

Utah Rocks

Part 1: Prior Passes

The focus of the Roadrage2000 was *definitely* Utah.

Don't get me wrong: I eagerly anticipated the Olympic Trials in Sacramento (!) too, but they were tied for a distant second on the Roadrage2000 Priority List. Utah had called to me before, on the brief visits and pass-throughs of various other roadtrips. And each time I was in Utah, I remember thinking: *I can't wait to come back here!*

Well, the time had come.

Nicknamed the Beehive State, Utah is the 12th largest, and the 35th most populous. It barely beats out Nebraska in population density.

There is nothing scintillating about the State Flag. On a blue field, appears the state seal. In the center of the seal is a beehive (the state emblem) with lilies growing on either side, standing for peace. The state's one-word motto "Industry," meaning steady effort, is in the middle. An eagle spreading its wings above US banners represents protection in peace and war. The "1847" indicates the year that Brigham Young led a group of people to the Salt Lake Valley to reestablish the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints, a.k.a. The Mormons. The "1896" is the year that Utah gained admission to the Union. It's all pretty routine flag stuff, really, except for that damn hive.



The name *Utah* is derived from a Native American word meaning *those who dwell high up or mountaintop dwellers*. Arriving Europeans mistakenly believed the name referred to the Ute people, later applying the word to the state. The state's original name was Deseret, from a word in the Book of Mormon that means *land of the honeybee*.

The beehive became the official state emblem in 1959. Utahans relate the beehive symbol to industry (see State Motto, above) and the pioneer virtues of thrift and perseverance.

Are bees really thrifty?

Whatever. I guess they don't spend much money. But they don't give two-thirds of their income to their freaking church, either.

None of that mattered to me, though, because **I was BACK!!!!**

Richie and I had zipped literally *through* The Great Salt Lake after it had flooded its banks in 1984. Richie slept right through it, so don't expect him to verify it. We were a day out of Rock Springs, Wyoming, where my dear cousins Nancy and Lynne had held a great Passin-Thru Party for us the night



before, and we were feelin' just a teench tuckered out this next morning.

So, Richie was snoozin' on the bed in The Roadhouse, my first van – the blue '73 Dodge -- when we got to GSL. I saw a sign that explained what lay ahead. Due to record snow melt that spring, GSL had grossly overflowed its banks, and had flooded the salt plains in all directions, including I-80. Damn, were they right! The highway had since been reclaimed by bringing in millions (thousands?) of truckloads of dirt, and constructing a causeway at least twelve feet above the original surface of the Interstate, all the way across the **33-mile** Lake Bed!!

I kept calling back, "Richie, you should

see this, it is soooo cool!" only to hear a muffled retort of some kind. Once he actually lifted his head, looked out the side picture window, and muttered, "Mmm. Water." before dropping his noggin back onto the pillow.

Then, three years later, on Max's maiden voyage, Alf and I came into Utah from the south after passing through Texas (and Oklahoma, kinda), New Mexico, and Arizona.

We definitely should have done a bit more research on our way up from the Grand Canyon, because we ignorantly drove right through Zion National Park, enjoying the cliffs and wall and tunnels, but never pausing to discover the wonders that did not lie roadside. But at least we did have the smarts to stop and tour the otherworldly canyons of Bryce N.P.

Blown away by its bizarre array of shapes and colors, we giddily dashed up and down among several of the hiking trails, dwarfed by the erratic spires, and reveling in everything we saw.

The destination of that 1987 Roadtrip was Provo, where Wheels was going to be running the 800 Meters in the National Junior Olympics that were being held at Brigham Young University. I had told him at the qualifying race, "If you make it, we'll go," knowing full well that any excuse to roadtrip to Utah would do. As it turned out, his parents paid Wheels' airfare out, and gave him the OK to roadtrip back.

To get to Provo, Alf and I eschewed the Interstate in favor of the more folksy roads through the small towns. An enormous thunderhead towered before us at one point, with countless flashes of lightning zapping through its dark billows. When we reached the town that the storm had been above, we were momentarily stumped. The streets and sidewalks were soaking wet, which was to be expected, but all the lawns were white! "Snow?!?" we thought for a split second, then realized it was hail. Big hail. And lots and lots of it.

The summer-heated pavement clearly had melted whatever hail had landed on it, but the cooler grassy spaces had nurtured it. It must have been an hellacious deluge because there was no green to be seen. Up closer, it looked as though everybody's lawns had been carpeted with golf balls. We got out and gathered a few as souvenirs, and put them in the cooler where they could do some good. Cars parked along the road bore fresh dings and dimples from the icy downpour. But at the town's northern edge, just a half-mile or so further on, the pavement was dry, and the ground was clear. It was apparent that the town had been singled out and punished for its sins. Must have been a Mormon thing.

Salt Lake was still (or again) beyond its proper boundaries when we arrived there, and Alf and I decided to do some buoyancy testing. There was a bathhouse and stuff, but you could tell it was kinda underwater – at least the bottom of it was – so we just pulled over and picked a random spot along the "new" shore to plunge in.

The Lake's reputation for salinity is definitely not overstated. The water was gray and felt weird. We bobbed around like tennis balls, even floating in an upright position, with no treading needed. But, man, did we feel gross when we got out! A coating of salt clung to us as if we had been spray-painted. It was unpleasant. I can't believe I actually went back there a day or two later with Wheels.

We also took a walking tour of Salt Lake City, and accidentally overstayed our parking meter. When we returned, Max was brandishing a tag on his windshield. Irked, I snatched it away. But reading it turned my ire into amusement.

In a very understanding, yet tongue-in-cheek tone, it empathized with our fascination with the city, which surely was the reason why we had lost track of time, but suggested that we put more money in the meter next time, just in case.

Who else but the Mormons would give a "Courtesy Citation?"

Wheels finished ninth in the qualifying rounds, with eight advancing to the final. We didn't state it openly for another day or so, but we were both glad that he didn't make it since the final was two days later, and that would've put a time constraint on our leisurely roadtrip home.



BYU was nice, and all that, as I told you already, but we both craved open road and scenery. Yellowstone National Park was our first target, and as we headed north from SLC, through Ogden, and up into the beautiful Wasatch Range.

Right near Bear Lake on scenic Route 89, we encountered a construction project that had cut the road down to one lane. It was one of those wait-your-turn things where traffic flow is allowed through one way for a few minutes, then the walkie-talkies crackle and the signs turn from “Stop” to “Slow” and off you go.

Well, at this particular spot, on this particular day, there was a very pretty young woman doing the sign thing. It was very hot out, and she looked a bit weary and dreary. Her hair was hanging in her face,



her orange vest didn't fit well, and was an extra layer that she just wasn't happy about wearing anyway. We were right up at the front of the line, so I grabbed a Coke from the cooler, rolled down the window, and offered her the ice cold, dripping can.

“Whoaaa! Thanks, dude!” she exclaimed with a grin. She drank it with zeal. It would have made a great commercial. As we pulled away, I took her picture and she gave us a big smile and wave. Her hardhat said “Ladner” on it; maybe that was her name. I wonder what became of her. If you know her, tell her the guy in the van says “hi.”

Three years after that, in 1990, Kelzo and Bobby and I cut through the corner of Utah on the way to the Big Hole. We did a short afternoon run by the Emerald Pools of Zion – the same trails that Clint Eastwood runs on in *The Eiger Sanction* – and saw some deer and some natural beauty. Still, though, we remained clueless as to Zion's real treasures. We knew it was a nice place and all, but we never delved enough to find the pearl in that oyster.

When we pressed on eastward from there, we faced a choice: follow 160 to Four Corners (the only spot where four states meet), which I had been to before, or try 163 north into Monument Valley. We chose the latter, and it was spectacular!

The stands of rock throughout the Valley were amazing. Rising straight up out of flat desert, these huge upthrusts of reddish rock stood like giant tombstones over the empty plain.

It was like being in caveman times, except for the highway. And the comfortable, air-conditioned van. And the music. And the beer, of course. Oh yeah, and the clothes we were wearing. Alright, so I guess it wasn't like being in caveman times. Bite me.

