

Road Romp 2004

Day 12: Monday, 21 June 2004

FOCK 3: Lane Laments in the Desert

The clouds were rolling back in, so I reminded myself that I had both purpose and goal, and crossed to the south side of the river. Though it didn't register with me until I checked the Rand, I had already crossed the Colorado once on this journey, but I didn't even notice it at the time. Nine minutes before midnight on Day 6, I had entered California by driving across the State Line, which is, officially, the Colorado River. Well, toast my muffin!

Alt-89 rejoins US-89 at a nameless spot in the desert, and continues southwest. To the left are the Echo Cliffs, a long line of mesas that hem in the desert plain to the east. They are what you see waaaaaaaay across that wide flat basin when you first emerge from the Kaibab Plateau after leaving Jake Lake.

I had to slap myself. I mean, Shame On Me for thinking only of North Rim and South Rim, and totally forgetting what a **great** ride this is between them. This ride is **made** for me: long, open, relaxing, mellow, and great unspoiled scenery, with wide-spread vistas. It has been a terrific ride under bright, hot sunshine before, but even under overcast, it looks really cool.



This landscape is just plain Noble: it stands tall. The verticality of the mesas gives it a crown-like effect. The redness too, makes it seem more ... red. And that's better than gray. Or even brown. It's ruddy, damn it! [Is that a cross between "red" and "muddy"?]

And then came the real kicker: RAIN! It was raining in the desert! How rare was this? And bolts of lightning to

add to the show! This was just too good. It was about 60 miles to the merge to Cameron, my turn to return to GCNP, so I had plenty of time to just sit back and savor the ride. You road warriors know what I mean: this was a better show than TV, and it took some major time and effort to get here to see it.

If I did this ride every day, yeah, it might actually start to suck. BUT I DON'T!! So it was AWESOME!

With few specific man-made things to see, signs along the roadway catch your eye pretty good. There were three good-sized signs in fairly rapid succession: "BEEF JERKY AHEAD," followed by "BUFFALO JERKY," with the kicker at the end, "REALLY REALLY **GOOD**" (yes, "good" was in red letters). How I resisted really, really **good** buffalo jerky, I'll never know. Iron will, I guess. It's not every day that you get the chance to gnaw on dried strips of buffalo meat. But I let that opportunity slip through my fingers.

US-89 provided excellent research for my on-going study on lane dropping. You may be familiar with this peeve of mine. It first came to me in Tennessee, on a six-lane divided

highway – that is, three lanes on each side of the grass median strip. The highway was going to shrink down to two lanes on each side, so a sign had been posted to warn motorists of the change. The sign said, RIGHT LANE ENDS.” I kept going and, sure enough, my three-lane road did shrink down to two. But, you know what? I was still in the RIGHT LANE. We still had a RIGHT lane, and we still had a LEFT lane. What we didn’t have was a MIDDLE LANE.

So, anyway, that pissed me off, and it became somewhat of a mission for me to get to the bottom of this sham. Well, as it turned out, US-89, which is typically just one lane in each direction, would have several widenings and narrowings due to passing zones and such.

The first such zone ended with a LEFT LANE ENDS sign. This seemed a little inaccurate too, though. There was still a left lane: all the eastbound traffic was in it. You never want to be in the left lane unless there is nice divider right outside your driver’s window.

The second zone ended similarly, with a LEFT LANE ENDS admonition. OK, I figured, Arizona looks at it the other way. Interesting.

But, not so fast, ferret-face!

The third passing zone squeezed shut with a sign that bellowed, RIGHT LANE ENDS, 1000 FEET. Oh my. Whattup with this??

The fourth and fifth zones, likewise all concluded with the RIGHT LANE ENDS proclamation, but then, in a surprising reversal, the sixth and final one had a LEFT LANE ENDS sign posted. Good grief.

What discussions took place, in what offices, and how many vitriolic memos were exchanged, to arrive at the decision that these three had the right lane end, but that the others shut down the left? *Well we can't make them ALL left! Harry insists it's the fucking right lane, and so does Jill. Let's throw a couple of rights out there too. [I do realize that I may be the only one who has ever noticed this, and I'd bet I'm the only one who is truly bothered by it.]*

I have my travel lane here on the right, the designated passing lane is in the middle, and the opposing traffic is on the left, where I hope they stay. End the left lane? Fine by me, but those drivers will be ucked-fay igtime-bay.

“Right Lane” makes only a little bit more sense, except that you will always still end up with a right lane. The ONLY time that sign could be correct is if you knock the road down to one lane. That’s it. Bare essence of road. Seven feet wide, one-way traffic. One lane. No right, no left, no middle. Fuck you.

Why don’t they all just say “Passing Lane Ends, 1000 Feet”? Duhhh. What is so hard to understand about that? Even “Extra Lane Ends.” At least those two would be accurate. To me, “Middle Lane Ends” would be fine, but I guess they’re afraid that the average driver would panic at the thought of that lane turning to dirt and grass while the right and left lanes continue blithely onward.

Personally, I would enjoy “Superfluous Lane Terminates, 25/132 Mile.” Oh, yeah, I’d be **loving** that sign!

To be fair – which I rarely am, especially if it puts my precious opinion at risk -- the 6th sign of that gantlet actually seemed more appropriate, as the middle lane clearly was the one collapsing in to the uninterrupted right. The “right lane ends” ones may well have been collapsing from the shoulder in. Hmmm. Do I have to go back and investigate now? Grrrrrrrrr.

No. They’re still wrong. Nibble my toes.

But the lane-drop signs weren’t the only interesting postings along US-89. At an outpost called The Gap -- no, not just Gap, it’s The Gap, and it’s not a clothing store (though I think that chain should put one way out here in the void just on principle) – there was a dust storm kicking up. Waves of dust billowed across the roadway and Moby was pushed hard from the

left. He didn't seem fazed by it, being a heavy road creature, so we just enjoyed the occasional tussle and rolled on.

There was an Arizona Storage Rental facility. OK, now who the hell would store anything out here?? What would be the point? You are so far from ANYTHING. Flagstaff was more than 70 miles away, and there were only four "towns" within a 20-mile radius – and the largest of those was Tuba City, which proudly claims 4000 residents. I've been to Tuba City, and if they have 4000 residents, then my van can seat 100. Plus, you're in a wide-open desert; if you need to store something just put it outside and throw a tarp over it. Jeez, Louise.

Beside the road was a yellow, diamond-shaped sign: it showed the silhouette of a person walking, and the accompanying sign beneath it said "1 Mile." So is this somebody who is walking a mile? What's the big deal about that? That doesn't warrant a sign! Better not be my tax bucks involved. Anyway, there was nobody walking within that mile. Stupid lying sign.

Then another sign showed a cow, and it said, "30 miles." Long walk for the poor moo-moo. I made a mental note to be ready for a bovine encounter in 25 minutes or so,

The landscape turned more badlandish: a succession of round mud hills, creased by erosion. There were tumbleweeds blowing across the road. The weather was getting downright wild. This was cool indeedo.

Another cow sign said, "Next 15 Miles." I still hadn't seen one from the last sign.

An ominous bank of black clouds grumbled in the east, and dark veils of blowing rain hung off it like teats off a cow. Maybe that's what the signs meant. A dust storm was really raging all around the Mobe, hip-checking him relentlessly. Dust swept across the road in waves. It was getting **very** windy. This was erosion at work: any tiretracks, footprints, hoofprints, and so on were all being erased.

At one distant mesa, black sheets of rain hung down, while black roils of dust launched upward off the ramped slope of the mesa to meet them. Cool sight. Like a black jaw of Evil and Death. Like I said, a nice ride.

Just before Cameron, a mighty bridge appeared. It had been quite a construction project, and I wondered what road it carried, and over what. Turned out it just supported a pipe over the Little Colorado River (which was barely more than a ditch). I assumed that this was a key water line, then I realized that **any** water line out here would be very key.

A sign announcing, "Cameron: Assembly of God" made me wonder. Call me crazy, but doesn't that mean that they are trying to put God together? Did He fall apart or something?

Some sign somewhere back on US-89 encouraged using headlights, ostensibly so other drivers could see you better. As soon as I turned west onto AZ-64, with 53 miles remaining to GCNP, there was another sign that said, "End Daytime Headlight Use." I had to laugh. It was like they were saying, "Look, we had to ask you to turn them on to get the federal bucks, but now that you're on a state highway, shut the damn things off, because that is really stupid."

There had been no cows in last 30 miles. But now there was a sign that warned me of "Elk, next 15 miles." Are those signs just based on probability? Why should I believe a sign about Elk, when cows, a much more common animal, didn't show up for their shift?

Looking ahead towards GCNP, I could see big clouds over the area. "No sunset tonight," I sighed.

This still being Navajo Indian Reservation



Land, there were some typical roadside Indian jewelry booths, with advance signage. One said, "Turn back, you missed the friendly Indians." Then the next sign said, "Oops, you missed us." Is "oops" now accepted Indian language? Oops??

I would have been an evil influence on Nate by now.

North Rim gate to South Rim gate in 3:07. Fire hours my left cheek! If I had encountered a motorist going five-hour pace on those roads, I would've blown past them with a whistle and wave and been long gone. It was a hassle-free ride, and an easy 200-plus miles. Mesas make such a difference over just plain desert: that noble touch, and that unclimbability.

At the east entrance to Grand Canyon National Park, there was a new gate being built, so all traffic was funneled into a 15 MPH gravel pit. Not even a temporary road, really: *just drive through that rutty, clunky, rock pit over there, and welcome to the National Park.* Weird, but all in the name of progress.

I stopped at the first overlook, Desert View, and had a gander. It all looked good, but under gray skies, it lacked spark, especially given all the views I had had this morning.

At the second overlook, though, Navajo Point, I could see a bright spot in the clouds. I pulled in and got to the rim just as a gap slid open, and a flood of crepuscular rays poured



through. To the west, the successive ridges within the Canyon took on a deep gold color, and the Colorado River gleamed like liquid silver.

My good Catholic upbringing came into play, and I could only see it as God's Canyon, and He was throwing a howyadoin blessing on me, rewarding me for making the trip. I took a few photos, but mainly just stood there and dug the scene. It was one very grand looking canyon.

To the north, the slanting beams seem to flow right into the swift flowing river, and illuminated the sheer cliffs that rose up from it. Those rock walls looked small from here, but they were at least a couple hundred feet high.

Then the gap closed, and the beams vanished. The gray melancholy settled back onto the landscape, and I moved the Mobe onward. I had a motel room waiting for me at Grand Canyon Village, and that was still a good half-hour away.



On the way there, I passed a large section of forest where there were acres and acres of charred trees. There must have been a very extensive fire here. Strangely, the evergreen trees still had needles on all their branches, but their low trunks were charred. Possibly a controlled blaze set by the NPS to burn out the underbrush. The burnt smell still pervaded the whole area.

It was almost 8:00 when I tumbled into Room 7050 at the Yavapai Lodge. It wasn't much. It was like a dorm room: cinder block walls, no-AC, bottom of the line tub and shower, a bed that was way past its prime, tiny and plain white towels, and a buck-a-minute phone rate. But it was still MUCH better than Motel 6 in San Antonio!

I took a dusk walk over to the south rim. There were hundreds of people all over the sidewalks and in the gift shops. Man, was this place crowded! Solitude, shmolutide.

The sky was odd. It was almost like a fog bank hanging above us all. You could see some mist veiling down, but it lacked the impetus to come all the way, so it just fell to a point, thinned, dissipated, got caught in the draft, and rose back up. Very indecisive behavior for water vapor.

I went back to 7050 and downloaded my latest photos into the Presario 2100. I took the extra step of immediately burning them onto a CD, having learned from the debacle of four years before, when all 300+ of my RR2K photos disappeared in a laptop crash the day after I got home.

Photos secure, I called it a night before 10:00.

Nothing to see here ... until morning.

