

Road Romp 2004

Day 8: Thursday, 17 June 2004

FOCK 2: Back to the Yo

On the way out, retracing my route along the switchbacks, I passed a UPS truck going the other way. Once again, my mind set to wondering. Hey, sometimes I just can't stop the damn thing; it's like it has a mind of its own. Hahahaha.

Anyway, I wondered about the UPS driver: does he dread this route, or does he love it? If he could take the time to stop and dig the scenery, he'd probably be all over it. But I'm betting that he doesn't have that kind of cushion. If he's in a rush to get all his drops done, these 30 MPH switchbacks must really piss him off.

But, would he rather be rushed doing short jumps in the crowded streets of downtown Fresno, or be trying to make good time on one run while looking at gorgeous scenery on lightly-trafficked roads for two hours?

If he's done this ride four times a week for the last three years, does he just curse a blue streak whenever this recipient gets another package? And what if the recipient had been mailing these packages to himself over and over, just to piss off the driver? And what if the driver suspected it, but couldn't prove it? Or, even worse, what if the recipient boldly put his own return address on each package? Or used the same box over and over again, just slapping a new label right on top of the old ones? And even called UPS to come make the pick-up, just so the package could fly to Memphis and back? What a twisted loony. The driver must HATE that guy!

UNLESS the recipient was a vivacious woman who craved Mr. Brown's companionship and intellectual repartee, and thus manufactured delivery-pickup-delivery-pickup-delivery-pickup, in-out-in-out-in-out, just to see him again and again.

It would make an interesting interview, no?

But my mind soon gave up on that stupid speculation – it was getting out of hand, as usual -- and returned to the road. I welcomed it back.

Seeking to see more new stuff, I opted for an alternate route back to where I needed to be. Route 180 was fine, but I had already seen it once, and it probably didn't look any better in this direction since the KCNP vistas that had made it sing were now behind me. The map showed a narrower and snakier road that went by Hume Lake. It looked like a good take, so I decided to take it.

The lake itself was great: a deep shade of blue under the azure sky, and ringed with high hills and evergreen forests. It was a great place to put a summer camp, which is exactly what some group did. And this camp was something. Not only was the lake there, with canoes, kayaks, and other water widgets, there was also a large swimming pool, complete with the now-rare diving board, plus sand volleyball courts, plenty of green space for other frolics, and



a whole town's worth of pretty good looking cabins.

It was Hume Lake Christian Camp, and there were kids everywhere. There must have been 500 kids that I could see. Now I don't know if the inmates ran this asylum or what, but I don't remember seeing an adult anywhere. Man, did I feel old. But it was mid-afternoon, and the morning's PB samich had pretty much worn off by now. There was a grub shack right next to the road, and I could smell the burgers on the grill. That did it. Pull in, park, go in for food.

I ordered up two cheeboogers from the junior high girl behind the counter, gave her my name, and sat down to wait. The noise in this camp was incredible. It was just a din of loud boy bellows, and shrill girl shrieks. Even the normal conversations that some kids were having had to be at high volume to rise above the background sounds.

After a few minutes, the cook – a good-natured kid who was probably about 16 – came out to the counter holding up a bag, and called out "Slick Rick!" He looked surprised when someone my size and age stood up and took the bag. "Thanks, Chef," I said and got the hell back to quiet of the Mobe.

The burgers weren't great, but I chowed them voraciously. Maybe the setting put me in that mindset, but it was as if this food was the key to life itself, and thus was fantastic. It was like the meals that Dash and Ban and B and Cliff and I had on those canoe excursions at Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario. I remember that a simple foil-packaged meal called Pasta Italiana seemed like a succulent feast after a day of paddling and portaging. It was simple to



cook: boil water, dunk package for several minutes, remove package, open package, eat contents. And it was simple fare: ziti in sauce. Duh. If someone served you that at home, you'd raise an eyebrow and say, "c'mon, can't we have REAL food?" But, at the lake, we all devoured the ziti with zeal (though it lacked zest) and longed for more.

The Hume Lake Road wound pleasantly for thirty or so miles among and over hills, past a few campsites, and eventually plopped me back out in Grants Grove. I reached my marked junction of 180 and Generals Highway for the second time in

4½ hours (1.88 macs), but this time I turned left and charted a course bearing 2-7-0 for Fresno, 55 miles due west.

It was a long roll down those hills, and I had to ride the brake a lot on the twisting roads. I could smell the hot rubber of the brake pads, so I gave the van a hand by gearing down.

Moby's tranny had been handling the elevation changes surprisingly well. I helped him out a lot, though, by downshifting into second every time we approached an extended incline. Since park speed limits – both imposed and natural – kept you under 45 MPH most of the time, second gear was just dandy. Since he was locked into that gear, he had none of that confusing shifting crap that had been messing with his meshings. And when we crested a rise and started the decline, I'd just slip him back into "D" and let him do as he pleased. The cooler air and a careful watch of the coolant level were keeping his fever down as well.

Finally, we emerged from the protected lands, and plunged down the eastern slope of the Sierras. The ground was golden again, with ordinary looking oak (or whatever) trees.

Halfway down to the valley, we caught up with a chubby guy on a bicycle. His bike was loaded with packs and saddlebags. They flanked both wheels, and hung from the front of his handlebars and the back of his seat. He wore a small backpack also. There must have been a hundred pounds of gear draped off him and his bike.

I had seen him before: yesterday, he had been struggling mightily up Generals Highway, just before Giant Forest. The hill had been steep and a few miles long, and each pedal action looked like a slow motion grind. He couldn't have been going faster than ½ MPH. Sequoia NP was eating him alive, and he was truly one sufferin' bastard.

Today, though, he had to be lovin' life. Down, down, down he rolled, riding on the back of his renewed friend, Mr. Gravity, and probably goin' "yeeee-haaaa!" inside.

We passed a sign for Squaw Valley, but it couldn't have been the famous Squaw Valley. There was no big-time skiing going on around here. That Ski Area was 170 miles north, near Lake Tahoe. I know; it doesn't make any sense to me either. At least, that other Squaw Valley is beneath Squaw Peak. This one, on the down slope leading to Fresno didn't even appear to be valley-ish enough to warrant the name. Damn it.

Still we rolled downward, 4000 feet, 3000 feet (again), 2000, 1000, and not yet to the fertile lands of the San Joaquin Valley floor.

When we finally did reach bottom and leveled out for the remaining ride to the city, there was one very curious geographic feature that could not be ignored. The land had been flat for some miles now, and yet there was one very large brown hill that stood out. It wasn't rounded or gradual, like a natural undulation would be. It just bulged upward a few hundred feet, as if some enormous fist had punched upward at the earth's crust a few times and left a big dent.



The brown hue contrasted sharply with the vivid greens of the crops that surrounded it. At first, it was impossible to get a sense of scale for this freaky mound. Was it 1000 feet tall and far away? Or was it 200 feet tall and fairly close? It lacked definition, and it lacked tell-tale tree cover.

It wasn't until I had drawn almost even with this mystery hill that I could estimate the size of the trees/bushes that grew near its base, and then get a grasp on its size. It wasn't all that big, really – 300-400 feet above the plain – but it was still a damn fine hill. Damn fine. Back in the old days, I might have felt an absurd urge to run up the dang thang. Fortunately, I have matured.

The lowlands had brought heat back into play, and I chilled up the AC to counter it. This practical but long route from Kings Canyon to Yosemite looked really dumb, and I scoured the Rand for a viable short cut. Route 180 went straight west to Fresno, then I had to turn 90° north onto Route 41 and go another 60 miles to get to Yoyo. There HAD to be a hypotenuse in there somewhere.

A chat with the Park Ranger as I was leaving Sequoia National Forest had given me hope, as she suggested that there just might be a rough and hilly road that cut the angle by quite a few miles. "I don't know, though," she hedged, "it's probably faster to just go the extra miles on the highway than to clunk along that road."

Still, I considered it. Moby was not trail-rated, but he was Dodge RAM tough, and that had to count for something.

But I stopped for gas at Centerville, the meager crossroads that she had mentioned, and was told by the uninspired (and probably stoned) attendant that the road in question was closed. "Dunno why," he shrugged, "jus' closed."

So, it was off to Fresno.

Fresno is one of those cities that everyone has heard of, and most people kinda know where it is, but is virtually unknown beyond that. You may be surprised to learn that Fresno, with its 2000 population of more than 437,000 people, is the 37th largest city in the nation. Atlanta, Sacramento (!), Oakland, Miami, and St. Louis are all smaller. It is 54% white, 32% under age 18, 21% foreign-born, and 67.5% high school graduated. And its name comes from the Spanish name for Ash Tree. What more could you possibly want to know?

Oh yes, and they do have a Pacific Coast League AAA baseball team, the Fresno Grizzlies. They were not in town this evening. I had checked the whole PCL schedule before beginning this most worthy ramack, and had scoped out a few possible games. I had already missed a New Orleans Zephyrs game, as well as a San Antonio Missions contest. With Yosemite just a swallow's flight away, the Grizzlies would not have stood a chance anyway.

The outlying areas of Fresno seemed OK by me. Traffic wasn't bad at all on this outskirts highway, especially for a third-to-six, and the transition to 41N was painless.

That highway had quite a few offshoots onto cool-looking country roads, most of which had numbers rather than names. There was Road 207, and Road 209, and so on. Then there was Road 425B. Come on. B? You need a B? You can't just call it Road 426? WTF with the B, OK?

Pretty soon, Moby and I zollied past yet another "Elev. 3000" sign, and closed in on The Prize. The Grand Canyon hike with Nate was the lynchpin of this ramack, but Yosemite was The Special Bonus Prize. The trip could easily have been shorter. But once the southwest swing was laid out to include Joshua Tree NP, meaning that I was already in California, a return to Yosemite seemed like a necessity. It had blown me away on RAM Tour 1990, and that was just a one-day drive-through. Yosemite needed to be explored. As much as I was anticipating the Big Hole hike, I was every bit as eager to get out on foot and delve into the Big Yo.

It was 7:16 when we reached the gates of YNP. The sun was well down behind the trees, though daylight would still be hanging around for a while. Succinct signs at the gate hut informed me, "Campsites Full" and, "Fire Danger: Moderate." Though I felt moderately relieved about the latter circumstance, the former issue presented a problem. It didn't seem like an insurmountable problem to a veteran roadtripper, though a little resourcefulness might be required.

But with daylight lingering, there was stuff to see before dealing with the night's home. The drive to Glacier Point would take too long, and would be a focal point of tomorrow anyway, so I turned right and headed for the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias. Kelzo, Bobby and I had done a different big tree grove in '90, so this would be virgin ground. We had gone through Tuolumne Grove, at the western end of the park, and had driven Max through a tree.

The Mariposa trees had no such tunnels, but they were definitely not shy. The parking area was a loop that circled a few of them, while paths to others webbed off in all directions into the forest. There were deer there. Not like a thundering herd of them or anything, but maybe about eight or so, just hangin' out in the cool shade, nibblin' a little grass, and watchin' us humans with wary curiosity. They didn't seem bothered by us. I doubt they got shot at much. In fact, they seemed hopeful for a handout. I offered a doe a buck, and I offered a

buck some dough, but neither seemed interested. Money only interests humans. No other beings give a badger's balls about it. Good for them.

Mariposa Grove was very peaceful. The respectful silence that usually accompanies the forest seemed even more profound at the feet of these mighty Sequoias. I got out and took a little walk. I even shut my door silently. The Luckless Log came along as my walking stick, and got to have a little contact with the 2000-year-old trees. Part way up one of the trails, I stopped and rubbed the barkless shaft of Luckless against the exposed wood at the bottom niche of a huge Sequoia, letting the wisdom and strength of the ages pass across the karmic bridge. I felt no difference, but maybe, just maybe, Luckless did.

By now, dusk was at hand, and it was time to locate a parking spot. The obvious – make that “only” -- choice was the Wawona Golf Course and Hotel. It offered a fairly large parking lot, with plenty of cars in it for cover. The only question was, would there be any open spots?

I entered the lot, and immediately backed into the first available space. I moved with confident familiarity, striving to look very much like I not only belonged there, but also that I go there all the time. There was no uncertain surveying of the grounds, nor was relocation to a better spot considered. Though those actions and inactions seem innocent enough, they can draw unwanted attention. A vehicle that pulls in and goes directly and unhurriedly to a spot simply fits there. That's all. No employee gives a sidewise look and says, “WTF is that nutty van over there *doing?*”

My spot was on the outer edge of the lot, a good distance from every building, and tucked neatly into a row of a couple dozen other cars. The lot probably held close to 100 cars, all told. My main worry was that all these other cars would depart, leaving me conspicuously alone. But, given the time of day, and the size of the hotel, not even a large dinner crowd would drain this lot much.

Some hotels, especially nice ones, and even more especially ones that want to discourage vagabonds, have a security patrol that circulates around the lot at night. Often, they are armed with a clipboarded list of vehicle registration numbers, and they cruise the lot looking for tags that don't match the list. It's a tedious process, but, really, what else do they have to do?

So, anyway, that's why I backed in to my spot. Florida only provides one license plate (or tag), and that goes on the back. The front spot either remains empty, or has some sort of decorative tag. In any case, with my rear bumper up against the bushes, and no tag in the front, Moby was immune from that particular scrutiny. I counted on the fact that they would not be so motivated as to double check makes and models, if they were even privy to that info.

But, such personnel are often on foot as well, with flashlight ready, and are on the watch for lot-squatters like yours truly. Closed curtains can create suspicions. Sure, they could simply be hiding whatever belongings are packed within, but such draperies often are intended to keep light off a sleeper too.

To allay that suspicion, I have perfected a ploy over the years. I first used it in the winter of 1993-94, while living for several months in the parking lot of a Key West condo



complex. I would leave not just the front curtain open, but also the ones on the passenger's side doors and on the driver's side middle picture window. A beach towel would hang between the backs of the two midsection captain's chairs, looking as if it were hung to dry after a day at the beach, and I would lie behind it, stretched out diagonally across Max's bed.

By 2004, I had refined this method. The front and middle blinds and curtains could still all be kept open, but no towel was hung. Instead, my duffle bag was placed at the front of the bed, often with my cowboy hat on top of it, just blocking the gap between the seats, and my head would be pillowed in the corner of the bed behind one of those seats. Anyone peering in, even with a flashlight, would see the bag, but not my lanky legs stretched out behind it. The van looked totally unoccupied. Sweet, huh?

So, content in my cleverness, I settled in for another great night's sleep in the Sierras. The night was cooling quickly, and both a sheet and a blanket were put to use. No fans were necessary.

It was only about 9:00, but it was time for sleep. Yosemite would be awake early, and I'd be there to stick a straw in it.