

# Road Romp 2004

Day 3: Saturday, 12 June 2004

## Fock 1: Louisiana

As Day Three began, there was a task to attend to. For several ramacks now, the trip log has been kept on a hand-held cassette recorder, and later transcribed onto paper. With no navigator to jot down random observations and fleeting thoughts, the only net I could catch them in was an electronic audio device.

Planting my faith in tech advances, I left my old reliable hand-held cassette recorder at home, and brought my sleek, discreet, palm-sized digital gizmo.

I was garrulous but not loquacious through Florida and Mississippi, logging anything from five-second quips to two-minute revelations. But when I went to comment on the setting sun near Mobile, I was met with a terse on-screen message: "FULL".

I was flabbergasted. I dare say that I may even have been flummoxed. FULL??? This was the *second day!!* It was supposed to hold "nineteen hours" of entries, but it barely made thirty *minutes*.

Bah! Pshaw!

Clearly, this would not do. So, task one of Day Three was to purchase a hand-held cassette recorder, like the one I had so callously left behind.

It didn't seem like a daunting task, especially when a Best Buy loomed off one of the very first exits ramps from I-10W. How fortuitous, I thought, this would take but a Sacramento Second.

Shame on me for not realizing just how quickly the march of technology had stomped on the simple hand-held cassette recorder. My first search through the Personal Listening Devices aisle introduced me to a splendid array of CD players, but it was as if cassette tapes had never existed.

After a bit more searching, my perplexed look caught a sales associate's eye, and, when I finally walked right up to him, he half-heartedly offered to be of service. When I told him what I wanted, he frowned and knitted his brow.

"I don't believe we sell those, sir, but let's have a look," and he strode to the Personal Listening Devices aisle.

"I looked here already," I said, holding back the "I'm not that fucking stupid, you know," just in case he found one that I had overlooked. He didn't. I was vindicated.

"No, we don't carry those any more, sir." His concern was underwhelming. "Most are digital these days, you know. Some can..."

I cut him off. "I know. I have one. It sucks ass. The cassette ones are much better for what I need." He seemed more than a tad peeved at my interruption, and made a thin attempt at hiding it.

"I guess I can't help you then, sir," he said, and with a nod, he walked away.

I scratched my nose with my middle finger and continued browsing. Near the back corner of the store, there was an Office Accessories aisle. It was small, and very out of the way. Low priority for sure; this wasn't Office Depot, after all.

Compact palm-sized digital voice recorders hung in abundance, displayed confidently within their thick, clear plastic shells, and aggrandized by colorful cardboard backings, replete with dynamic fonts and market-savvy slogans and boasts.

"You all suck..." I muttered as my eyes scanned them.

Then, dangling forlornly on the bottom row, nearly obscured by the lowest echelon of compact palm-sized digital voice recorders, was a hand-held cassette recorder: a Sony TCM-200DV "Cassette-corder," featuring "2X Record Time", "Clear Voice" playback, and "V-O-R", whatever the hell that was.

I grabbed the little fucker before it could obsolete itself right out of existence. A feeling of triumph washed over me, like a '49er who finally found a nugget in his pan. I seized my prize and began to head for the cashier.

But just a few steps later, a thought crossed my mind: a hand-held cassette recorder is purdy dang useless without a cassette, and I hadn't brought none – at least no blank ones.

I stopped the next Sales Associate that crossed my path, brandished my hand-held cassette recorder with pride, and asked where I might locate some cassettes.

He pursed his lips and knitted his brow. "Hmmm, I'm not sure..."

My demeanor darkened. "Come on," I'm thinkin', "they even sell those at fucking Walgreen's."

He wandered down what looked like the Miscellaneous Crap aisle, waaaaay in the back corner, and scanned the lower shelf. "Yes!" he ejaculated, and pointed downward. Four 5-Packs of Sony CD-IT 90-minute cassettes, in clever little "slide cases", lay there, all but forgotten. I guess nobody uses cassettes anymore, huh? Good thing I wasn't looking for a stylus for my turntable, or I woulda got a, "You want a *what?* For a *what???*" I snagged my 5-pack, thanked him, and began to refocus on the road.

I had to detour though. I spied my first helpful sales associate, and rerouted myself past him. I slapped him lightly on the arm as I passed, held up my hand-held cassette recorder, and proclaimed with a grin, "Got one. Thanks."

If he didn't mutter "what a dickhead" once I was out of earshot, I'd be very disappointed in him.

There was an extra significance to leaving Baton Rouge behind. It has nothing to do with red sticks, even though I love referring to such foreign lingo cities by their translated names. The people of the very wealthy and prestigious city of Boca Raton absolutely hate the fact that they are living in The Mouth Of The Rat.

But francophonics aside, the key about riding I-10 West out of Red Stick was that I immediately crossed that big steel bridge that spans the Mississippi River. Years of history lessons



and numerous ramacks have given me a kind of reverence for this natural boundary. Maybe if you lived along its banks and crossed it every day in rush hour traffic, you'd yah-yah that kind of sentimentality, but living over a thousand miles away, as I did, and crossing it only in voyaging mode, the Mississippi sent my mind into thoughts of westward expansion, Mark Twain, cotton plantations, and ridiculous flooding.

Mostly, though, it put me in a wagon train frame of mind: headin' west, I reckon, across the prairie, through the desert and into the promised golden territory of California. My wagon train was a tad more comfortable, and a trifle faster, and the route I would travel was a bit more civilized and polished, but, otherwise, it was the same damn thing. Wasn't it?

My various vans and I had crossed this sprawling, serpentine waterway eleven times prior to this '04 Road Romp.

In August of 1983, in the Roadhouse – my very first van – Richie and I jollied our way across the mighty river into St. Louis before spending a night sleeping under the Gateway Arch. A week later, we returned, launching ourselves from a stupid run around the farms of Council Bluffs IA and off towards even stupider times in Toronto and Montreal.

A year later, with Patrick, we again made another less-than-lucid crossing at St. Louis, before swapping him for Richie in Kansas City. On the way back from the Los Angeles Olympic Trials, 17

days later, Richie and Cliff and I bridged again at St. Louis, mainly because those two Budweiser zealots had to pay homage at their Mecca (I tagged along, of course).

Then, next June, Cliff and I took The Moose, the successor to the demised Roadhouse, on a northern route and crossed the river as it divided the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota – still a few hundred miles south of its point of origin. A week after that, Sharon – I traded her for Cliff in Boulder (good trade) – passed over those winding banks on I-80 East, heading from Iowa to Chicago.

The spontaneous whirlwind tour with Dugg in August of 1986 even made an unexpected zip across to the west side, fleeing from Memphis into the thick, still, Arkansas night for a futile attempt at sleep in Spuds, my Dodge Caravan. (We shoulda had some battery-powered fans!)

In 1987, riding high in Max, my two-week-old Dodge Ram – a very welcome return to full-size vanning -- I slept in the back while Alf ferried us across the Mizzip' in northern Louisiana on our way from the Natchez Trace Parkway to Dallas.

On the eastering leg of that '87 trip, Wheels and I used that I-80 East route, hell-bent for Chi-town after feeling the noise of Iowa.

Three years later, on the Big Trip – RAMtour90 – the River served as the take-off point for an impressive stint of driving, as Max transported the highly-motivated Kelzo, the-still-green-around-the-edges Bobby, and the usual mellow me from St. Louis to Boston in just under 22 hours.

Except for track-related plane flights to Utah, Seattle, and L.A., the 1990's were spent east of the Mississippi.

The solo RR2K – Roadrage2000 in longhand – made the break again, though, with an on-the-fly route-change taking Blue Man (and his shattered window) across on I-40W at Memphis. The homeward-bound ride made the eastering pass on I-80E at Davenport, Iowa.

Moby and I were miles and miles west of the River before those memories cleared...

The bayou country of southern Louisiana made for a very relaxing ride. A surprising amount of the road was what you'd have to call "bridge." Not big, arching suspension bridges or anything, but an elevated road on concrete and steel trestles, with characteristically square concrete guard rails. There is no change in elevation for most of them, and if you drove at night, you'd never even know you weren't on solid ground.



By day, though, you can look down 15-20 feet or so at the dead calm, dark waters, and the grasses, shrubs and trees that rise up from them. Some of the vegetation is clumped onto small, solid-looking islands, but much of it pokes right up from the water. Roots fan out from tree trunks like spiders' legs, and give them a weird hat-stand appearance.

Little row boats, or small skiffs with puny motors, float here and there in the few shady spots, or in the shadow of the bridge, with one or two black men lazily dangling fishing lines into the water, and riding out another sweltering summer day. Catfish and crawdads for supper. Yum.

The Western Louisiana landscape was remarkably unremarkable, which is a lot like being extraordinarily ordinary, I suppose. Mostly, it was flat and non-scenic, with scruffy grass, some plain old trees, and some plain old fields.

One billboard did command attention, though. "For All Your Hunting and Police Needs" was boldly printed above two burly men, one in police riot uniform, and one in combat fatigues, and each armed to the teeth – AK-47's, knives, sidearms, ammo belts, full battle gear. And it was a store – yes, a freaking *store* – that was being advertised.

I began to hunger for scenic change. Aside from some coastal wetlands, nothing had been especially different since I left the Keys. Any ramack that originated in the northeast would have passed through quite a bit of change in 1200 miles. Key West (FL) to Lake Charles (LA) was the same distance as Boston (MA) to Chicago (IL), or Rochester (NY) to Gainesville (FL). Now, those latter two routes would have all kinds of scenic variety, but this one was being a bit too same: flat, with trees blocking your view of just about anything.

The final thirty miles of The Pelican State were the worst. Right at the Lake Charles bridge, things went from Plain Jane to Ugly Agnes, from fields and rivers to factories and refineries. A highway exit sign said it all in the names of two nearby towns: Industry and Sulphur. Odd town names had been commonplace in LA – e.g., Grosse Tet ("big head" in French), and Cut Off, two towns about an hour back – but these two most recent names told a story, and it was not a happy tale.

The highway turned to a crappy concrete. As bad as the travel lanes were, the breakdown lane was far worse. It looked like it had been shelled. The concrete was in tatters, and any asphalt patches had just been thrown down without concern. Even the patches in the travel lanes looked they had been shit out of a truck and only flattened by passing cars.

The ride, of course, was awful, with the thumping and rocking getting me irked and vexed. This road had not seen repairs in a lonnnng time. It was like the Highway That Time Forgot.

I hoped for refuge in the next state, but my optimism was checked at best. As Louisiana's western border drew near, I smirked about the early morning notbook entry that I had made back at the Rest Area: *Texas awaits: big, hot, and stupid.*