

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 10: Saturday, 19 June 2004

FOCK 2: Runnin' Down A Dream

We left Bishop, and began road rallying again with the big silver Chevy pickup. He thought he was so damn cool, but when push came to shove (not literally), he didn't have the chutzpah to pull ahead and be the Fastest Vehicle On The Road. He just couldn't take on the responsibility. He kept edging up even, then lagging back, all while I was on a steady cruise-controlled 80. He would have been bugging the shit out of me, but I was just too damn busy rockin' to the song *Runnin' Down A Dream*.

I had caught the second half of that song on the radio while I was still in Florida, and learned that it was by Tom Petty. Well, I'll be dipped. Never knew that. Then, remembering something about a TP CD, I looked and checked, and sure enough, it was there. Serendipity!

I played it once or twice while driving across the continent, but for some reason now, on this big, open California highway, with its downslope putting Moby in a galloping mood, and with the sun beaming bright, and the sky so clear, and the green hills and mountains over there, that song just got me in a Giddyap frame of mind. My horse was runnin' free, and the lyrics were singin' to me. This was a song made for road romping! Listen:

*It was a beautiful day, the sun beat down
I had the radio on, I was drivin'
The trees went by, me and Del were singin'
Little runaway, I was flyin'*

*Yeah runnin' down a dream
That never would come to me
Workin' on a mystery, goin' wherever it leads
I'm runnin' down a dream*

*I felt so good, like anything was possible
I hit cruise control and rubbed my eyes
The last three days the rain was unstoppable
It was always cold, no sunshine*

*Yeah runnin' down a dream
That never would come to me
Workin' on a mystery, goin' wherever it leads
I'm runnin' down a dream*

*I rolled on, the sky grew dark
I put the pedal down to make some time
There's something good waitin' down this road
I'm pickin' up whatever is mine*

*I'm runnin' down a dream
That never would come to me
Workin' on a mystery, goin' wherever it leads
Runnin' down a dream*

"There's something good waitin' down this road, and I'm pickin' up whatever is mine."
Oh yeah. All I can get, Chet!

"I'm runnin' down a dream that never would come to me." Ain't it the truth! Isn't that what ramacking is all about??

And the minute-and-a-half guitar crank that follows the final line is *outstanding!*

I had to play it again, so I punched "Repeat" on the CD player. Moby and me were indeed runaways and we were indeed flyin'. The lines about the rain and cold weren't exactly spot on, but I made various attempts at plugging in my own more appropriate lyrics as I sang along. *The last three days, the parks were incredible / Such awesome sights, bright sunshine.* That worked better for me. And, of course, "Del" became "Mobe."

But soon we had to slow down again for the much smaller town of Big Pine. Even though this was a semi-arid climate, with mountains rising not far away, I noticed some similarities between this Big Pine and the one in Florida. That latter version is Big Pine Key, a medium sized island 30 miles from the western end of the Florida Keys. Given their radically different environs, you would think that the two would have little in common besides their name. Well, both of them lie almost entirely on one road – US-1 in Florida, and US-395 in California – both are small towns that have one major side road, both have heavy traffic due to funneling fast highway traffic through a slow zone, and both have a whole lotta nothing surrounding them. Flat empty fields surrounded this one. Water, of course, surrounds Big Pine Key. The slow-down only lasted a few minutes, so when we hit open road again, I cued my song back up.

Just outside of Big Pine, there was a designated Wildlife Viewing Area. A highway sign said so. I was psyched to see wildlife. What would be there? There were three cows lazily munching on the field. How wild. And there were some of those big rolling sprinklers. Maybe they water the wild life?

Soon thereafter, though, there were big chunks of lava. They weren't doin' much wild stuff, just kinda sittin' there, bein' lava. And, to be honest, if it weren't for the sign that said something about lava, I probably would have assumed that they were just ordinary sedimentary rocks instead of igneous chunks.

Then, a good twenty miles later, I saw them: 12 mules! Wildlife! Where was the sign now that motorists needed it???

As I drove along southward, with the elevation slowly but steadily dropping, Highway 395 kept impressing me with its grand sights. This is one great road! I did **not** remember this road being this nice when we drove it in 1990. What the hell had I been thinking about that I missed all this?

But, to be fair, we had been driving the other direction, in fading daylight after leaving Death Valley and heading north to Yosemite. It was probably dark, and I might have even been lying in Max's belly while Bobby or Kelzo drove. OK. Maybe I wasn't such an unobservant dumbass after all.

This – 19 June 2004 -- was the final full day of spring. All that snow that I saw on top of those mountains would have to be gone by tomorrow.

To my right, just to the west, loomed Mt. Whitney, the highest point in the contiguous United States. It stood well behind another range, but its peak was clearly visible: very tall and very white. At 14,494 feet, it is twice as tall as mountains half its height.

Moby and I slowed briefly for the town of Independence (population 574), which billed itself as the "Gateway to Discovery." I fully expected the next town to be named Discovery.

The landscape had gone desert again. The mountains to the west still looked tall and healthy, but the range well to the east was dried up and brown, and the valley floor had gone from fertile to famished. Oh yay, more desert.

At the next small outpost, called Lone Pine, Moby and I blew right past the turn to Death Valley. It was done on purpose, though. There was a stop to make before going to the dead place. I was goin' to Dunmovin! There was no good reason for this. I just wanted to see it. I had noticed the dot and small-font name on the Rand a few years before and it conjured up cool images in my mind.

Dunmovin. I pictured a wagon train of settlers. They had launched their quest way back in Oklahoma and traversed more than a thousand miles of parched prairie, culminating with an agonized crossing of Death Valley itself. They lost a few along the way. They finally came to a spot where there was water and fertility. Yet another wall of mountains lay dead ahead to the west. The temperature was mild, and the scenery was at least partly green.

The scruffy leader of the wagon train reined in his horse, and the others slowed to a stop behind him. He stood tall on the wooden plank seat that had been callousing his behind for months, threw his burlap sack of personal belongings on the ground, and made an announcement: "WE ARE DUN MOVIN'!!!"

That was 100% speculation, of course, but it made for a nice scene in my haid, and I wanted to check out the real story behind the name.

As I zoomed Dunmovinward, just before Cartago, one of those Adopt-a-Highway signs caught my eye. This stretch of 395 was being kept clean by The Lava Girls. I had to wonder just who the hell they were.

By now, I was on my 13th straight playing of *Runnin' Down A Dream*. I had been rockin' with that kickass song for a full hour. Each time it ended, I found myself saying, *yeah, jusssst one more time; I'm not sick of any of it yet*. But after 13, it was time for something else. Besides, I was reaching the crossroads outpost of Coso Junction, which, Rand told me, was beyond Dunmovin. Could I have missed it? How could I have missed a whole TOWN amid all this *nothing??* Was I that immersed in the music that I missed Dunmovin completely???

I slowed to a stop in the middle of the road. Not a car was in sight for miles in either direction (the silver Chevy had bailed at Lone Pine). I love when it gets like that: "You say you'll give me a highway with no one on it," is my favorite line in U2's *All I Want Is You*. To me, that is a cherished thing indeed.

Sure enough, Rand said I missed the damn town. So, I drove across the twenty-yard wide parched grass meridian, and went back north. But first, since it was right there, I pulled into the gas station at Coso Junction. This would prove to be a critical stop.

Getting gas was not the critical part, nor was purchasing a bottle of Steel Head Pale Ale. Or even getting the *L.A. Times*, full of facts, opinions and lamentations about the imminent dismantling of the Lakers, who had just gotten beaten by the Detroit Pistons in the NBA Finals. Certainly, the Celtics fan's satisfaction was significant, but did not qualify as critical. Somewhere, I had gotten wind of the outcome, but very little else of the real world had gotten through. My cell phone was off, and my Internet was idle, which was how I wanted it.

In fact, the critical nature of this pit stop would not be evident for a while.

On the way out of the Chevron station, I thought that the stop sign looked strange for some reason. Each of the eight points on the octagon had a small red light bulb on it, and they were all flashing. It was apparently an attention-getting technique, something to keep traffic from this side road from rushing headlong onto 395. But, I had to wonder why the hell it was deemed necessary. It would have been hard to find a more remote place than Coso Junction. Traffic at this small intersection had to be a trickle at best, and you could see a very long way in

each direction down the perpendicular highway. A stop sign seemed like a mere formality, a legal requirement that verified the obvious right of way. Decorating it with high-tech lights seemed like classic overkill.

I conjectured that fog or snow might have been the reason. In whiteout conditions, the mysterious flashing octagon would be enough of an eye-catcher to keep motorists from blundering onto 395. Still, they would've been able to see uncoming headlights. I dunno; it just pissed me off.



But I had better things to worry about. I had to find Dunmovin.

According to Rand, it was three miles to the north. I vaguely recalled seeing a couple of dead buildings up around there, but nothing else.

And, yes, three miles later, I was looking at

a cluster of dead buildings. Dunmovin had done moved. In fact, the land was for sale: 170+ acres, with "water rights." That cracked me up. What water? WTF? Ain't no water 'round here, mate. I guess you could still have the rights to it, though, in case any ever showed up.

I pulled into the cluster and looked around a bit. The main building had remnants of a "Cabin Rental" sign. Again, WTF? There were a few mobile homes and small, boxy houses set a little further back from the highway. It was a forlorn settlement of about 20 people, I guess, but I have no clue what the hell they did out here. Another cult of reclusive misanthropes, I surmised. California sure has a lot of those. At least these ones lived above ground.



If I ever win Lotto, I just might buy Dunmovin.



In revisiting my speculation, this would not be a good place for a wagon train to toss anchor and plop. Given the terrain, it would be a real stupid place. No one would want to hang here. Hence the failed cabin rentals.

Across 395, and a couple miles further north, there was a small mining thing going on. It was mostly obscured by a hill, but I don't see how it could have been the town that I sought. And those mobile homes probably housed the miners. At least that made some sense.

Just a little more north, there was a good looking body of water called Halwee Reservoir, but there was nothing of any kind along its shores. Must be reserved land, I deduced (being a reserv-oir), and I wondered if the government killed Dunmovin when they laid claim to the area's only water supply.

Then, a good look at the map clicked a memory from a show I saw on The History Channel about Los Angeles, and how it grew to become the city it is. Their water supply was a huge question until some rich dude orchestrated the building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which stretched from L.A. to the Owens Valley. It slurped all the water out of Owens Lake and

dried it up. Owens Lake was only about ten miles north of Halwee Reservoir. The Rand showed the L.A. Aqueduct tapping into the Owens River just between Independence (Gateway to Discovery) and Big Pine. It bypassed the dried up bed of the old lake, and reservoired itself here at Halwee before resuming the long flow down to the City of Thirsty Angels.

It was not a very big reservoir. But, then again, southern California was in the fourth year of a drought, so this was probably shrunk down pretty bad.

It called to mind my dumbfounding experience at Lake Powell on the SW03 excursion, where I had been stunned and dismayed to find my deep swimming holes from RR2K had gone bone dry with a 20-foot drop in water level across all of Glen Canyon Recreation Area. I imagined that Halwee had had much better days as well. In all, I counted 21 dried up lakes shown in little blue dotted lines on the map. One was Lake Lucerne, which I had driven through on desolate Highway 247 after leaving Joshua Tree NP a few days ago. I'm sure most have been dry for a long time.

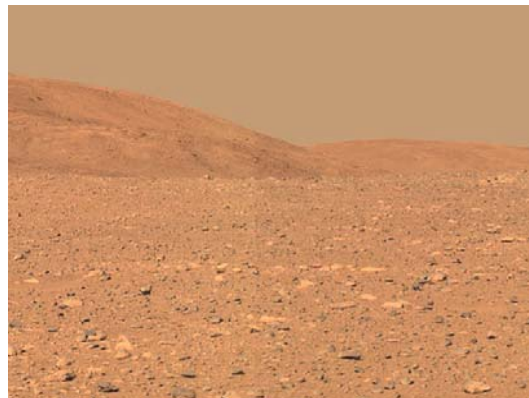
But, with my quest for Dunmovin done, it was time to press on. I was way too many pages into the chapter, and I hadn't even really gone anywhere worth writing about yet.

I took the fork at Highway 190 in Olancho – which wasn't a whole lot bigger than Dunmovin (neither was Coso Junction or Cartago) – and angled for Death Valley, 101 miles to the east. At an intersection, I pulled Moby off road to snap a photo of the barren landscape.



The sand that I had driven down through turned out to be a lot softer than it looked, but I pretty much had to go through it or settle down here, and my Dunmovin experience had shown me the futility of that concept. So, I gunned Moby into a good head of steam, and, using all the crafty techniques that had gotten me through snowbank after snowbank in Boston and Rochester, I coaxed the Mobe back up onto the asphalt.

The photo was worth the hassle, though. The view had struck me as being very familiar. It reminded me of an image that I had in my laptop, and I wanted to juxtapose the two photos. Here is that juxtaposition:



The photo on the left is at the junction of 136 and 190 near Keeler, California. The one on the right is Mars. (I did not photograph that one; Spirit Rover did.) The tint kind of gives it away. Still, except for a few tufts of grass and the blue sky....

Then, as I took the hard right that aimed me to DVNP, there were cows. Cows. In the desert. WTF are cows doin' *here??* There is nothing to eat and nothing to drink. Anywhere. Who the hell do these bovines belong to?? Just how lost are they??? There was nothing resembling a residence of any kind, in any direction, for as far as I can see – nor any shade nor any moisture -- yet there were a dozen cows here on the roadside. I admit it: cows baffle me.

Very soon, Moby and I were driving up the west slope of the Darwin Hills. I was impressed by them: they just kept rising. We hit 5000' and were still climbing, and I had to think, "WTF? I'm going into a valley??" Well, I guess a valley has to be between hills, doesn't it? But I didn't expect to have to negotiate such a climb just to go back down to flat ground!

Once over those hills, we dropped into the Panamint Valley, a flat void that lies just west of DVNP. The tiny outpost of Panamint Springs was the first actual sign of life within the National Park boundaries, and I stopped to flaunt my NP Pass. Since you actually have to pull off the road and seek out someone to show it to, it's pretty easy to avoid the payment aspect of the park. If I didn't have my pass, I probably would have sailed on by and played dumb, as necessary. Gas was \$3.099 a gallon for regular. I was glad I filled up at Coso Junction, even though the tank I put on the plastic there was a not-too-cheap \$2.399 a gal.

Panamint Springs also had a small motel, and the glittering blue water in the outdoor swimming pool looked very inviting. But, believe me, there were no people out there sunning themselves on the pool deck at midday. Between the power of the desert sun, the 115° ambient temperature, and the heat doubling back up from the stone deck, you would be a cooked goose in no time.



Highway 190 finished its down slope just beyond the PS outpost, and I looked ahead at another very daunting climb. But beginning the ten-mile rise, we traversed this brief but impressive wasteland. This was not even in Death Valley yet. It had to at least be Deadly Valley, because it looked pretty killer too. How did anyone ever cross this region? The name Panamint Valley just didn't fit it. It sounds too much like candy: *Mommy, Mommy, I want a panamint! Not until you've finished your haggis, Shawanda.*

Moby's core temp kept rising with the elevation. The highway department had placed large barrels of water every couple of miles on the slope. It was clearly labeled as "Radiator Water" and had stern "Do Not Drink" warnings. My eye was on that red needle for most of the time, and I wondered if I was going to need to avail myself of some of that there fluid.

At Towne Pass (4956'), we crested a low saddle of Panamint Range. This string of peaks contains the highest point in the Park, Telescope Mountain (11,049'). I was real glad they didn't get all crazy and route the highway up that thing.

Coming off Towne Pass, I let Moby go into freefall. It was a lonnnng straight downbound road, and gravity was back on our side. We shifted into neutral and gave the engine a well-deserved breather.

I had the AC off to keep Moby from overworking on the hills, and, as we descended, the air that poured in the open windows got hotter and hotter. The high-speed air was good for Moby's head though, and his temp needle slowly eased itself down out of the danger zone.

Down we dropped -- 3000'... 2000'... 1000'... -- gaining speed all the way. A road sign warned of Dips Ahead. Oh yes indeedy there were, and I got a good look at them too. These weren't just little sags where a pipe had been replaced; these were significant and well-rounded camelback humps – enough to lose sight of a high-top van in. I asked Moby if he was up for a little airtime, and he purred happily at the thought.

Without touching the brake, we hit the first dip at 80. There was a slight weightless feeling as we dropped into it, then a Whoaaaaaaa as we were swept through the bottom and launched off the top. We were briefly airborne, and the ground met us solidly, but Moby stood fast. There was a Bring It On feeling, and as we soared into the second and third dips, the take-offs and landings got more extreme. Luggage and garbage were flying everywhere inside the van. If not for my seatbelt, my head would have dented the ceiling (or vice versa).

When we slammed down into our third landing, still hurtling along in the high 70's, the cooler clanked and rattled with such clamor that I envisioned all my remaining Snake Dog IPA's smashed and bleeding. That was something that I could not have. The roller coaster thrill was grand, but it was not worth sacrificing my cold beer supply. I reined in the Mobe and kept the rubber on the road through the last couple of dips.



A slowdown was imminent anyway, as we were easing into the Stovepipe Wells Village. With an elevation of 5' – yes, five feet – this place is closer to sea level than most of Key West (though certainly not closer to the sea itself).

Man, oh man, was it hot! Even without Moby's fever problem, I would not have had the A/C on. Why come to the desert if you're not gonna feel the heat?

That'd be like going to the beach and not catching some rays, right?

What a grim landscape this must have been to try to cross: there is nothing but rocks, sand, and gaspy little bushes that hold no promise of any water source. It's hot and dry, and every place you want to be is a long way away. And if you do get across this frying pan, you have a steep mountain range to climb on other side. How hot underfoot was this for horses and humans alike? Humans were stupid enough to put themselves here. The poor horsies had no choice.

The sand, except for the small area of beige dunes, is gritty and dirty, with nothing beachish about it. It is worthless. The hills are bleak and dead. At least on the valley floor there is some starved sage, but the hills are barren.



I checked out an area called Mud Canyon. It was nothing special.

Mustard Canyon, on the other hand, was a coolo spot. It's long been a belief of mine that you can find some wicked neat stuff if you're willing to explore dirt roads. Mustard Canyon was hidden beyond the Harmony Borax Works (left). Yes, people actually worked out here! A lot of them! And they had the twenty-mule-team wagons and all that other

shit. I resolved that when I got home I would log on to my Netflix account and rent the DVD's of the old Ronald Reagan TV series *Death Valley Days*, but I haven't done it yet (and probably won't now that the fervor has waned).

Anyway, Mustard Canyon was aptly named. Similar in concept to Mud Canyon – the road was banked by long-hardened walls of oddly-shaped mud – Mustard's vivid yellow coloring



gave it a fascinating appearance that Mud's plain old gray just didn't have. The gray gravel road contrasted well, and reminded you what normal dirt looks like. It lasted about a half-mile or so, I guess. It was pretty cool being the only one in there.

Furnace Creek Visitor Center was right next to the bizarre canyon. The Chevron station there sold regular gas for \$2.820 a gallon. None of the usual 9/10th shit, just a straight-up \$2.82. I liked that. I'm strongly opposed to the 9/10th of a cent crap, and the 99¢ bullshit that is always tacked on to prices.

When Earl Duncan, one of the leading car dealers in Key West, spends half his radio ads, drawling through, "it's only \$17,999" and "all for just \$19,999," I just want to strangle the bastard. And with his drawl, it sounds like "nahntin-nah-nahnahnahn."

I bet people would have a lot more respect for a car dealer who would say right up front, "It costs \$18,000." There is not a soul alive who would day, "Shit, man, I'd buy it right now if it was \$17,999." Besides, you still have taxes and fees and insulting preparation charges to pile on top of that price, so the number is even more goatshit anyway.

And even if you buy the damn thing for \$17,999, and someone asks you want you paid, you're going to answer, "\$18,000."

That whole fool-the-stupid-average-consumer ploy has more validity when you're selling CD's or laundry detergent or desk lamps, but whenever you have **five** decimal places, the three to the right of the comma might as well be zeroes.