piss him off recently. Then, of course, the "Plennnnnty o' rooo---" became "STOP!!" He was laughing, so I just had to climb out and take a look. Sure enough, the rear tire was teetering on the dirt rim on the road, and if you had hung a rope off the rear bumper, you would have had quite a climb to solid ground. Plenty of room, my cheek.

Naturally, the turn was too tight to simply swing downhill from there. It required the wonderful four-point turn from Hell, playing gravity jussst right so that we wouldn't have to push. The uphill traffic



was bullshit, of course, but there wasn't much else we could do. Richie was putting on a jocular display of exaggerated gesticulations – behind his head, under his leg, inside his pants – as he “guided” me, so I think he mitigated their ire a good bit.

We glided the exhausted van down the road a bit, then Doctor Rick prepared for surgery. In 1973, Dodge, like all car companies, made a far simpler vehicle. The engine cover came off with the flick of two latches and turn of two floor bolts. Once the cover was lifted away, you were actually looking at ... the engine! There it was, fundamental and accessible. You could change wires, spark plugs, rotor,



distributor, alternator, water pump, fuel filter, air filter, hoses, belts, fan, and just about anything else with a simple ratchet set, a screwdriver, pliers, and some basic common sense. It was even enjoyable to do, since you knew you were saving money by doing it yourself, and because you knew there would be such great satisfaction in turning that key and having that engine roar back to life.

Big Brudda Bob was always the mechanic of the family, and any such knowledge I ever had was stuff I had gleaned from. Richie's dad made his living as mechanic, so, of course,

Richie knew nothing about motors. It made sense, when you think about it: when Richie's car broke down, Big Dan fixed it, so Richie never *had* to know anything about motors.

My vehicles often needed help, and Bob was not always handy enough (or willing enough) to repair it for me, but he was very good about giving advice. One such tidbit that he had given me shortly before we began this roadtrip came in damn handy up here on the mountainside.

While Richie cracked us another beer – “breakdowns are always better with beer”, he said – I reached a long screwdriver in to the side of the carburetor, tweaked the little screw to adjust the fuel-to-air mixture, and fired the Roadhouse back up. It greedily gulped the new mix, and Richie held up his barely-touched beer with a WTF expression on his face.

We remounted the willing van, and submitted with alacrity.

The view was outstanding.

We reveled in it.

See Richie revel (right).

The ride down the mountain had an interesting interruption too. Given the rapid descent, a driver must constantly apply the brakes, even in low gear. So we shouldn't have been surprised when we were gestured to a halt at the quaint little rest stop at about 10,000 feet or so. A uniformed man placed his hand inside the van's front fender, over the tire.

“Too hot,” he declared, though not ominously. “You'll have to pull it over for a while and let the brakes cool off.” Buzzed by scenery overdose, we nodded and complied. We dismounted and, by mutual consent, went



our separate ways for an hour. Both of us ventured off into the high-elevation forest to enjoy nature, sunshine, and, most of all, solitude. No matter how much you like somebody, you still gotta have your Alone Time. After a week of non-stop companionship, I'm sure Richie craved some private time as much as I did.

I wandered quite a way until I found a sloped clearing. The sunshine streamed bountifully through the thin, pure, Colorado air, and I stretched out long and lazy to relish the serenity of the Rocky Mountain afternoon.

I'm sure Richie spent his time the same way I did – though I couldn't catch the squirrel, and I didn't have any Twizzlers anyway. I never asked, and neither did he.

The nearby town of Colorado Springs, and its suburb called Fountain, played a more active role in the next visit thither, in 1985, with Cliff, to visit Danny Mac and his summer guest, the inimitable Richie. This was always a volatile combination. Dan was quite the catalyst: always willing to jump with both feet into any vibrant social or recreational situation. Typical sprinter.

The four of us did the Peak again, and descended on the small town at its feet for some boozin'. When we saw a bar called The Keg, we just knew it was for us. The carved sign and shingled entrance gave it that welcoming look, but the wooded keg that dangled from the sign just made us *thirsty*, and we were not to be trifled with when we were thirsty.

The bar was dark and smoky, and beer was wonderfully inexpensive. They all drank Bud, but I opted for Pabst. Yes, PBR's, quality since 1844.



The Keg kept us zealously occupied with the tabletop shuffleboard game.

It was my first exposure to this most excellent test of finesse and skill, and the gliding of those weighted pucks across the lightly dusted maple table was addictive to me. I had to keep playing and playing. And drinking and drinking.

The deeper the buzz got – and it had started well before we crested the mountaintop – a Rocky Mountain high, if you will tolerate the obligatory pun – the smoother the slide of those silver weights got. The metallic pucks with the blue caps would clack against the ones with red and vice versa, and we would cackle with glee and bellow raucous taunts as our feverish competitions

wore on and on. Five-pointers would hang on the edge and survive as opposing weights would zoom by into the boards. I don't know if we were playing well or shitty because I had never seen the game played before, but it sure was fun.

Eventually, it was suggested that we leave The Keg and spread our joy elsewhere. I don't remember for sure whether this was our idea or the bartender's. We bounced across the street to a much more respectable bar (it almost had to be), and they had the good taste to deny us service. We shrugged and laughed aloud at their wisdom.

That was just a warmup, though, to our whitewater rafting experience.

The Arkansas River winds down from Turquoise Lake in central Colorado, and runs through Royal Gorge, near Canon City, on its way towards Pueblo. It is a lively river, and rafting tours are common on it. Being rather hungover, I approached the excursion timidly. The day was overcast and cool, not the sunny and hot that we had expected, so our enthusiasm for a good soaking was diminished. But, we climbed aboard anyway, and hoped for the best.

The raft held seven people: six tourists and one guide. Our guide, Matt, was a typically sturdy mountainman type, with shaggy blond hair, and the aura of a man who had a damn cool job and knew it. He assigned the four of us guys to the prominent paddle positions, and placed the young just-married couple from Tennessee in the safety of the middle "passenger" seats. Matt even went so far as to appoint Richie the "Bowler," the one off whom we would all pace our strokes. We protested, naturally, though Richie was a study in smug about it.



We started out calmly enough, just as the Arkansas did. We followed Matt's clear instructions, learned how to steer the raft, and prepared for some harrowing times. We had overheard three of the guides talking on the bus ride from base camp to launch point, and they had seemed legitimately concerned that the overnight rains had swelled the river to risky proportions. Hence, we were just a trifle daunted.

But then the hangover wore off, we got cocky about our paddling, and soon we were ready to take on the Nile, the Ganges, and the Yang-tse, with [Angel Falls](#) thrown in for good measure. The honeymoon couple was getting worried.

As the river rose in spirit, so did Danny Mac. We had navigated the first whitewater tumble without mishap, so as we churned into the second, Dan leapt to his feet in the front right corner of the raft, held his paddle up high, and bellowed "I'm the King!!" to the heavens as we plummeted with a crash to the level below. Even Matt began to realize that we had raised the bar a few notches.

We wanted to compete. We wanted to take on any boat that was on this river. Where was the end? How far? How many boats were ahead of us? How fast would we have to go to reel them all in? We wanted to know. We wanted to know.

Matt tried to remind us that we were not out here to race, but Danny Mac's intensity was, as always, contagious, and we strained at the bit to Go Get 'Em – whoever "Em" was!

We hit a couple more rapids and splashed through them with arrogance. Richie was bousing away like there was no tomorrow and we bowsees were just rollin' on the river.

We came upon a wide spot, just after a moderate gush, and the river filled its lungs for the next test. Matt declared that it was time for us to take a breather as well. We griped that the red raft was getting ahead of us, but Matt insisted that we were OK. In fact, he said, we were so OK, that he reckoned we didn't need his guidance anymore. With that, he stood up, dropped his paddle into the raft, and dove out of the boat into the belly of the river.

If you knew Danny Mac, you would have done the same thing we did. My arm, Richie's arm, and Cliff's arm all leapt up and out to grab him before he was even halfway out of his seat. We knew that he was just a split second from diving out of the raft too, and our grab for him was a schooled response, taught from years of spontaneous reactions to "WTF? Why not?" things.

Trouble was, if Danny had gone, I probably would have too, then Richie would have, and Cliff would have looked at the frightened Tennessee newlyweds, decided he didn't want to stay with them, and joined us in the river plunge. The five of us would have then watched the terrified two, who were already clinging to one another, drift on down the river and fall out of sight in the upcoming rapids.

Oh, man, we would have laughed too. Dan had this loud and irresistible laugh that just lifted you from your namby-pamby, should-I-or-shouldn't-I mood and into an of-course-I-should-**goddammit** frame of mind.

One summer day, several of us were standing on the big beach at Cape Ann on the north shore of Massachusetts, having just emerged from a lively Frisbee session in the water. As we stood there talking, a white blob suddenly splattered all over Danny's shoulder. We all stopped in mid-word, and the dirty chunk slid slowly down his chest. I don't know for sure what I would have done, but I can guess that it would have involved cussing out the gull, knocking the droppings off my body as if they were radioactive, and dashing back to the water to cleanse myself.

Not Dan.

"HA!" he laughed out loud, so the whole beach could hear. "I just got shit on by a bird!!!!" And he stood there laughing, watching the avian feces course down his body.

That was Dan.

And when he got his gumption up, you had to follow or just go the fuck home. It was that way with drinks ("I'll chug two more Slippery Nipples, if you will."), with ludicrous displays of courage ("I'm jumping off that bridge, who's with me?"), and, especially with physical challenges. I nearly broke my neck one day at the beach, trying to match him in doing back flips from a stand at the water's edge. Dan was fast and lean, and knew better than anybody I ever knew (except maybe Larry C.) how to get a woman in bed. As Lisa once said about her friend Fletch on Hilton Head, he just had "the magic dust." He would enter a room and all the women would go into a little daze, lose focus on whatever man they had been talking to, and murmur under their breath, "ohhhh, who just came in??"

But we kept him in the raft this time. Matt seemed to realize at that point that such challenges should not be issued, and he returned to the raft with a more businesslike attitude. We did catch and pass two or three more rafts. Matt recognized that that was what we were into, so he let out the reins and

allowed us to sprint the rest of the trip. It was enjoyable, to be sure, but, after all, there was nothing to drink on the raft, and even Cliff was into shortening the gap between bowser and boozier.

Cliff was there for a couple other trips through the Rocky Mountain State, including a surprisingly bizarre encounter up in one small, high altitude town.

It was in '85, and Cliff and I rolled contentedly into Kremmling, a small and tidy town about two miles above sea level in the north central highlands of Colorado. It was a mid-summer afternoon, a tad on the cool side, and partly cloudy (maybe it was "partly sunny", I really don't know for sure, I'm no meteorologist). We had just had a delightful cruise down Routes 13 and 40 from Rock Springs, Wyoming. Awed by the precipitous scenery of Rabbit Ears Pass, we were in high spirits as we reached Kremmling. We were also lookin' for lunch.

Now, I can't really speak for Cliff, who claims that he "will eat anything", but when I'm road-tripping, I tend to eschew the nationally recognized eateries: Mickey-D's, BK, Papa G's, The Hut, and their ilk. I go for local flavor. Why go to Kremmling if you're going to feel like you're at the BK in your hometown, for cryin' out loud.

Who coined that phrase, anyway: "for cryin' out loud"? What does it mean? Why does that phrase add emphasis to anything? Are they saying it's wrong to cry out loud, or right? Is it better to cry to oneself, or is it worse? And exactly what is cried out loud?

But I digress. Really? Me???

So, anyway, disdaining the very notion of lunching at a franchise, I scanned the town for a distinctively Kremmling establishment. It didn't take long. First of all, Kremmling (population 1162) was not exactly Fast Food City. Secondly, there was a limited area to scan.

Kremmling was the quintessential Main Street Town, although they chose to name it Park Avenue. It was one straight street, faced on both sides by ordinary, square-faced buildings -- hardware stores, food stores, small offices, utilities, places of town business, perhaps a watering hole or two, and whatever else was necessary to the nearby mountain dwellers. It wasn't particularly lengthy, there was nothing taller than two or three stories, nothing particularly decorative, and there did not appear to be anything of import on any side streets. Come to think of it, there were not all that many side streets either.

Kremmling, it turns out, is named after Rudolph Kremmling, a businessman who opened a trading post on the north side of Muddy Creek in 1884. Pioneers traveling west would stop in Kremmling for supplies. However, many decided to settle here and, by 1904, Kremmling was home to 30 landowners and 140 residents. In 1906, the Denver, Northwestern, and Pacific railroads reached Kremmling. To celebrate this joyful event, citizens organized a free fish fry in town, complete with an elk and antelope barbeque and a public reading of the Declaration of Independence. In 1912, the first fair, now known as the Middle Park Fair, was organized by W.H. Harrison. How 'bout dem apples, Hoss? (I wanna know where they got the fish for the fish fry, way up in the mountains like that.)

It was nice though. A grayish-blue ridge of Rocky Mountains loomed over it, the air was thin and pure, and everything about it implied an uncomplicated lifestyle. It was not difficult to envision this place a hundred years before. Take up the pavement and you could picture a roadway of brown, packed dirt, with light swirls of dust in summer, and slops of slushy mud in winter. Change the concrete sidewalk to strong mountain pine. Take away all those diagonal parking spots and put in hitching posts. And replace the cars with sturdy horses -- include the accompanying olfactory alteration, especially in July -- and you've got the right idea. Kremmling was a good place to pull over and give the van a break.

The van in those early days of the Reagan era was a thirteen-year-old rust brown Dodge panel van. With a couple of months worth of toil, sweat, and **money**, it would eventually become a totally refurbished shiny midnight metallic blue sweetheart -- for all of a *month*, until some pinhead blindly darted his little Subaru out from his Commonwealth Avenue parking space and right into my path, totalling both the van and his own leg. Sigh. At any rate, in this summer of wanderlust, we called the van The Moose, largely because it was big, brown, and not especially swift.

The Kremmling restaurant scan lasted only until we spied the wooden sign bearing the words "The Moose Cafe". We decided that that sign was, indeed, a sign, so we wheeled *our* Moose into one of those diagonal spots that lined Park Avenue, and we ventured inside.

The Moose Café was small, plain, and at least reasonably clean. It had the standard white tile floor; black, metal-framed, thinly padded chairs; about eight 4-foot square tables of white formica (with tiny gold speckles, of course), adorned with S&P shakers, the large-style sugar pourer, the typically boxy

napkin holder, and the classically prosaic 1-page typed menu in its vinyl, black-edged, clear protective cover.

The dining area was not large, nor was it crowded. In fact, our arrival doubled the total clientele.

It was awkwardly quiet. A *very* large woman sat by herself, dwarfing her table in the back corner of the room. Aside from the fact that she was certainly very large, we noticed little about her. She latched her stare onto us strangers as we walked in, so, deeming it prudent to avoid riling up the locals (especially the very large ones), we did what we could to avoid staring back. Perhaps she lost any and all interest in us right away, I don't know. I didn't want to look; what if she was still staring at us? She had me cowed.

After several uncomfortable minutes, the very large woman put down her fork, clattering it on the plain china plate. She sat back in her chair and boomed out, "Well, Wes, what brings you here?"

Cliff and I shot each other a quick I-hope-she's-not-talking-to-us look, but then became aware of Wes, sitting unobtrusively behind his newspaper in the front corner. He had apparently been there much longer than us, but had somehow escaped our vigilance. He was pushing 70, thin, with a hungry and harried look about him. He wore a plaid flannel shirt and black-rimmed glasses.

He slowly lowered his newspaper. His voice was slightly crackly but bold and he replied: "Just lookin' for a rock 'n' roll band."

Cliff and I nearly choked on our burgers, straining to keep from guffawing. You don't want to be laughing out loud at people in their own hometown. Or cryin' out loud either, for Pete's sake.

Before we could regain our glutinary equilibrium, the very large woman responded sagely, "Ya know how 'tis: if yer bones don't ache, yer teeth do." Then she picked up her fork and placidly returned to her meal, and Wes, with a knowing nod, slipped back behind his paper. Neither uttered another word.

Minutes later, we left \$6 on the table -- including the 18% tip (good prices at The Moose) -- and eagerly departed.

Wes and the very large woman were still there. They may be there yet, still lookin', still achin'...