

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 15: Thursday, 24 June 2004

FOCK 2: The Bland Day

Shortly after Vega, there was the Biggest Cross in the Western Hemisphere. The sign said so. Other, smaller ones clustered below it. It was the only photo-worthy object of day, and even that is very debatable.

I suppose it serves a purpose as some kind of a fanatic religious message, but it seems a bit misguided to spend all that money to build a big cross instead of using it on food or clothes for the poor. I have to think that Jesus is looking down at this pompous monument, shaking his head, and saying, "Mannnnn, you just don't get it, do you??"



A little while later, the industrial side of farming/ranching began to appear. There was a big cow hangout on the right. I missed the Cadillac Ranch again. It must just be my destiny to not go to this place. Maybe something cataclysmic would occur if I ever show up there. I caught a glimpse from the road, though. There were six or seven Caddies jammed nose-first into the ground a couple hundred yards from the road. They were painted bizarrely, as if graffitied. They didn't seem to be fenced in anyway, and didn't even look like they were on anyone's property. I could've gone back, but it didn't inspire me all that much. Natural wonders had more allure than oddities contrived by eccentric men. It might've been a cool pic, but so what?

Then came Amarillo. It could have been any city. Well, maybe not Boston or New York or even Seattle, but it could have been any medium-sized midwestern city. From the Interstate, all I could see were the typical corporate/chain signs: Circuit City, Appleby's, Olive Garden, Red Lobster, Burger King, Motel 6, Arby's, etc., etc. – El Chico sounded like it might be a unique, local-color place, but otherwise, this place could have been the outskirts of Topeka, Fort Worth, Omaha, or Pixley.

One Amarillo radio station broadcast a car dealership ad that caught my ear. They were advertising a "hail adjustment" due to storm damage. That's pretty weird. Dimpled-car discount, I reckon, Hoss.

Right after that, Amarillo's Concert Station, Rockin' 08 (107.9), loudly bragged that they were promising to give away tickets to a show, and to "get you guys fucked up!" I did a double-take over that one, for sure. Trouble is, a double-take only works with sight, not with hearing. But I know I heard what I heard.

There must be some different rules and regs in this part of the country, because I had heard the word "fuck" on the radio in Arkansas during Roadrage2000 also:

As I was leaving Little Rock and aiming west, there was a talk show on station KSJY, called Scott Land, I believe, hosted by some joker named Scott Anderson with his sidekicks Rex and Joel (I think it was Joel, might not be). This show crossed lines that would never be allowed most places. The banter was lively indeed. The word "titties" was the first to catch my ear. *Whoa! He just said "titties!" WTF?*

And it didn't stop there. They talked about jobs, and joked about blow versus hand. But the crowner, and I swear I heard what I heard, was the word "fuck." Twice they used it. And it was in the sexual intercourse context: *that woman could fuck!* and *I'd fuck her!* I

couldn't believe it. This was Arkansas, the bland state, and they were broadcasting fuck talk. Though, now that I think about it, it is Bill Clinton's state, iddinit?

When you hear the phrase, "like white on rice," does it conjure up anti-Asian sentiment? Me neither. Yet, on that same Scott Land show, some woman called in and was livid about the use of a racial slur that had been made against Asians. The hosts were bewildered by her protests and finally calmed her down enough to get her to repeat the purported slur.

"White on rice!" she blurted out. "White on rice! Everyone knows what you *really* mean by that!"

I think the hosts were even more befuddled at that point – I know I was – and they turned against her as only radio talk show hosts can. "Would it be better if we all said 'yellow on rice'? There's yellow rice too, ain't there? And brown rice. And pilaf! "like pilaf on rice' sounds pretty inoffensive to me." I'm sure they had cut her off already because she offered no further insight.

Some people put a little too much effort into being offended. Would she have thought "flies on shit" was some sort of knock too?

Anyway, Amarillo didn't slow me down, and I was through the clutter and back into the empty Texas plain in no time. The fields on both sides of the highway were so damn big. It must be quite a task to till these. There were two tall trees on the right edge of I-40 that looked unusual, though I couldn't pin down why right away. There were several on the wide median strip, but these two looked all wrong for some reason. Then I realized that they were only about six feet off the pavement! A semi actually brushed the overhanging branches. That may be a common sight on parkways, but it's usually deemed a safety hazard and prohibited on such I-states. Stupid Texas.

Thankfully, the stovepipe of Texas is relatively narrow, and another state line was crossed at 2:20 pm. Oklahoma. This part of the Sooner State was virgin territory. It was greener than the other regions I had seen. It looked fertile and healthy, with full-sized trees, and fecund farmland. It was 90° here in Tornado Alley, but no storms were imminent.

Cowcoons abounded. That's what I call those big rolled bales of hay that you see sitting here and there in empty fields. Very few people know this, but those are actually woven at night by cows, who then hide in them and cowberate.

One time, I saw nine of them lined up, with the letters C-O-W---C-A-N-D-Y hung on the flat ends. Another time, a row of about 25 of them had been wrapped in a shiny white plastic, and the words "More Marshmallows Please" were painted on the ends. Oh, folks just love to get playful with their gosh darn cowcoons.

As I approached the bridge over the Red River, I thought back to the last time I had seen this "body of water":

Alf and I ventured on up into Oklahoma on the '87 ramack, looking for a late lunch. We took I-44 North across the Red River, and immediately veered off the highway onto the tiny road that Exit 1 had been built for. The Red River is the boundary between southern Oklahoma and northeastern Texas. It slithers its squiggly course for well over 600 miles from the stovepipe of the Lone Star State all the way to the Arkansas border.

The river seemed aptly named, because, with its bed of clay and the low mid-summer water level, it was just a ribbon of red, hardened muck. It looked like the surface of Mars. It was clear enough of weeds and such that we could believe that water had been flowing through there fairly recently, but it was totally walkable.

There was nothing at all to see along these initial roads. If anything, Oklahoma seemed even emptier than Texas. There was a good amount of food being grown around there, but half the fields were just empty, reddish-brown earth. Perhaps they were lying fallow. They looked rather fallow.

After a few miles, we junctioned with a numbered road – highway 70 – and angled west. There was a dot on the map labeled Devol, which appeared to be a town, but I don't remember seeing anything. The first town we actually drove into, Grandfield (population 1224), was a ghost town. Three-quarters of the stores were closed down, and the other quarter were soon to follow. It was eerie. We wondered if the 1224 was something other than people.

It took another 34 miles and a northerly turn to reach the big city of Frederick (pop. 5221). It wasn't what you'd call "alive," except in the sense that, unlike Grandfield, it was still breathing.

By mutual agreement, Alf and I eschewed the couple of franchise eateries that we saw – KFC and Pizza Hut – and sought out "local flavor." With memories of the alarming white gravy of our east Texas breakfast stop, we knew we could be making a big mistake, but we needed to sample some succulent Sooner sustenance.

Harper's Restaurant was the place we picked. It was empty except for two old people, and one very old waitress. It smelled like a nursing home, and looked like your classic, undecorated, cheaply furnished, small town diner. Once again, we are easily the rudest things there. The food absolutely sucked, and the service wasn't exactly friendly. "Coldly tolerant" would be a better description; Granny didn't take a shine to us tourist types. My burger was really gross. Alf over-tipped, so I took back 60¢.

But, in 2004, there was water in Red River! Pretty good amount too. It really looked like a river. The water was still red, or at least a brownish-red, but it was a few feet deep and movin' right along. It gave me a feeling of optimism. I even bet that the burgers around here were better.

Central Oklahoma was mostly rolling terrain, not as flat as the stovepipe was, and it was surprisingly verdant. The dirt in all the plowed fields all around here was very red, and created a striking contrast. It wasn't just dim brown dirt up against dull brown grass; this had contrast and hue and saturation, all the things that digital photographicists dig. I had a much better impression of Oklahoma this time around.

A roadside billboard announced: "Microsurgery vasectomy reversal." I didn't catch the phone number.

With the gas gauge at the half-full/half-empty point – I'm neither optimistic nor pessimistic, just realistic -- I stopped in Oklahoma City to get gas, to head off sputtering. The station was charging \$1.639 for a gallon of regular, and that was the cheapest I saw on the entire trip – more than a buck a gallon less than I had paid at Yoyo. So, in that one small regard, it was better to be in OKC than in YNP. And, I guess I didn't have to worry about breaking my behind on a snowbank either, so that's 2 points for OKC. I think that makes the score about 998-to-2.

I needed a pause from the rush hour traffic. It was now after 5:00 – see how fast we've been driving, and how little there has been to comment on along the way? – and the cramped roadway was vexing me after several hundred miles of open road. There was a big park – Woodson Park – on the Rand, and I entertained thoughts about taking a little exercise break. A nice slow jog around some shady, rolling, wooded trails would be a nice touch, I felt.

I'd soak up a ton of negative ions, and flush away the traffic-induced cortisol flow. Then I'd take a refreshing jug shower to rinse the road-filmed skin.

But, the park was boring. It was big, but it was just flat grass fields, most of which were soccer fields. A jog around the perimeter would have been unshaded and waaaaaaay to visible. I sought secret exercise, where no one would see what a Sluggo Run I was actually doing. I didn't know a soul in this area, so it shouldn't have mattered, and it probably didn't, really. A trail run would have been fun, but a perimeter run here would have been blah. I didn't need blah. The scenery was blah enough. So, I bagged it and rejoined the I-40E road rally.

As (bad) luck would have it, I got back just in time for a nasty, creepy-crawly, traffic jam. And this one turned out to be criminal! The Interstate traffic squeezed down from three lanes to one. People were zooming ahead to the last possible inch, the cutting right in front of others. Bumpers and fenders passed within millimeters of one another. People's ire and fingers were both raised. Horns were honked and tempers flared.

Even when we were reduced to one lane, some jamokes were trying to sleaze by in the breakdown lane. The funnel of orange cones lasted well over a mile, with close to half that line closing off two lanes.

Then they just ended. The cones just stopped, and all three lanes were open again. There was no sign whatsoever that anything had been damaged, there was nothing being constructed, there were no police, no wet paint, no new guard rail, there was nothing!! Just empty lanes where we all of us should have been... a half hour ago! It was like a diabolical practical joke.

I could tell my fellow motorists were just as pissed as I was about this because everyone was roaring away from the bottleneck with extra oomph. I was just passin' through, but most of these people had places to be, or were at least in a rush to get home to dinner.

Soon, there was another retarded road sign: "Eastern Ave." Did they run out of lower case N's?? Way to make yourselves look dumb there, guys. Maybe trim an "m"? Or send out for an emergency "n" delivery? Or flip over a "u"? But DON'T waste the taxpayers' money on a sign that makes your population look like inbred imbeciles.

That wasn't as bad as the Pennsylvania sign though; that one was horrendous:

There is a sign on I-81 near Harrisburg that made me just shake my head. It's one of those huge, green, across-the-whole-damn-highway signs that tell you what direction you're headed. In this case, you're headed for Harrisburg. The word is very prominent on the sign. The word "Harrisburg" is critical to this sign's purpose. Indeed, it's pretty much a "Yes, Harrisburg is THIS way!" kinda sign.

Now, these signs are not cheap. I've never paced one off or anything, but when you have a sign that spans most of three highway lanes, you have a LOT of sign. You could probably park a half dozen school busses on this sign.

(Well, if you put the sign on the *ground*, you could park busses on it. Up on those supports and crossbeams, bus parking is a tad impractical. Even if you could get the damn bus up there, and get it to stay, you'd probably get a ticket for blocking the sign itself.)

ANYWAY, this was a pretty new sign. The green was vivid, the lettering crisp. The font was Tahoma-ish. The "H" was upper case, but the "arrisburg" was lower case. There was nothing controversial about the "Harrisbur". The problem was the "g".

The "Harrisbur" was lined up perfectly. But the "g" obviously had posed a problem to the sign makers. G, as you know, has a tail when it is in lower case. Only five letters are tailed – g, j, p, q, and y – and even though they are not the most popular letters – ranked 17, 23, 19, 25, and 18, respectively (people must not like tails, except, of course, a gypsy) -- they are

common enough that you would expect that sign makers would have strategies in place to handle them. I mean, how hard is it?

Well, apparently very hard. On this sign, tails were apparently not allowed. The bottom of the g's tail was even with the bottom of the other nine letters, and the top of it was level with the top of the upper case H: **Harrisbur9** (except the 9 was a levitating g.)

It looked stupid. *Damn* stupid! You spend thousands and thousands of dollars making and installing a sign that large, that literally millions of people will see, and you *choose* to screw it up! Somebody, some high-falootin' Public Works Department honcho in some crap-ass office somewhere in Pennsylvania, approved it.

Didn't *somebody*, anywhere in this process, take a look at this sign as it was being made, and say, "Noooo, Jim Bob, I don't think that's right." Didn't anybody notice how goddamn STUPID it looks??

I'm sorry, but whoever gave the go-ahead to this sign, you should just QUIT, because you are an IDIOT! And you make your state look BAD. Every driver with half a brain in her/his head looks at that sign and thinks, "Man, they must have some real morons in Pennsylvania."

But I moved on. What else could I do? I was powerless to change that N. Leave it that way, I said, waving it off dismissively. Let them wallow in their stupidity. Stupid Texas. Oh, wait, this was Oklahoma.

Just when I was beginning to get that dry, dustbowl feeling again, there was a big brown lake that came almost up to the highway. Man, was it brown. Was it that shallow that it was constantly silted? It was a large body of water, but as brown as the Mississippi River. Lake Uvalla, or something. And right after I said into my hand-held cassette recorder, "that's a lotta water," I was faced with a road sign for Lotawatta Road. Hmm. Damn clever, these stupid Sooners.

Right after that lake, there was a field that had about 150 off-white cows grazing and lying about. The off-white color made them look shaved or naked. It was a very strange sight. They looked more like overgrown killer pigs than cows.

Since I didn't take a break at that Park, I opted for the I-40 rest area just before the town of Little. Little, OK. I liked the sound of that. *I live in the little town of Little, OK, OK??*

It was a good stop at the rest area, though longer than planned. I took the time to burn a CD of all the Romp '04 photos as a precaution against the kind of hard drive collapse that devoured all my RR2K pictures before I could harvest them. I had a couple of casual PB samiches on wheat bread, and tidied up Moby a bit.

A few semi-hippie high school kids pulled in and, while one kid went in to the rest room, the other three broke out a Frisbee and began tossing it around. I almost invited myself into their game, but after a few throws, it was obvious that these kids were pretty bad with the disc. I would have enjoyed an easy flip-and-catch session, but chasing a rolling or sliding Frisbee didn't tickle my boat at this point. It didn't float my fancy either.

A local guy named Del sauntered over to chat about traveling, and we had a good convo. He was a good egg, he was. I'm often wary of the approach of strangers, and I keep a somewhat defensive demeanor until I can tell if I'm going to be asked for money, or be lectured to about the Lord Our Savior, or be trapped into a corner by some loquacious loner who has nobody else to rant to.

But I could tell right away that Del was an OK OK guy. He was in his mid-20's, and dressed like somebody who spends his day on the road making sales calls for some company: loafers, light-colored Dockers pants, a pale blue button-up shirt, and a late-afternoon loosened tie. He had stopped to make a few biz-related phone calls and saw my Key West shirt and

Florida tags and thought I might be a good story. So I offered him a brew and a chill-out moment, and I told him all 265 pages, just like I've written them to you, though without the illustrations. But when I got to this paragraph I didn't know what else to say.

The "ten-minute" break lasted about 40. Oh well. It was a relaxing 40, very good for the soul. It had been a businesslike drive-drive-drive kind of day, just pushin' the gas and loggin' the miles, so I deserved a few extra minutes. Truckers have days like this every day. I once thought about doing that, but I'm glad I didn't. I like driving too much to have to do it for a living. If someone would pay me to drive anywhere I wanted, that would be several kinds of OK -- Okay, Okie-dokie, OK-by-me, Okie-fanokie, O-freaking-K, and more -- but I don't know why anyone would do that. At least, I haven't found anyone yet.

The last 150 miles of Oklahoma passed without even a hint of an incident. It didn't even have an odd tree, or an unusual car, or some strangely-worded sign to take note of.

Arkansas was next. Oh boy. Officially named the Least Scenic State of RR2K, the Natural State signified the end of the Cherokee Nation, and the return, apparently, to civilization. It was 8:55 when I breached the border, and daylight was gone. Oklahoma had been dispatched in just over six-and-a-half hours.

After about another hour, Moby suggested we call it a night at the first Arkansas rest area on I-40, at mile 67, leaving 89 miles to Little Rock. The total for the day was 667 miles, the second highest total of the Romp. Only the Day Two trek from Wesley Chapel FL to Baton Rouge LA, at 722, was longer.

Day 15 had taken just under 13 hours, including all stops, for an average of 52 miles each hour. I always plan on 50 MPH when I make my routes. Got 500 miles to cover? 10 hours. I know I can make it in a little over seven hours if I drive like a madman -- like Nate would do -- but only when I have a deadline -- like an event that starts at a specific time (i.e., the 'Topes game) -- do I stampede like that.

Gotta enjoy the ride, or you might as well fly.

Though this was the designated Bland Day, I did still enjoy the ride...