

Road Romp 2004

Day 4: Sunday, 13 June 2004

Fock 3: Cows and Cantaloupes

So, anyway, that occupied my convoluted little mind for about 30 kens or so. At about 4:30 p.m. (688 CT), I craved a break. This was not tiring driving by any means, nor was it unpleasant in any way, but it *was* more than a tad monotonous, and I just wanted to see something different, and be on a different type of road. So, I turned at Exit 404 onto County Road 864 and headed in to take a look at the small town of Sonora.



Almost immediately, I pulled over to check out the sights: cattle. Several brown-and-white cows stood and lay in the limited shade in a small, fenced-in area that was more of a yard than a field. A little white house stood a bit crookedly behind/beside the yard.

The cows were fat. They looked at me with bemusement. They had no desire for me to be there, but WTF, at least I was something new and I didn't seem threatening. Maybe they didn't feel threatened

anyway because there was a large black bull that had sense enough to be in the shade, and he did not stop glaring at me the whole time I was there.

"Bull" is a well-chosen word. It's hard to sound anything but masculine when you say the word "bull." Bull. You never hear the sentence, "Oh, what a cuuute little bull!"

That wildlife show ran out of entertainment value pretty quickly, so I hopped back onto Moby's saddle and set out for town. At one point, a dead porcupine lay forlornly on the edge of the two-lane road, just as a squirrel might in the northeast, or a wildebeest might in Kenya.



Sonora (pop. 2751) was a nice little town. Like San Antonio, its outskirts were less impressive. Numerous mobile homes lined the road into town, raising your internal Beware Of Trailer Trash flag, but the several blocks of "downtown" had very nice, albeit small, homes. There was a decent-sized school, a library, and one commercially-oriented street that almost no one was parked on.



One gas station sold regular gas at a modest \$1.73 per gallon (it was \$2.25+ in Key West), but there were no customers buying any. Strangely, the gas station directly across the street, boasted a \$1.97 price tag on its regular, and three cars were at the pumps. Stupid Texas.

Sonora looked like the perfect place for a typical ramack beer-and-burger break at a local saloon, pub, or tavern. I took Moby up

and down every street and block, and could not find a single such establishment. Imagine my consternation.

So, feeling a bit unfulfilled, but knowing there was still a lot of ground to cover by nightfall, I got back on I-10 and resumed zooming (re-zoomed?).

Within an hour, Texas turned totally arid. Any pretense of grazing or farming was pretty much gone. What few trees there were were very short and narrow, and had no leaves, just clumps of greenish-gray scrub. The grass was thin, with a starved shade of brown. The terrain seemed flat, but there was a gradual, steady rise as we headed further west.



Near the town of McCamey, at Exit 285 for McKenzie Road, there was a wind farm. Long-bladed fans on tall poles lined the top of a not-very-tall mesa. There were easily 200 of them, and they had been visible on the horizon for several miles (you can barely make them out on the horizon in the above photo).

It was good to see this alternative energy source being used, but I had to ask the question: Who was using it?? These fans were in the middle of the damn desert! Wouldn't it have made just a little more sense to put them right next to a town?



But it also made me think: if you lived anywhere out here in West Texas, just where would all your power and water come from? You are a mighty long way from anywhere, and power lines and water pipes cost money to install and maintain. So, wind power and solar power make a lot of sense, and you would probably put your town or home someplace where there were natural wells. If you didn't, you'd be some kind of moron, wouldn't you?

Once I got a close look at the fans, I noticed something rather curious about them. Not all of them were turning. Only a couple were spinning with any kind of vigor while a couple dozen more turned sluggishly, like they needed oil. Most were not moving at all. This puzzled me. Shouldn't they all be doing the same thing? Were the wind currents so capricious that a 20 MPH wind could be just a few feet away from a calm zone, with a 10 MPH vein just beyond that? Or were most of the fans turned off? Why the hell would you ever do that? Do you want to harness only *some* of the wind? If only some fans turn when the wind blows, aren't the others just a big waste of money?? Stupid Texas.

Music often sings to me when I'm ramacking. Whether it be CD's, cassettes, or radio, it is not uncommon for song lyrics to nutshell what is happening at the moment. (Mr. Hoppy was an exception to that, certainly.) Indeed, the subtitle of my book is going to be a line from the Samples' song *Information*, which was sung to me early in the RR2K journey: "Somewhere a destination crosses my path." It seems pertinent not just to that trip, but to my life as well.

On Road Romp '04, during the brief pass through the nub of Mississippi, in Moodfood's song *Spiritual High, Part III*, Dr. Martin Luther King's voice spoke of "the molehills of Mississippi." As I drove into The Big Easy, Bob Dylan was singing, "I drifted down to New Orleans" in *Tangled Up In Blue*. While a thunderstorm boomed and blustered on my way up to Baton Rouge, the James tune *Sometimes* cried out, "It's a monsoon!"

Well, here in the empty void of West Texas, just as I passed the 2000-mile mark of RR04, the song *Welcome To The Pleasuredome*, by Frankie Goes To Hollywood, was bellowing, "You're a long way from home!"

Amen to that, Holly. And it's by choice. :]

At 7:00 p.m., Moby and I left I-10 – for quite a while this time – and angled northwest on State Road 285 towards southeastern New Mexico. For 104 miles, with the very brief exception of the junction with I-20 at the Pecos, and a couple of gas stations that bore town names, Route 285 was the emptiest road I have ever been on. There was nothing. Not even a damn tree. Not even a ditch! It was short, stumpy, thirsty sagebrush covering flat, desolate, arid prairie in all directions.

There was an occasional, brief break in the nothingness. There was Dairy-Go-Round, for instance: a sizable field with a very large roof in the center, under which hundreds of cows ate from troughs. They pretty much had to eat that way since the ground had long since been picked clean of grass.

There were a couple of ambitious West Texans trying to raise some kind of crop. Their fields were perfect circles because that's only as far as the sprinkler would reach. Anything out of that range was just not gonna grow. The standard image of the square field – i.e., an acre, which, by definition, is square – is worthless out here.

I did stop to give Moby a long cool drink of Shell Unleaded Regular at Pecos, and was able to pick up a shaky local radio signal. It was just a repeating recording of upcoming events, but it was hilarious. The announcer was brimming with enthusiasm as he twanged out the script: *...more talent than you can shake a stick at! On Saturday June 26th, Night In Old Pecos Cantaloupe Festival will take place on the historic streets of downtown West Pecos. Don't miss this event! Complete with delicious food, cold drinks, great music, and entertainment and fun for the entire family...* I couldn't figure out how Pecos could be big enough to have a "West."

It faded out shortly after resuming the ride on 285. Cantaloupe Festival, huh? Must be Pecos' version of Mardi Gras. Maybe just a tad scaled down though.



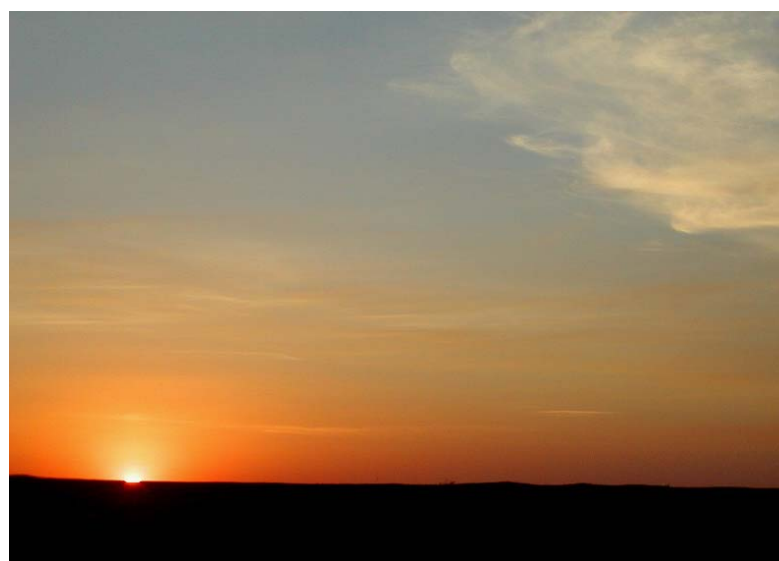
Once out of earshot of I-20, the void deepened. This must be what they refer to when they use the phrase “the middle of nowhere.” Terrain-wise, this would not have been difficult to cross in a horse-drawn wagon. Though cacti were beginning to appear more often, the ground was mostly flat for long stretches, with no sudden drop-offs, and certainly no roaring rivers to ford. But it would have been a hot, harsh, dry, dusty, and very, very long trip ... to anywhere.

So, 285 stretched onward for mile after desolate mile. Then, on the left, for no apparent reason, there was a picnic table. Not just some wooden table that fell off a truck; this was a roofed, concrete picnic table, with accompanying asphalt parking area for three or four cars. WTF? We’re thirty miles from anything resembling civilization, and I hadn’t seen a real house in any direction since Pecos. But here was a state-built Picnic Area. It’s even on the Rand McNally!

Usually, the simple icon that Rand uses to indicate such an area – four short, orange, lines in the shape of a table – does not actually indicate ONE table, but here it did. This was nuts. What a waste of taxpayers’ money. Stupid Texas.

So, what did I do? I stopped there. I didn’t eat, but I had a beer, stood in the hot late-day sunshine, and stared at the desert all around for a while. It was really, really quiet there too. There was nothing around to make noise. No swishing of leaves, no distant highway noises. Just desert quiet. I lingered for maybe fifteen minutes, enjoying the solitude. The rest of the world was, literally, far away. Maybe it was a good spot for a table, after all.

When I did finally press on, the sun was getting damn close to the horizon. I soon passed through the ghost town of Orla, at the “crossroads” of 285 and a dirt road that was numerically designated 652. There were twenty or so small wooden or adobe buildings, and all were abandoned, with every window either shattered or boarded up. They were the empty dead shells of a failed town. Everyone just gave up and said, “fukkit, we’re outa here.” I don’t blame them one bit; I would have sprinted out of here too. There is NOTHING out here! What was life like, especially if you were trying to make a go of it with a business? Damn, what would everyday, non-work life be like? What the hell would you do with your time? You



actually *would* get psyched for the Cantaloupe Festival!

At about 9:00 p.m. CDT (833 CT), Moby and I reached the TX/NM border. The sunset was just beginning. A thin spread of clouds above the horizon glowed brightly as the sun slowly dipped out of sight. Route 285 was still unbelievably empty. I parked on the shoulder and stayed for about twenty minutes to enjoy the whole sunset experience, but I could have just left Moby in the middle of the damn road. There was a

white-and-black horse grazing in the field across the road, and he strolled over near me to check me out. I said hi, and started to walk towards him, but he thought better of the encounter and sauntered away. Smart horse. Must have been from New Mexico.

Meanwhile, the sun faded out on the last corner of Texas. I waited till 9:15, when the afterglow dimmed out, and then crossed the last few yards due north into New Mexico, arriving in the Land Of Enchantment at 8:15, an hour before I left the Lone Star State, just seconds before.

Stupid Texas.

The west yet glimmered with some streaks of day, as I like to say, and stupid Texas was done. Finished. For now.

Not much changed, other than the Time Zone, as Moby stepped across that imaginary dotted line and into State #6. The void surrounding Highway 285 was still just as bleak, but as darkness settled in, the surroundings might just as well have been the warm waters that flank the Overseas Highway in the Keys: both would just look flat and black under the New Moon sky.

The road did begin to have a little more roll to it as I ventured a few miles into New Mexico, and I finally came upon a town with some life to it. No, not Malaga, the first town shown on the map. That wasn't as deserted as Orla had been; Malaga still had a pulse, but it might have been in a coma.

Loving was the town that seemed to be breathing. Maybe it was the "Congested Area" sign that gave the illusion of life, but the only thing congested around here was my trash bucket, which badly needed a bottle purge. It guess it's all relative; compared to the last 140 miles, four buildings and a stop sign qualified as "congested."

Loving was much more than that, though. It was, as the "Welcome to Loving" sign boasted, the "Home of the Loving Falcons." How sweet. Hunting birds that love you. Awwwww.

How much shit do the players on the Loving High School football team get from their opponents? Damn, I hope the hell they're a good team, and I hope their cheerleaders have some creative and innuendo-laced cheers.

While I drove through, I looked for an "I Love Loving" bumper sticker, but none showed themselves.

What Loving did have, though, was a big fertilizer factory, or mill, or plant, or whatever you call a place where fertilizer is made. And you thought cows did that...

About ten minutes later, we reached the town of Carlsbad. Ironically, the famous Carlsbad Caverns National Park is not there. It's about 18 miles to the southwest, next to the town of Whites City. My guess is that Whites City did not exist when the caverns were discovered, so they adopted the name of the nearest landmark town, and were happy with the alliteration.

Carlsbad, with a population of over 25,000, definitely has some substance to it too. They have all the big town doings: a McDonald's, a Chili's, a Pizza Hut, and the true sign that you have made it in America, a Wal-Mart. Fortunately for me, Carlsbad also has a whole lot of motels. I didn't necessarily want to sleep *in* one, but sleeping *at* one would be very nice.

Still, if a bargain shows itself, it's wise to investigate its potential value. So, when the sign outside The Carlsbad Motel bragged about \$29.95 rooms, I figured it was worth a look. A shower and shitter are not bad things to have when you start your day, but I can easily make do if the price isn't right.

I went in and was told that they did still have rooms available. Fine, I said, and claimed one. The woman behind the desk seemed to do a little more paper shuffling than you would expect, and her demeanor was odd. I couldn't put my finger on why, but she just seemed uneasy. She printed out a form, and, as she laid it on the counter for me to sign, she said, "That's \$42.95, plus tax, please."

Now, I was a little road-fogged from a long day of driving and what-have-you, so it took a second for the tumblers to click. I paused with pen in hand: \$13 in tax seemed like a lot, like almost 50%. Then another tumbler clicked. "Did you say, '\$42.95, *plus* tax?'" I asked. She nodded. I followed with, "What happened to the \$29.95 rate?"

She faltered for a second, then almost galloped through the reply she had apparently been dreading. "Oh, that's the corporate rate." When I showed no sign of comprehension, she rephrased: "It's a weekly rate. It averages out to that if you stay a week."

I stared at her, pen still in hand. It wasn't an angry or intimidating stare; it was just a did-you-just-say-what-I-think-you-said stare. Corporate rate? You're in a FREAKING DESERT! Who the FUCK comes to Carlsbad for a *week on business*? Do they have conventions in the Great Hall of the Caverns now??

I closed my eyes, smirked, laid the pen softly on the counter, and wordlessly departed.

Just down the road was a Motel 6 that offered a \$34.95 rate, but after that stark cell in San Antonio, they could have offered me a room for \$4.95 and I wouldn't have taken it.

A bit farther down the road was Days Inn. Once I saw the good number of cars in the parking lot, my road sense declared that I was home for the night. When the parking lot is too empty, you are too visible. You need the cover of other vehicles when ramacking.

But before I pulled in to claim my spot, I doubled back to the self-serve car wash that I had seen. Moby was pretty dingy from his Texas crossing, and I felt the good ol' boy would appreciate a bath. I think I heard him giggle as I scrubbed him down.

Minutes later, I settled in for a good night of slumber in the Belly O' Th' Great White Whale. It was still pretty warm in the Days Inn lot – the sun had only been down for an hour or so and the pavement still radiated the daytime heat – so I turned on three of the four fans, and fell right to sleep.

It's rarely a totally uninterrupted night of sleep in a van, unless you are out in the wilderness somewhere. In motel lots, the noise of other cars pulling in or out might rouse you for a few seconds, or the rumbling of trucks passing by on the road might open your eyes.

Another consistent pesky thing is light. It seems that, no matter which direction I face, or what part of the lot I'm in, there is always one ray of bright light that weasels its way through a crack between blind and frame and finds its way right into my eyeball. I turn over and another beam is leaking through another crack. They are diabolical. But they are no more than a shruggable aggravation. Sleep inevitably wins out.

I did awake four distinct times this night, though: three times to shut off one fan each, and a fourth to throw a sheet over me. The radiational cooling had done its job well, and the clean, dry air of 3111' elevation had gotten chilly enough to require a cover. Sleep was very good indeed. I drifted off, dreaming of shaking a stick at talented cantaloupes.