

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 10: Saturday, 19 June 2004

FOCK 1: Downhill Day

Without an alarm, I greeted the new day at 6:50 a.m. It was cold as bloody hell. The chill in the air had awakened me a few times during the night, chasing me first under one comforter, then under a second, and then deeper, and again deeper until only a small breathing hole connected me to the real world.

As daylight rose, there was frost on the windshield. Frost! FREAKING FROST!! Welcome back to Rochester, Rammo! Looking out the side window, once my eyes recovered from the shock of the dazzlingly bright sunlight, I could see the meadow covered with a sparkling white glaze also.

You gotta be shitting me! This is late June! In California! Turns out that it was 31° up there at night. Yikes. That's -1° Celsius! Dayem!!

That was not a ramack record, though. I had slept in the van known as the Roadhouse at Dartmouth College in January one night in the early 80's when the mercury tumbled all the way to 7°, but that was when I was a bit more acclimated to cold. There were several other wintertime vansleeps over the years too, and they were officially deemed No Big Deal. With thick, warm comforters, good blankets, and loose and warm hooded sweatshirts, no temperature was considered intolerable. Sleeping was actually OK. Getting up certainly sucked, but the time under the covers was toasty warm. The only thing that typically got cold was my nose, as that had to remain close to the breathing hole throughout the night.

With the cold and the brightness, this Yosemite wake-up call was a tad alarming. In my shorts and long-sleeve T, I was very underdressed. The hikers that I saw reinforced that point. They had just pulled in behind me, and had gathered their gear for a full day of high ground exploring. They were dressed in parkas, nylon outer pants, thick gloves, and had knitted winter hats pulled down over their ears. I couldn't imagine that hiking would be all that much fun if you had to wear that much stuff. I'm sure that by late morning they were going to end up carrying a lot of it too.

Moby fired right up at the first turn of the key; I'm sure he was eager to get warmed up too. Before shoving off, I got out to take a couple of pix. It was definitely cold, but there was no wind at all. Cold I can handle, but when the wind shoves it down your neck and inside your clothes – as it always seemed to do in Rochester -- that sucks.

A Park Ranger was rousting another van that was parked on the shoulder a couple hundred yards ahead of me, so my timing was good. I don't know if the guy was getting cited or just being told to move-along-fella, but I was outa there anyway, so I really didn't care.

With the heat on, and the road empty, the Mobe and I headed for the park exit. My body was still clenched. It was a feeling that I remembered well, and one that I was glad I never had to experience in the Keys.

There was snow on the ground in several spots. At first, I thought that the white spots I was seeing on the ground in the forest was just some light-colored rock, but it soon became



obvious that it was snow. I wondered how long ago it had fallen. Was this the remnants of the first snows of winter back in September, or was it left over from a late April blast? Maybe both? Guess I'll never know; the snow wasn't talkin'.

We left Yosemite National Park at the Tioga Pass Gate at 9945' of elevation, which would end up being the highest point of RR04. This was going to be Downhill Day, with a net drop of over 10,000 feet in just a few hours, from this high ground to the bottom of Death Valley. And, of course, as the elevation would fall, the temperature would rise.



Just outside the park gate, I stopped to get a photo of all the snow on the high peaks. But off to my left, there was a good-sized snowbank just sitting

there shining in the sun. I had to climb it and get a picture of myself standing on it. I set up my tripod and got everything lined up. The camera has a 12-second timer, so I had just that much time to cover the fifteen yards or so of rock-strewn ground, and the next five yards up the steep bank.

It was plenty of time, but the bank was icier than I had anticipated, and I nearly did a face-plant as I tried to run up its face. I scrambled to recover and got into position just before the shutter tripped.

I nearly broke my ass dismounting that snow bank, though. Picture accomplished, I stepped forward to go back down. The slope was steep and the footing was icy. There was no way to check momentum once it got rolling. I suddenly recognized the folly of that move, but it was too late. There were waaay too many big and jagged rocks at the base of that snow pile, and I didn't even notice them till I was halfway down and beginning freefall. These were not rounded stones; they were hard-edged, heavy, and bigger than a case of beer.



I just fell forward and moved my feet as fast as I could to keep from hitting them. I turned into a high-speed tiptoe dancer. I was very lucky indeed that I was nimble enough to flamenco my way through that minefield. If I tripped and fell, I would've been brutalized. Broken ribs, snapped collarbone, shattered face. With that much weight, and that much velocity, hurtling onto those jagged points, I would've been impaled. Yow. Call the ambulance, Sven, I don't think this fella's gonna be getting up.

But I lived to tell the tale. What an adventure. Damn snow.

Happy to be in one piece, I moseyed Moby out of there and down Highway 120. Both Tioga Road and SR-120 are closed in winter, and I could fully understand why. It would be a losing battle to keep these roads clear of snow and ice. If there was this much in June, what the hell is February like? You'd need a small army of plows and sand trucks for a road that almost nobody would use anyway. As if to reinforce that point to me, a sign by Tioga Lake, not

quite halfway between YNP and the main highway, said "Snow Not Removed Beyond This Point."

The views from CA-120 were terrific, though. The roundabout two-lane road was cut into the hillsides, and looped around two lakes. With the glassy surface of Tioga Lake in the foreground, snow-capped Mt. Dana (13,057') cast a clear and beautiful reflection in the early morning sunlight.



Across Ellery Lake, the rugged crags of the ridge stood in bold disdain of anyone who would have attempted to cross them. The snow cast a glowing reflection, and trees on the slopes showed just how huge the rocky slope really was.

I wanted to refer to these things as "rocky mountains" because those were the adjective and noun that described them best, but some wise acre (like me) would sneer, "they're not the Rocky Mountains, they're the Sierra Nevada Mountains." No wonder people hate me.



But it made me think what a dumb name "the Rocky Mountains" really is. How unimaginative. Aren't all mountains rocky? Isn't that kinda what makes them mountains?

Couldn't the explorers have come up with a more noble name? Or even name them after someone famous? They did that with plenty of other stuff. Were they named after King Rocky of Prussia? Or Rocky Balboa? Or Rocky the Flying Squirrel? Or Rocky Horror? Maybe these were Stony Mountains.

I suppose the Green Mountains might be an even worse name, especially since a whole state got named after them (Vermont: "vert" is French for "green," and "mont" is French for "Mountain"). The Rocky Mountains are always rocky, but the Green Mountains don't stay green all year round. Misleading. Five penalty points to Vermont.

And some of the other foreign names that do sound noble are really kinda weak if you translate them. The Rio Grande is just “big river.” And we’ve already discussed Red Stick and Rat’s Mouth. Maybe the best one of all is the range of mountains in Wyoming known as the



Grand Tetons, which means Big Tits! It’s true, it’s true. That range was named in the 1800’s by French fur trappers, who must have been lonely. What do you suppose they were like when they finally reached a town?

Whatever.

The junction of CA-120 and US-395 near Lee Vining mercifully interrupted that train of thought.

There was a Mobil Mart there, and though I did not need gas, I did want

to stock up on ice. It occurred to me that I should have just taken some snow. Duh. But I needed a boost to my beer supply too.

The woman who worked there was named Athena. She was probably in her thirties, and was a classic healthy outdoorsy woman. She wasn’t a lumberjack type (or lumberjane), but I’m sure she did a lot of hiking and ate trail mix. Fairly tall, with dark blonde hair swept back in a long smooth ponytail, she was very pretty, and the other workers – males of similar age or younger – were sucking up to her the whole time I was browsing around. They were so obvious that it was funny. She tolerated their fawning servitude with a wry smile. She noticed that I noticed and we exchanged winks about it.

The thing that was truly unique about this Mobil Mart, though, was not Athena and her admirers. The memorable thing was the trapeze apparatus that stood on the edge of the parking lot. This was not where I would ever expect to see a trapeze apparatus. I’m not entirely sure where I *would* expect to see one, but a gas station in the Sierra foothills would not make that list. This was a practice facility, not a performance venue. At first sight, I thought it might have been a batting cage, except that it had no top, the corner poles were ridiculously high, and the bottom net was way too low. Then I noticed the swing. And the platforms.

How much use does this thing get? Who uses it? Who built it? And at what cost? Had I noticed the apparatus on my way into the Mart, I would have peppered Athena with all those questions and more. She would have been pleasant to have a long conversation with. But, since I was on my way out when it caught my eye, the only one I had to ask was me, and I wasn’t tellin’.

US-395 is a great road. It is probably the road that I have the fondest memories of. As far as I could tell, it ran from just west of Los Angeles, up past Yosemite to the Lake Tahoe region, through Carson City NV. From there, it zags back across the state line and heads up the thinly-populated eastern edge of northern California into Oregon. It crosses the eastern half of the Beaver State, joins forces with I-90 in southeastern Washington, then cuts north again on its own to the Canadian border. From end to end, 395 would make a great roadtrip. Maybe someday, eh?

Anyway, I was only on it for 154 miles, but it was a good 154.

From that Mobil Mart, Moby motored south. There had not been a lot of southerly driving in the last week-and-a-half. We passed through Inyo National Forest. [That’s right, homey, I was In Yo’ National Forest.]

Tall, deep green pines dominated both sides of the highway, with snowy peaks in view ahead. To my right, the tall, green slopes of the Sierra's sun-drenched western flank swept down from the high blue sky and into the thick carpet of evergreen.

They sure were beautiful, but if I had been a westering settler, I would have had very mixed emotions about this formidable barrier.

The snowy crests of the Cathedral Range stood whitely behind the verdant Ritter Range.

Signs for ski areas pointed off in that direction. I imagine that those slopes would look mighty majestic when covered with a ten-foot thick mantle of snow. I was glad I was here in June, though, because even that little brush with snow nearly killed me.



A long freefall into the Owens Valley began at the pleasant sounding Dead Man's Pass (8036'). You would expect a name like that to be in the middle of the New Mexico desert, not here among the trees and cool air.

Though tall noble mountains stood behind them, there was the reappearance of the dull, round,

clumpy, stark, parched, sage-brushed, hills that I had gotten so damn familiar with. It made for a bit of a contrast. Sage and snow in the same frame was hard to reconcile. Kinda like that time back in Massachusetts in 1977, when a surprise mid-spring storm left three inches of snow sitting on the fully-bloomed lilacs.

Well-greened flatlands led into the town of Bishop, whose motto is "For All Seasons." This is a sediment valley; the basin used to be a lake, just like Yosemite, but the water disappeared, leaving fine fertile soil.

A billboard as I entered Bishop proclaimed, "Best Jerky." I've never had jerky. I guess if I was going to try it, I should've gotten some there. Oh well, another opportunity lost.

In the town, the main road was still the same size as the highway: two full travel lanes on each side of a wide central turning lane (which had been a median outside of town). The roadway hadn't narrowed at all. It seemed as if the highway was there first and the town sprouted on its edges. It was a trek just to walk across the street.

And Bishop turned out to be a big town! It had lots of stuff, and some of it was eye-catching, for various reasons.

Owens Valley Boat Dealership had a bunch of cars on display, making it look very much like a poorly disguised car dealership. I don't recall seeing any boats. Maybe it's done that way for tax purposes.



I passed what looked like the local high school football stadium. The good-sized grandstands seemed in keeping with the popularity of the high school game in towns far from the diversions of big cities. It was clear, though, that there was no track around the field. Well, screw this town! No track?! Heathens and scum, all.

Then, as I drove further and took a look back at it, I realized how wrong I was about the whole facility. It was a rodeo arena! A ro-de-rena. I guess that was an even more popular sport than either football or track 'round these parts.

Among more recognizable names – Burger King, Pizza Hut, IHOP, Subway, etc. -- they have The Pizza Factory. This excited me, and here's why. In the 1990 ramack through Washington, Oregon, and California, Bobby and I had done some spelunking in Lava Beds National Monument, and swam in a small lake high on the side of a volcano at Mt. Lassen NM, both of which were in northern California. With those adventures done, we had sought a repast in the small town of Quincy on Route 70. The word PIZZA had caught our eye, and we knew we were home when we got a good look at the sign, "PIZZA FACTORY: We Toss 'em, They're Awesome!"

Well, here in Bishop, there was indeed another Pizza Factory, and they still bore the same motto. With at least fourteen years in the business, I guess their tossed-on-site pizzas must indeed qualify as awesome. I remember that

Bobby and I had agreed with the sign when we had dined at PF-Quincy. It was a bit too early in the day here, though (only mid-morning), so I was denied a taste.

The roadway may have been wide, but the speed limit had certainly changed within Bishop's limits. By rapid degrees, the posted maximum dropped from 55, to 45, to 35, to 25. Now, 25 seems like crawling on narrow roads. On something nearly SIX LANES wide, it feels speleothemic.

It's similar with running: on a narrow trail with leaves and branches just a couple of feet from your head, you feel like you are hauling some mean ass, but run that same pace across a large and empty parking lot, and you feel like a Tennessee Turtle.

And WHY is it that so many speed limits are on the 5's?? 65. 55. 45. WTF? What happened to round numbers? 40. 50. 60. 70. Come on! Much better speeds! 60 is a mile-a-minute. How much tidier can you get? We lapsed into the 55 crap with that gas shortage scam back in the mid-70's, and we never broke out of it. Car speedometers were fived-out so the needle could rest on the federal speed limit instead of confusing the average dumbass American driver by wavering somewhere between 50 and 60. How stupid is somebody who can't figure out that 55 would be the midpoint there??

I absolutely LOVE seeing round number speed limits! When I see a SPEED LIMIT 60 sign, I rejoice! I thank God that somebody is being sensible!!

About the only X5 limit that I like is 75, possibly just because it's faster than 70. I can handle a 35, for the same reason (at least it's faster than 30), but when you drop to 25, I get miffed. That is so freaking slow. This road through Bishop is straight and wide, with plenty of traffic lights and crosswalks. 30 would be just fine and dandy. Conscientious drivers going 30 would put nobody in jeopardy. Make us crawl down to 25, and you know what happens? We get distracted. It is so damn slow that we start looking for things to occupy our attention. We



certainly don't have to watch the road very much; a glance now and then will let us know what's what. It will be minutes before we reach that next light, or car, or person.

So, we figure it's a good time to catch up on some neglected duties. It's a perfect chance to change the CD, for instance (which I did). Plenty of leisure to browse through the selection, check labels and titles, and pick out a suitable one for the mood (*Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers: Greatest Hits* – very creative album name, huh?). Disposing of random trash is another good thing to do. Those wrappers and such that are on the passenger's floor should really go in the trash bucket, and there is now plenty of time to reach over under the dashboard and gather them up. Losing sight of the road is not a problem at this glacial pace. Adjust all mirrors, even on the passenger door. Arrange cooler's contents so that things can be grabbed easily without looking, when and if the chance to drive at a real speed ever comes along.

And the town is still only half done.

But, SPEED LIMIT 25 is the law of the land in downtown Bishop. I comply. Don't dare rile the local sheriff. The redneck bastard could ruin my day very easily.

It's funny how I still get competitive and try not to be passed, even at 25. I squeeze up to 28 to keep my rival motorists at bay. So silly.

It's a child of experience, you know, born of too many screwings in the cutthroat world of Boston driving. Every single vehicle on the road is a potential obstacle to your progress. You let someone get ahead of you, and sure as shootin', that selfsame car will cause you a delay. It will immediately signal a left turn, and block your path. Or it will stop cold the instant a light turns yellow, causing you to jump your own brakes to avoid plowing into it. Or it will clog your lane while the other lane sails on by, snickering. Experience is a hard teacher, but my lessons were ingrained. If a car, truck, van, or motorcycle COULD be kept behind me, then it WOULD be kept behind me. Within reason, or course.

There were thirty guys standing in front of Rusty's Saloon, all looking kinda rough, and all waving at the passing cars. One banner said "Welcome Fishermen" and the other said "Mule Days." WTF is up with that combination? Fishermen? Where exactly were they gonna fish in this arid countryside?

The guys didn't seem drunk, but I wouldn't say they seemed real sober either. By noon, I bet they'd all be good and trashy. And I'd be lonng gone.