

Road Romp 2004

Day 3: Saturday, 12 June 2004

Fock 2: Stupid Texas

The first eight miles of Texas were badly marred by crappy highway. The bad concrete had continued from Louisiana, making yet another lousy first impression for The Lone Star State. At the eight-mile mark, it suddenly changed to beautiful new asphalt, so the Mobe and I were all grins again. But that only lasted for about a mile-and-a-half, when it turned back into a craphole road. If I had been in a boat, I would have described the ride as a "moderate chop."

Right from the get-go, Texas looked big and empty. One of the first highway signs blandly stated that El Paso, at the west tip of Texas, lay just 857 miles away. 857 miles.

Having done Dallas – though certainly not like Debbie had done Dallas -- and having no real interest in Houston, but wanting to see *something* in that big-ass state, I had set my sights on San Antonio.

The everyday-life kind of stuff that Texas was showing me along the way had some entertainment value, though. Signs were proving to be worth a chuckle or two:

"Burr's BBQ: We're Smokin' The Good Stuff!" (I was envious).

"Babe Z Museum" (for Olympic track star and pro golfer Babe Didrikson Zaharias).

"BudgetCasket.com" (for disposing of those not-so-loved ones).

"Jimmy Casino's Country Italian Restaurant." What do they serve? Beef Jerky Alfredo? BBQ Eggplant Parmesan? Antipasto & Grits??

And my favorite: "Bucky's: Fabulous Restrooms." That's all it said on the billboard. Nothing about food or gas or beer: just "Fabulous Restrooms." Now, I had some time on my hands, so I had to wonder: what qualifies a rest room as "fabulous?"

Fabulous, by definition means: 1 a : resembling or suggesting a fable : of an incredible, astonishing, or exaggerated nature <fabulous wealth> b : wonderful, marvelous <had a fabulous time>; 2 : told in or based on fable.

Ohhhh Kaaaaaay. Which of those traits do you suppose applied to Bucky's restrooms? Do you think fables had been written about that incredible toilet and that astonishing TP dispenser? Or perhaps the marvelous sink for washing the marvelous shit off your fingers, and the wonderful exhaust fan for clearing the fabulous restroom of your wonderful exhaust?

I didn't feel the need to find out. Stupid Texas.

Anyway, Houston was along the route, so a short visit seemed like the neighborly thing to do. I figured I'd take a little detour and foray into downtown H-town for a bit, then zimzam an hour or so north and check out Austin.

Didn't do either though.

The Austin thing kinda went out the window just after entering Texas. Rand McNally, my trusty navigator, showed no good lookin' route to the state's capitol city. There were highways aplenty, but no blue ones. They had yellow ones, but yellow ones mean lots of traffic lights, kinda like US-1 almost anywhere on the east coast. Drive a little, stop for a light, drive a little, stop for a light. Drive. Stop. Drive. Stop. Ugh ugh. No flow at all. Ya gotta have flow. The more flow the better. (Which begs the question, if you flow, are you a flower?)

Blue highways in the Rand denote "limited access highways," which, of course, means no interruption to your ride except the occasional accident and the inevitable construction. On a ramack, the blues are my friend, and the yellows make me cringe. Fifty miles on a blue should mean forty minutes or so. Fifty miles on a yellow might take an hour-and-a-half.

Green dots are the best things of all. They can accompany any road, but you rarely see them with a yellow. Many times, the dots call your attention to a narrow red line: a two-lane road that might or might not have a number. The Natchez Trace Parkway is like that, all 440 miles of it. So was the Colorado Riverway in Utah: another of my favorite by-ways. Come to think of it, most of the roads in southern Utah are green-dotted-redlines.

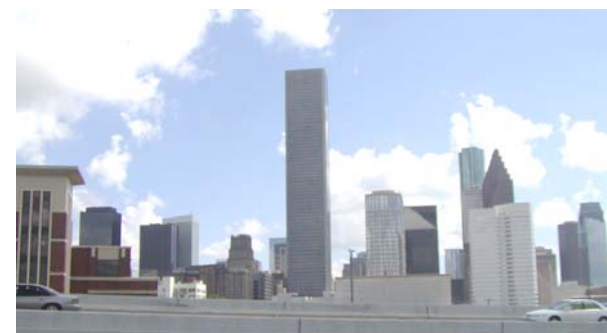
If there is a choice of routes, green dots are my guide. Sometimes, I have to remind myself that the road has been deemed "scenic." Alligator Alley – I-75 across South Florida -- is so designated, but most Sunshine Staters would pooh-poo it as a long, flat, uninteresting road, flanked by nothing but grass: "Move along, folks: nothing to see here." But, to a Vermonter, or a Coloradoan, it might be different enough to even be called "*damn* scenic." So, to each his own, and don't moan at the tone, Joan.

So, the best route to Austin was a yellow road with no dots?? NFW. Screw Austin.

Time was slippin' away,
and San Antonio would have
been a late night arrival.

Houston, though, since it
lay on I-10 anyway, was going to
stay in The Plan, Dan. I was
ambushed, however, by
something that I have become
unaccustomed to: urban traffic.
As a long-time Bostonian, this
should have been second nature

to me, but three years in Key West had washed it clean from my instincts. New Orleans had not been a problem because I had scouted the route and had a little familiarity anyway. With Houston, however, I was totally winging it. After all, it was a Saturday afternoon. WTF would there be heavy traffic for on a Saturday afternoon?



I-10 had exits before the cluster of city buildings, and it was evident that those would lead you into the downtown area, but that wasn't good enough for me. I didn't want to deal with traffic lights and such – have been giving off anti-traffic-light vibes lately? – so I'd wait till I found a ramp that just plunged directly from the Interstate to City Hall.

Trouble was, there wasn't one. At least, not one that I could get to. I-10 just seemed to curve right around the central group of tall buildings without offering any ingress. I was past the cluster before I could do anything about it. Traffic wound through a multi-layered maze of ramping roads before grinding to a halt. Texans surrounded me and didn't give two shits where I wanted to go. Surface Creep ensued for about fifteen puzzling minutes.

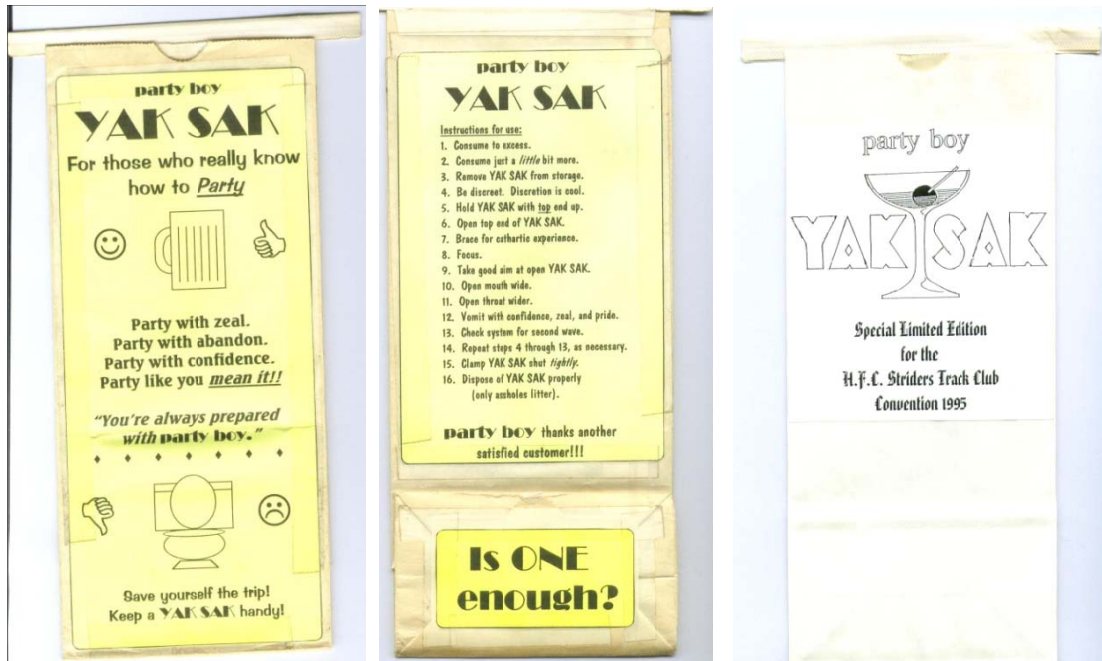
I guess I underestimated Houston.



The skyline and snarl of Houston briefly broke the dry sameness of the landscape, which might have been kind of a plus, I guess, but there was still a long way to go, and now less time to cover it. The first real RR04 highlight, a full 1660 miles into the trip, would be the city of San Antonio, and that was another 200 miles west. Getting there by sunset became a concrete goal.

On a flatlands blue route, 200 miles is no big deal; it's not even three hours, and most of it is on cruise control. And Texas kept tossing its oddness in my path.

Right after Houston, on the left side of the highway, stood a large warehouse and distribution facility that proudly bore the name PARTY BOY, and sold paper and party supplies. I had to wonder if they had Yak-Saks and Ponchos. Colyer, Nooch and I may well have been ahead of the wave with those inventions.



The Yak-Sak (see above) was the only one we ever physically created. I purchased one gross of airsickness bags (as opposed to one gross airsickness bag), and printed out some labels to stick on them. They didn't all get processed, though. Fewer than 60 are actually in existence. I'd wager that not even ten have been puked in. The concept was simple: drink till you heave, but heave with dignity. Be prepared! You don't even have to leave your seat. Simply burp out an "Excuse me for a second, won't you?" and remove the PBYS from your pocket. Follow the instructions on the back, purge your demons, fold it up tightly, dispose of it properly, and get ready to fill the tank up all over again.

We had two models: the high-visibility-yellow Collegian, made for the beer-swilling, keg-draining, do-shots-till-your-eyes-fall-out Party Boys; and the more distinguished classic white Cocktailor, for those special occasions, such as open-bar weddings, when your small army of Extra Dry Bombay Sapphire Martinis have had a little too much of an argument with the obnoxious family of hors d'ouvres and are kicking them out of your cozy tummy.

But it was the Party Boy Poncho that was the crown jewel of our line. It never got beyond the design stage, but it would have been the flagship of our fleet. Concocted on a buzzed Sunday afternoon at a table in the backroom of the Sarasota Brewing Company, it was the culmination of the twisted reasoning of the combined Party Boy, Inc. executive board: Colyer, Nooch, Cliff, Richie, and myself. Bonnie was there to lend us credibility; if she laughed, then it must have been funny to someone other than us five.

We were discussing the various ways to discreetly wield your Yak Sak, and were stuck on the idea of someone who had “lost touch” and was “nodding off.” The perils are obvious, and, suddenly, it just struck me: toss a poncho over his head! But, not just any poncho, Pancho: make it a Party Boy Poncho, rimmed with deep, watertight pockets all around the bottom hem to act as a gutter for all spills. The back pockets would be sealed and be more or less a reservoir, and the front and side pockets could be Velcro’ed or zippered shut when the eruption was over. A flap in the back could be opened for drainage later, and one good rainstorm would wash it clean for the next use.

We knew we had a winner!

Sadly, our designs never gathered enough steam to coax any funds into their development and marketing and all that business shit. I think we were lacking something called Initiative, whatever that is. We invested our funds in more “liquid” assets.

Despite our chosen name, we were not afraid of claims of sexism. The name Party Boy, on one hand, suggests that we are excluding the ladies. Why not Party *Girl*, huh, huh, huhh?? But on the other hand, we figured, why the hell would the ladies complain about us saying that they weren’t stupid enough to drink till they vomited all over themselves?

Maybe I need to contact Party Boy, Inc. in Texas and sound them out on these classics of party paraphernalia.

As Moby and I left Houston behind, the terrain began to turn more Texas-ish. There were big, open plains all around. Most were green, rather than the beige-to-brown that I was expecting. They weren’t lush by any means, but they still clung to green as the predominant hue. Cows and horses could be seen here and there. This was mildly rolling grazing land, not farmland. At one overpass, where I would have thought I’d see pickup trucks, there were two horses and riders trotting along over I-10. Yes, much more Texas-ish. Texish?

At one point, there was a dead turtle on the line between the travel lane and the breakdown lane. Hit by a truck, I reckoned. Truckers like to run over turtles for some reason. Just ask Tom Joad. A couple hundred yards later, there was another deceased turtle, this one just a tad farther into the breakdown lane. Then, maybe a quarter mile beyond that one, and way deep into the breakdown lane – almost on the shoulder – was a third dead turtle, but this one had its shell just plain crushed down the middle by something about as wide as a truck tire. Undoubtedly, a serial turtle killer was on the loose.

About an hour later, there was a medium-sized yellow sign on a pole on the side of the road. It looked like it might have been your typical “Caution: Ice On Road” sign or something like that. Instead, it read: BRIDGE DAMAGE AHEAD.

This was daunting. Was the bridge out? Missing a lane? Hole in the middle? Hanging loose from one corner?

No, dumbass, none of the above. The railing had been hit by something and a piece of steel on the top rung stuck out about two inches from the rest of the railing. No big deal. Not even a medium deal. It was not obtrusive; the curb and breakdown lane were there as a buffer between motorist and rail anyway, so it would have been almost impossible for any vehicle to hit it – unless, of course, said vehicle was careening out of control and was destined to cause a whole lot more bridge damage forthwith.

The sign simply called your attention to the fact that the state hadn’t fixed the goll darn railing yet. They posted the damn sign because it was cheaper than fixing the rail. Simple as that. I mean, they would have had to close one lane for a few days, and might have had to replace as much as a hundred feet of very expensive steel guardrail just for one irregular dent and protrusion. That hen don’t cluck, Tex!

As a concerned tax payer who chooses to believe that his tax dollars go towards highway maintenance and nothing else, I can certainly live with that decision, but WTF, why post the sign at

all? If it weren't for the goll durn sign, not a single person would ever ever EVER notice the goll durn damage! Goll durn it!

File that one under C.Y.A., I guess, Hoss. Warn the public rather than protect the public; at least your (Y) ass (A) is covered (C) against litigation.

Stupid Texas.

Moby ran smoothly along the Texas highway, cruise control cruising, air conditioner conditioning, and tunebox tuning. Somewhere a long ways back, the Interstate had switched back from cracked concrete to smooth asphalt, and the ride was jusssst fine, thank ya much. There were no big hills to irk Moby's tranny, and if I saw a lengthy rise looming ahead, I would ease my foot onto the gas and gently take the conn until we crested it, thereby insuring that there would be no unwarranted surging. It was a minor nuisance, but at least it kept me paying attention to the road instead of zoning out completely.

The radio was my companion for most of eastern Texas. The CD player offered quality tunage for when the airwaves totally let me down, but if you're gonna do Texas, you oughta listen to what Texans listen to, right?

Well, it was what you'd expect: a plethora of country music, and a preponderance of gospel, both in music and in sermon. The very first song I turned on when I crossed into the Lone Star State was a kickass, rockin' country jam. Maybe it was the zeal of the new state, but I was doin' the Yeeehaaa thing and slappin' my knee as I drove. Unfortunately, no subsequent song, on any station, for hours, came even close to that, except maybe [I'm A Redneck Woman](#) by Gretchen Wilson. That was a hoot! Hehhehheh, yeahhh!

So, National Public Radio took me in its esoteric arms now and then. I was flipping through the stations, and happened upon NPR just as a somewhat catchy classical concert was ending. There was applause, and a gradual calming down as a speaker came on stage. As he spoke, thanking the orchestra, and began to transition into a story, I recognized his voice. "Mr. Hoppy!" I proclaimed and turned up the V. His name wasn't Mr. Hoppy, but I didn't know what his real name was so I called him that. He was the same storyteller who had recounted the tale of Mr. Hoppy, the Norwegian Bachelor Farmer, on my ride through North Carolina during RR2K. That had been one weird but memorable experience.

This time, he spoke about Lake Woebegone, and a high school graduation. He was more of a stand-up comic in this performance, which was better than beleaguering his listeners with a convoluted tale that never really ended.

He wasn't a particularly funny comedian, but there is something about his voice that holds you. He's a natural yarn-spinner. Maybe someday he'll actually come up with some good stories to tell. Besides, it's easy to hold an audience when their radio alternatives are what they were here.

I would find out later that his name is Garrison Keillor, and he is actually very famous. You can find some of his very famous work online at www.prairiehome.com.

Now I know. Which is nice.