

Road Romp 2004

Day 16: Friday, 25 June 2004

FOCK 1: The Toad Suck Experience

I overslept my goal of an 8:00 a.m. Rise-n-Shine by an hour-and-a-half. What, am I gonna be late for work or somethin'?? I chortle at the thought. Heh-heh. In fact, I downright guffaw at it. HAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA!

It's damn comfy in the Belly O' Th' Whale. I wonder if Jonah thought so.

Waking up in Arkansas is not something that ranks high on a list of ramack moments. I did it in 2000 also, at much the same place, though aiming outward. At that time, the best of the journey was still ahead of me; Arkansas was a necessary (though unplanned) step to reach the highly anticipated lands of Utah, California, Oregon, and Washington. That made it easier to get up and go. Today I faced the rest of Arkansas, then Memphis, and, with good navigating, the Natchez Trace Parkway for sunset. The day would end well, but the beginning was not especially inspiring.

Arkansas is Blandland anyway – it should be nicknamed The Bland State -- but a gray overcast morning sky dimmed its limited luster even more. The landscape here was much, much greener than anything I had seen since the Meadows at North Rim. Even the brown grass looked healthier, maybe because of the absence of sage. An empty pasture looked much more like a cultivated field than a desolate prairie. Coming from the west, the forested hills were a welcome sight, but I still couldn't call them *scenic*. Most of the vegetation that you see from the road is kind of wild looking, which does have some allure; not every highway interchange or median is country-club-groomed. It all could be looked at as "ugly," or you could generously applaud them for being "untamed" and "natural" – and, Arkansas, after all, is The Natural State. I could think that the unmanicured appearance was by design, but I don't.

The first bumper sticker of the day said, "Lord, let me be the person my dog thinks I am." A good sentiment. Dogs are so non-judgmental: feed me, pet me, and I'll love you unconditionally. No one is ever as sincerely delighted to see you as your dog is. You rarely get a shrug and a grunt from a doggie. If you do, you take his ass to the vet.

Another thing that I recalled about the Arkansas landscape was the trees that stand on water. In several places, small lakes (or large ponds) would come almost up to the shoulder of the road. There was nothing unusual about this except when you take a look across the pond/lake you see tall, mature trees that appear to be just standing on the water. The base of each trunk is plainly visible, and many of the trees are as much as 100 feet from shore. It makes you do a double-take. But the scene would turn out to be significant foreshadowing.

I-40 through Arkansas was a MUCH better road than it was in 2000! At that time, I had ranted on about its poor condition giving a dismal first impression of the state: it seemed poor, broken-down, and unhealthy. It was easy to project those qualities state-wide, onto the industry, onto the schools, and onto the people. It made me feel bad about being in the state.

But this highway under Moby's wheels was brand new, smooth, black asphalt. He was a happy van. He purred. I like when my vans purr.

The road signs, though, were weird. I never saw signs "constructed" this way. They were assembled in sections, on uneven ground, and they didn't fit together especially well. They certainly did not look sturdy. Maybe they had been hastily reset after some tornado or something, but they looked very low budget, which took away from the positive vibes of the pavement. Perhaps the upgrade of the signs would be Phase Two of the I-40 project.

Once again, I was relying on local radio for entertainment. The music was neither good nor bad, but the ads sometimes were good for a chuckle. One such ad, for Vinosbrewpub.com, promoted an upcoming show that would be a benefit for the Arkansas chapter of NORML.

Wow, that still exists! I had not heard a thing about the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws in decades, it seemed. Good to know that some causes never lose their appeal.

Five years had changed more than the pavement in this part of Arkansas. On my pass-through during RR2K, I stopped for gas at a station that was almost next to a mobile home dealer. I assumed it was a dealer, though none of the ones there looked like a good purchase. Some, in the back corner, were beyond decrepit and were just left there because it was cheaper to ignore them than to haul them away. At the time, I had speculated about good ways to attend to them. I honestly thought that blowing them to smithereens would be a fun way to address the problem. And rather than a furtive nocturnal demolition, which would just cause a lot of alarm among the locals and prompt a potentially embarrassing investigation, I would suggest a public Blammorama, complete with rock bands, cotton candy, and souvenir T-shirts bearing clever slogans. I'm sure explosives are not hard to come by in Arkansas. Maybe July 4th would be a good date.

For added effect, you could prop up mannequins inside at the windows, posing them in distress positions. And when the countdown ended, "BLAMMMO!!" What an event it would be. The rednecks would gobble it up. Trouble is, it would probably start a rash of impromptu, late-night, alcohol-induced, copy-cat functions here and there at trailer parks around the Midwest.

But, anyway, in 2004, that place had become THE place to buy your next mobile home. Nice fencing, new homes, (including double-wides), and the appearance of clean and organized profit made for quite a contrast to my memory. All those trash trailers were gone. Maybe they *had* been blown up.

But the reason I had even pulled in there in the first place back in '00 was the name "Toad Suck Park" on a highway sign. I needed gas soon anyway, so I pulled in and tried to find out what Toad Sucking was all about. You can imagine what visual images were running through my odd little mind. I was afraid to go there.

One story, in the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, says that this place was a popular spot for the bargemen on the Arkansas River to pull over and drink rum and moonshine. They are said to have "sucked on bottles until they swelled up like toads." I dunno, though.

Another customer at the gas station maintained that it was a linguistic thing: that "suck" had been the French word "sucre" (sugar, or sweet), and that "toad" was a combination of "eau" (water) and something else ending in T: --*t eau d'sucre*. I dunno, though.

The hick gas station guy, though, was armed with "the real deal" – I'm sure he gets asked the same question over and over, so he had a well-practiced and nicely e-nun-ci-a-ted reply: "There is a geographical feature called a 'suck': when a river was high but the water level drops, it leaves a pool on a flat shore that gets separated from the river. That pool is called a *suck*. Such a feature occurs all along the river here every spring, and they often fill up with toads and tadpoles."

I chose the latter explanation. It also seemed to explain the trees standing on the water.

But here I had an opportunity to investigate. I probably should have been making haste, but I couldn't shake out of lollygag mode. So when I saw the sign for "Toad Suck Park, Exit 124," I went to have a look-see.

There was no directional sign at the top of the exit ramp, and no Suck – Toad or otherwise – noted on the Rand, so I took my 50/50 chance and went left. AR-65 was two lanes wide and windy, with plenty of fat trees and bushes on both sides. It actually was a pretty nice stretch, but after about seven miles, there was still no indication that any toads were being sucked 'round here.

I stopped as I passed a little road construction spot and asked the guy with the flags if he knew where I could find Toad Suck Park. He said he never heard of it. I was going to just thank him and pull away, but for some reason I said, "Damn, there was a sign for it on the highway and everything..."

"Oh, *that* Toad Suck," he exclaimed, making me wonder how he had never heard of it, "oh, hell, that's way over th' other side o' th' innerstate, way over past Conway." He gestured as if he was sending me off on a voyage to China.

"OK, thanks, man," I smiled, "Keep wavin' those flags, bud!"

I wouldn't be surprised if he muttered, "what a dickhead," as I drove away.

So, I retraced my tire tracks to I-40. I had made up my mind that enough time had been wasted in this silly pursuit, and that I'd just get back on the highway and resume eastering. But Moby had other thoughts and insisted on going for the Toad. We missed the I-40 on-ramp, and headed down into Conway (population 27,000 or so). It was modern enough, with malls and motels and the usual Appleby's-type eateries scattered around several major intersections – each one with a traffic light, each one RED, of course -- and it slowed me down accordingly. But after a few more miles, just as I was giving it the old "OK, one more mile, then we call off the hunt," I saw signs. And more signs than I would have expected:



Those were some happy looking toads on those signs, but I guess we don't need to speculate on the why's and wherefore's of that, now, do we? And, *damn*, I hope you get a LOT of wheat straw for \$300!

Then there was Toad Suck Park itself. Not a bad place at all, though the park itself would never have lured me out this far off course if not for the name.

The bridge that you have to cross to get to TSP is actually a dam on the Arkansas River – the selfsame river that Richie, Danny Mac, Cliff and I did that Colorado white water rafting excursion on back in another life.

RV's were parked along the banks, and there were plenty of fields for recreation or relaxation. People were camping, some of them very long term, judging by the wooden fence and array of shrubbery around one detached RV trailer. There was a boat launch there, and lots of folks were dangling lines into the water, apparently hoping to catch some good, fresh, live toads to suck on.

So I had seen Toad Suck Park. Now I could get on with life. My stay lasted maybe two minutes, about 1/30th of what the whole search mission had taken.

Besides live bait, minnows, crickets, worms, and wheat straw (premium quality wheat straw, I assume), Toad Suck One Stop also sold gas, ice and newspapers, so I procured all of those, but none of the featured items, on the way back to I-40.



Perhaps the most impressive part of the whole Conway/Little Rock area was the churches. They were large, stately, very well kept, and by far the nicest of all the buildings I saw. I imagine that there was a ferocious but unspoken competition among the different sects to have a nicer house of worship than their heathen counterparts.

One church had a pithy sign out front: "Get the last word: Apologize." Clever.

Entering Little Rock at lunchtime turned out to be a bad move. Naturally, there was a traffic jam. One lane of the Interstate was closed for repair, and all traffic was being shifted into the other. Why is it so difficult for people to merge from 2 lanes into one?? This was a stupidly long backup – traffic was even STOPPED for much of it -- just because assholes can't figure out that alternating vehicles is easier and faster than trying to cram in front of one another. People suck. On toads.

Sometimes truckers team up to control one of those merges, and keep dickheads from sleazing down to the very last foot before cutting in to the line. That just gets everyone thinking cutthroat, and the truckers just try to bring a calm sanity into things. Two semi's might roll side-by-side, letting no one by, which creates a smooth merge and an easier flow for all. I've tried it myself sometimes, straddling lanes to discourage would-be flow-breakers.

OK, OK, now before you roll your eyes at me, I will freely admit that I have been on the other side of that behavior as well. When I'm in a hurry, it's almost by instinct: *I can get ahead of 100 cars and get through there a few minutes sooner? I'm already late for the ceremonial Feeding of the Llamas, so get me up there, give me a four-inch opening, and color me Gone!*

And sometimes, my intentions might be bordering on Good, but I see others way up there who have done it, and I think, *well, if they're doing it, why not me? The flow is already broken...*

Actually, there have been quite a few times where I saw the detour well up ahead, and attempted to merge at a respectable point, but the traffic in the other lane would not let me in. I'd have my turn signal on, and be trying to blend in, but I'd be barricaded out. People would inch right up to the bumper ahead of them with the NO WAY, YOU BIG VAN, YOU! mentality. In some ways, I don't blame them for that; I don't enjoy being behind a large, view-blocking

vehicle either. But then the problem is, if they don't let me in, where am I gonna go? Am I gonna back up?? I don't THINK so! So, given no other choice, I say fukkem, and trot on down to the detour and bully my way in, creating umbrage and ire and adding to the general flood of bad vibes.

Annnnd, it's happened with an exit ramp or two over the years as well. Traffic would be heavy and slow, but moving, and there would still be a mile to go to the exit. I'd be rolling along at whatever speed I could manage, and not even notice that the right-hand lane was either not moving at all, or was doing Surface Creep. When the ramp itself would come into view, I'd be saying, *Ohhhh, that line is for THAT? Oooooops! Sorry, all...* and cut someone off to make the exit.

That happened recently on I-275 coming into Tampa from the Sunshine Skyway. Traffic was backed up so far on the causeway that the Exit Only notation above the lane didn't appear until a few hundred crawling cars had been passed. Still, I didn't take it seriously, honestly believing that the road would give birth to another lane on my right. It didn't seem possible that the lane I was in would be Exit Only. But, gall durn it, it was. Somebody was slow on the go, however, as they often are, and I slid right into a fortuitous gap in lane two.

But where this happens all the time is on I-95 in Connecticut! Exits from the LEFT lane! Who's goddamn retarded idea was that?? Take the fast lane, full of all the people who want to get someplace in a big big hurry, and block them, cut them off, and slow them to a crawl while Creepers and semi's veer outward to take the exit.

Plus, you're flying along the fast lane of an Interstate, making good time, passing the other lanes, and suddenly you're commanded to vacate that lane and merge with the other lanes. On an empty road, that's not a problem, but if traffic is moderate or more, the snarl that is created by fast traffic trying to merge right, and exiting traffic trying to merge left is incredible. You creators of Left Lane Exits, if it were legal, I would have you flayed. Twice.

The biggest problem with any of these aforementioned construction merges is the refusal of some people to let another vehicle get in front of them. Granted, some people are total assholes about it, but when you think about it, why would the merge occur 500 yards up the road before it had to? That just leaves a wide open invitation to jump ahead, and, to many people, jumping ahead of others is what life is all about. I mean, you come up to such a situation, and you see two lanes: (A) has 100 cars crawling along, and (B) is empty. Which does your road savvy tell you to take? Try (D) for Duhhh.

Those cones and signs up there do seem to define the merge point, so I don't think it's fair to blame people for taking all the open lane that they are given. They're (we're) not doing anything illegal.

It would be a piece of cake if drivers just backed off the throttle, slowed to a negotiable speed, stopped racing one another for a minute, nodded, winked, and let every other car take access to the available lane. Left-right-left-right, there ya go, your turn, now mine, off we go, wheeeeeee!

But it all starts with the very first **No You Don't** that causes somebody to hit the brakes, light the lamps, and bring all behind him to a halt as well. I suspect that a truck is often involved, though seldom as the instigator. People see a one-lane-ahead thing, and say, */ gotta get ahead of that freaking truck!* So they surge ahead, and cut in just in time, causing Tracy Trucker to stand on the brake pedal, and all hope is lost for order and an enjoyable merging experience.

Pucking idiots. And, yes, I confess that I have done that too. How do you think I know so much about it? Just flip me off as I go by, like all my other fellow motorists do.