

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 2, June 11, 2004

Fock 1: North Into The Deep South

Day Two of Road Romp '04 began under hot sunshine. Summer in Florida, big surprise. The night had been surprisingly good for sleeping. The high humidity and 80-degree-plus temperatures of Key West make vansleep a very uncomfortable thing, and I anticipated similar discomfort on many nights of this southern route: summer swelter would be the rule, not the exception.

So, I prepared for it by purchasing four small, silent, battery-operated fans. What a boon! With one placed on each corner of the bed, a network of cooling breezes crisscrosses the sleeper, and turns a still, thick, sleepless night into a comfortable snoozefest.

It seemed mild enough at that Rest Area to use only two of the fans, and as the night wore on, I even ended up shutting them off because I was "too cold." Nice.

So, the first target of Day Two was Tallahassee, Florida's capitol city. It was still a good 200+ miles away, so there was time to do some typical pondering.

On the way to Tallytown, for some reason that now escapes me, I decided that I like the word "follicle." It sounds like it should be something fun. Follicle! Maybe it's too much like Popsicle or Fudgicle. I think they dropped the soap when they used such a playful word on such a clinical thing. Let's face it, if they're ever talking about your follicles, it's not for a good reason.

"Pillow" is another word that I like. Pillow. Despite the suddenness of the P sound, the rest of the word is soothing, comforting, and cushy. Pillow. Ahhhhhh...

When the long peninsula of Florida was finally behind me, I steered Moby west onto I-10, which would be my course – barring slight diversions and excursions – all the way to Tucson, Arizona, some 1700 miles due west.

I stopped in Tallahassee to go for an afternoon run on the highly recommended Lake Overstreet Trails. They were indeed great, and reminded me of my favorite Greater Boston running paths in Dover's Noanet Woodlands, Canton's Blue Hills, and Stoneham's Middlesex Fells Reservation. How many hundreds of miles had I logged over the years on the shaded, rolling, negative-ion-saturated trails of those forested lands??

Even though my flatland-oriented body suffered mightily on these long and sometimes sudden hills, I thoroughly enjoyed the run. I spent most of it in Massachusetts, mentally, reliving bygone runs. Quite good for the soul, if not for the ego.

Very soon after leaving Tallahassee, Moby and I passed into Central Time. WTF?! We have 160 more miles of Florida to go, and we're in Central Time?? Dayummm.

True it was, though. It prompted a little map study. It turns out that, at 24.50° longitude, Key West lies directly south of Cleveland, Ohio. The ENTIRE CONTINENT of South America lies EAST of Key West. When you finally get through that long-ass panhandle and reach Alabama, you are due south of Chicago. Eastern state, my left buttock.

Florida is only ranked 26th in land area, but you can count on one finger the number of states where you can drive 900 expeditious miles – that is, making a beeline for the next border, without any stupid, stoned, meandering miles thrown in the middle: Alaska is the only one.

Texas doesn't make it. From where I-10 breaches the eastern border at Orange, to El Paso, at the tip of the western thumb, it's 857 miles. In fact, it says so on the first roadside mileage sign you pass. And 857 is a pretty daunting number to see on such a sign.

If you were to get on California's I-5 at the Mexican border and drive that road all the way to Oregon, you'd cover barely 800 miles.

Yeah, yeah, you could drive 1000 miles without leaving Rhode Island, if you wanted to, but that's not my point. This is an expeditious through-route – known as an ETR in ramack jargon – that we're talking about. My point is that Florida is one lonnnng frigging state, OK?? Bite me.

I reached the 24-hour mark of the ramack, and I was still in Florida! The asphalt of I-10 was brand new now, and seemed rubberized. Rain appeared to be absorbed right into the pavement. That's a damn cool development for us road rompers. Glad my tax dollars are being put to such good use!

I had a friend I once worked with who chose to not pay his taxes because he did not want to contribute to the nastiness that the military was perpetrating here and there around the globe. He did this for three years and, somehow, he was getting away with it.

Trouble was, he was trying make a statement, and when no one seems to be hearing you, it's not much of a statement. Tree falling in the forest and all that malarkey. So, on the fourth year, he informed the feds that he would not be filing again, and why. Well, they came after him with fangs, attaching wages to ensure they'd get their fines and fees and penalties. It was ugly. Steve stood his guns and showed he was indeed a man of principle, but I couldn't bring myself to attaboy him.

I mean, he didn't want his the building bombs with his tax bucks. Now, how many bombs did he really think they would build with his \$3000? A box o' bullets, maybe, or a few guns. But they're gonna build 'em anyway, so I suggested to him once that maybe his three grand was going elsewhere, like mine was. My tax money fixes roads, baby, smoothing out the highways and byways of the US of A so we can all ramack with alacrity. And when I see that deep black, brand new asphalt – like here on the panhandle's I-10 -- so fresh that I feel like I'm leaving impressions with my tires, I smirk with approval at my chosen (though quite involuntary) investment.

So as the panhandle rolled by, I gave the radio some chances to both entertain and enlighten me. You can learn a lot about a region from its radio broadcasts. One thing I learned right away was that Florida car dealers are obnoxious assholes. Their ads SCREAM at you: HEY!! LOSER! BUY A NEW GODDAMN CAR, YOU PUTZ!!

What ad agency approves those things?? They have the opposite effect on me: I hit the Seek button as soon as they come on. Not only do they fail to reach me as a client, they scare me away from the station as well. Doesn't seem like real wingo-zingo strategy to me.

A truck had kicked up a small rock on Alligator Alley the night before, and it had caught the upper edge of my windshield, chipping it (the glass, not the rock). I thought nothing of it at the time, but as I drove, the crack slowly lengthened. From Naples to Gainesville, it crept slowly straight downwards. Then, strangely, as I veered west towards Tallahassee, the crack began to curve to the right. When my course settled on a due west direction, the crack began to straight-line it to the right. It continued creeping farther right as I drove farther west. It was creepy the way it crept, real creepy. So far, it was creating an inverted trace line of my route. I wondered if I would end up with a full loop, all the way to the passenger side edge (west coast) and back.

At Bagdad, Florida, the odometer clicked to 101101, which my quick mental calculations told me would be the first of seven such palindromes on this journey.

Alabama (67 miles) and Mississippi (79 miles) brought the average down to a more workable 356 per state. The Yellowhammer State flew by without so much as a pisstop. I didn't even pause for Mobile, except when traffic necessitated it.

The long bridge across the Mobile River delta is a cool drive, and the tunnel that dives under Mobile's near shore is something that some theme park roller coasters would envy. It zooms downward at a serious pitch, and then rises steeply up to daylight. With enough speed behind you as you emerge from this very round tube, you could almost feel like you were being shot out of a big cannon. Almost.

Once I reached the Magnolia State, though, I pulled Moby into the Welcome Center for a little time-out.

It was a serene place. First of all, it was big. There was plenty of room to spread out, and no group or individual had to be anywhere within bothering distance of any other group or individual. The picnic tables were set way back at least a furlong from the highway, among well-kept lawns and on a special, low-traffic, picnic-area-only road. There was a nice style to each little picnic hut, and peaceful fields and woods lay just on the other side of the thin wire fence over yonder.

I did lots of things there. It was a multi-functional break.

Exercise came first. This was an ill-fated concept. I did 100 push-ups and 150 sit-ups on the table first, and cleared my conscience. There was a vague intent to do this kind of routine every day, but, somehow, this ended up being my one and only such session. So it goes. I'm on vacation, dude.

It was the perfect place to plan my immediate route to, into, and within New Orleans, my next destination. It was still two hours away, but when you're driving into an only-partly-familiar city, and it's

dark, and aggressive fully-familiar-city traffic is charging all around you, that is NOT a good time to be fingering the Rand McNally. I wanted route numbers, street names, exit numbers, and mile markers all laid out ahead of time, so all I would have to do is zip right, zing left, zig right, zag left, park, zoom, booze.

A good meal was in order here also. It was dinnertime, after all. There was a bag of garden salad left, which, when topped with tuna fresh from the can, and a nifty dose of 1000 Island, made a great and healthy repast.

And there was beer. Duh.

Moby got to cool his wheels while I cooled my heels. It was about 6:00 when I pulled in, and I was still feeling damn content with the karma of the place at 7:15. But, eventually, the lure of The Big Easy slid through my reveries, and reason took over: should I spend this primetime Friday night on a highway, or should I spend it in The French Quarter? No brainer. Two hours to NOLA. Hit the road, Jack.



New Orleans' Bourbon Street was fun, as always, but nothing noteworthy this time – which might be a good thing.

It's actually very likely that I left Bourbon Street more sober than I arrived. My choice of parking spot was dubious. It looked great at the time -- a big, well-lit public lot with plenty of empty spaces – but I swear it was three-quarters of a mile from the meat of the Street. And, for some reason, I kept walking back to the van (usually to get free beer). Now, this has been a common and successful strategy in prior visits, but I had always been parked

only four blocks away, on North Rampart Street, on those occasions. The walk was short, quick, and a good catch-your-breath thing.

This, however, served best as a warm-up for my National Park hiking. I must have walked eight miles that night. And since I haven't mastered the art of drinking on the move, the walks all consisted of long stretches of determined strides punctuated by brief pauses for gulping.

Bourbon Street was the usual collection of drunks, with women flashing their breasts for meretricious strings of beads that they would just throw away the next day. Each time a woman would get so bold, a flurry of horny guys with video cameras would descend on her, like pigeons to a crust of bread. But all the women seemed a tad on the heavy side, and all of the guys, I swear, had mustaches. Whatever that tells ya.

One couple on this street was memorable though. There was nothing bizarre about them, but the contrast between them was amusing. The 26-year-old woman, who was tall and beautiful, with long, cascading, blonde hair, walked with rightful pride in her appearance, making confident eye contact, and flashing an eager smile back at anyone who offered a friendly face. She was dressed in a casual, light colored dress that clung sensuously to her slim hips, and accentuated her long lean thighs. She radiated good will, and seemed to manifest everything that was good and right and lovely about her gender.

The man, however, can best be described as a walking snarl. His cold eyes glared at the other pedestrians. There was anger and hatred in his look. His dark hair and firmly set jaw gave him a deeply menacing demeanor. He exuded evil intent, as if he would kill the next person who looked at his woman – and EVERYBODY was looking at his woman! He tried to walk with purpose, but her casual gait held him shoulder-to-shoulder. It was burning him up, and she reveled it.

Now, if I were he, I would have been the quintessential Cock Of The Walk. I'd be grinning like the Cheshire Cat, looking every envious guy right in the eye with a smug gaze that said, "and she's goin' home with ME, dude!"

Lighten up, evil eyes, and have a little self-confidence. Chicks dig that, I hear.

It was about 2:00 a.m. when I decided to shove off. The parking lot I was in would have been fine for an overnigher, but the hourly rates would have ching-chinged pretty high (depleting the coveted Beverage Fund), and San Antonio – the next planned stop – would've been that much farther away. So, some rest area just shy of Baton Rouge became home for the night at about 3:30, and Day Two was a done deal.

Even in the sultry summer air of Louisiana, where you would expect temperatures and humidity to blend into a very unpalatable concoction, this night's sleep was extraordinarily pleasant. Moby was proving to be a superb roadhost.

The bed – much more than a folded-down couch because of the four comforters that were layered atop it – was as good as any bed this bad bod has called bud. The translucent blinds kept all light and prying eyes at bay yet did not leave me in blinding darkness. The high ceiling gives you room to breathe. The polished wood trim makes to feel that you are in some luxury digs. All those make Moby a great place to spend the night.

But the biggest reason of all: the fans. Basic, battery-operated, circulate-the-goddamn-air fans. This was a revelation whose time was waaaaaay overdue. I had originally bought two of these suckers at Home Depot months before. About five inches square, and



requiring two “D” batteries (not included), these beige beauties fold open and stand at whatever angle you need. Placed on the windowsill, near the open screen window, they keep that muggy air from sitting its fat ass on you. Best of all, on low speed, they are totally silent. On high, they hum mildly.

As soon as I bought those two, I knew they were winners, but when I went back for more, they were sold out, with no more forthcoming. An Internet search could not find the same model, though I did get a couple of similars. Four, I felt, would be perfect: one in each corner. A breeze from every corner of the compass. Nice.

Do compasses have corners? Screw it. Roll with it.

Anyway, these fans took the humidity right out of the ball game. Instead of lying uncovered on increasingly moist sheets, with my pillow feeling like a used towel, I felt as though light, cool ocean breezes were caressing my body, gently kissing my skin, lovingly lulling me into a deep and very contented sleep.

Mighta been the buzz though. At least for part of that.

Of late, I have 180’ed my attitude vis-à-vis batteries. For years, I was dead against forking over money for them. My boombox needs what?? SIX batteries! Fug that! To me, it was like charging me again and again and again for the boombox. Shit, man, I already bought this damn tune machine, now I have to keep pumpin’ more cash into it every time I want to hear some music outside? Crump that! I hated batteries. I would often flip off the Duracell, Eveready and Energizer displays as I would walk by.

Part of the problem was that some of my battery-operated things were never there for me when I needed them. Flashlights, especially! Damn, how many times did I have to open my hood on a dark road on a winter night, only to have my “trusty” flashlight beam be about as strong as a match, and fading fast. Power cells, my fanny.

But, changes in my technologicality brought changes in my attitudinality. My first digital camera forced the shift. I was immediately hooked on the convenience of it, the immediacy of the photos, and the opportunity to adjust and enhance my own images. But the camera consumed batteries like I consumed beer: voraciously. I had to re-evaluate my stance: did the advantages warrant the periodic expense? Yes. Unequivocally yes. No film cost, no developing cost? I guess I can spring for a couple of AA’s every week or two.

A better camera brought even more bennies – a lot more memory, a powerful zoom, and numerous quirky photog thingies – but it also demanded 4 AA cells. Weekly photo binges required a new strategy, and instead of scowling when I had to fork over a couple of bucks for a couple of batts, I was greedily hoarding the little suckers. Twelve-packs, 16-packs, 24-packs! No amount was enough. The zip pocket on my shoulder bag bulged with slender coppertops. Every visit to a supermarket or department store would find me staring at the battery display: Do I have enough? What photo ops will be coming up soon? Will I be caught with the photo of a lifetime and crapped out cells? Oh, the ignominy!

So, with new ‘tude in place, I stocked up for Road Romp ‘04: 32 AA’s for the camera, and 20 D’s for the fans. Yeah, like no place but Key West would have batteries for sale. But, that’s always been a ramack philosophy: money spent before shoving off does not count towards the Overall Ramack Budget (ORB). So, beer, Coke, water, bread, pretzels, cold cuts, and two rolls of quarters would all be procured prior to departure. Kinda stupid I guess, but it falls in with a general RAM philosophy: It’s Better To Have And Not Need Than To Need And Not Have.

But, never mind all that. It was a good night’s sleep in the pre-dawn hours of sultry Louisiana.