

Road Romp 2004

Day 16: Friday, 25 June 2004

FOCK 4: The Birmingham Quest

I crossed the Tennessee River, which is not as significant as the Mississippi River was. Dugg and I, Alf and I, and Pat and Neal and I all swam at this spot on our respective journeys down this road. The water was nice, especially on a hot July afternoon.

But, all too soon, I was leaving the NTP behind to take up the back roads of Alabama, turning onto AL-20 towards the thriving small city of Florence. (If the city name calls to mind images of Italy and the Renaissance, you can stop that nonsense right now, please; this is Alabama.)

As I squeegeed my windshield at a gas and shitty-samich stop in Florence, I pondered the world of insects. What percent of the insect population gets wiped out by cars? Personally, I estimate that I was nailing 200-400 between squeegeings, and I'm just one vehicle out of thousands, on one road out of millions, on one night out of...

Now, Moby is higher profile than many of the lower, sleeker, more aerodynamic cars that clog my roads, but if I smoosh a lot of buggies, how many do those 18-wheelers kill? I guess that's why those rounded spoilers have been added to the roofs of the cabs in the last decade or so. Well, not just that, of course. Gas mileage is the main concern, I would imagine, but the fronts of those trailers must be spared a whole mess of bug guts because of that redirected airflow.

That line of thinking gave me a good laugh – which I needed to balance out that crappy excuse for chicken salad that this gas station was peddling – as I remembered a ride through Tennessee on the solo ramack of 1998:

I had just reached the small town of Dover (TN), and a golden opportunity was promised. After more than a 1000 miles of rain-free, summertime, often nighttime driving, Blue Man had done his best to take a bite out the insect population. Bugs of every imaginable color had left stunning and lumpy patterns all over his hood and grill and bumper. At one gas station, I even noticed a small *bat* stuck in the grill. Many of those bugs had made clearly audible SPLAT sounds at impact, and their guts were strewn in all directions.

And, speaking of splatting bugs, don't motorcyclists get smacked with those all the time too? I mean, *whammo*, a big heavy moth cracks off your face guard?? And what if you don't have a face guard, or a helmet? Don't you end up with bug guts all over your head? Ughh. Man, windshields sure were a good idea.

ANYWAY, so I pull into Dover, TN, with the van a hideous collage of vile insect residue, and I see a sign: "Cheerleader Car Wash, Dover HS, 9-3pm." Oh, yes!! Let's see those southern belle types cringe and grimace and go "ick" and "oooo, grossss" as they scrub their way through this crust! Cool!!! I don't care what it costs, I'm there. Then I looked at the clock: it was three-forty. Damn!!! I did drive to the school, just in case they had hung around, but it was indeed deserted. Shit.

But, here in Florence, I choked down the rest of the samich, and got Moby back in motion. Ironically, when I fired the Mobe back up, the radio came on with Warren Zevon's "Sweet Home Alabama." Yeah, right. At this point, I was drifting pretty deep into Get Me The Fuck Home mode.

As I struggled to escape Florence's gravitational pull, I found myself on SIX concurrent highways: 43S, 72W, 13S, 17S, 20E, and 157S! And they all turned left at the same intersection. SIX designated highways share one road. If you were feeling a bit devious, you could give REALLY complicated directions here: *OK at the first light look for the sign for 43S and follow that. A half-mile later, you're going to have to find 72W and take that turn. Then*

you go straight ahead onto 13S, then straight ahead again, but onto 17S. Take a left when you see the arrow for 20E, then a right at the sign for 157S. Or you can just stay on 43S if you want.

As is often the case on ramacks, I had been subsisting on very light fare: peanut butter and wheat bread had been the self-made samich of choice this time. On other tours, cold cuts or tuna have been the staple. Tuna's a pain, though, because you have to open the can, drain out the tuna-juice, use some container to mix in the Miracle Whip, then wash it out afterwards so you don't get that rotting tuna smell in your van after a hot day on the road. That's a lot of work for a vaykaying dood.

Even cold cuts are labor intensive. You have to keep them chilled, but if you forget to attend to the ice and it melts too much, you have floating and waterlogged ham. Ham loses most of its flavor, but sliced turkey loses ALL of it. A Tupperware container is useful when coldies are in the plan, but that takes up precious cooler space. It can be done with cans in the cooler, but bottles make it a very tough fit. As always, peanut butter crackers, and those sometimes-yummy-sometimes-gross, pre-made, chick-sal samiches at gas stations augment the standard diet.

But fried chicken breasts from supermarket delicatessens are the best meal for the buck anywhere. A good-sized clucker boob is a fully satisfying meal. It's hot and sloppy, a perfect meal to make you pause in your driving to chow down. Your hands get all greasy and your face gets smeared. Crunchy crumbs fall all over. This is not a meal to eat while driving (though it's been done).

These big juicy fried chicken breasts were my "splurge." Outside the northeast, it seems that every supermarket deli would have a nice bin of fresh hot fried chicken pieces, and the price of a succulent breast was as low as \$1.09. Sometimes it was closer to two bucks, but that still beats the bejeezus out of a Big Mac.

Many times I would stand outside the van, soaking up the sun in a hot parking lot, just voraciously wolfing down this chicken. Bird bones and crispy batter bits would fly, while I made gluttonish grunts and moans and gasped for breath between mouthfuls.

One time, in Brevard NC, I pulled into the neighboring gas station and ate while Blue Man drank. I was just about finished ravaging and slobbering over my hot hunk o' chicken, and I looked up to see a horse staring at me. It was in a trailer, about eight feet away, with its head sticking out the side opening, and it was riveted on my eating display, probably mortified that my fellow humans would have said that I was "eating like a horse."

As I burped up the ghost of the ghashtly chick-sal from Florence, it occurred to me that my last real meal on Road Romp '04 had been the Burger and FF at Jerome Palace, waaaaaay back in Arizona. Even at the 'Topes game in Albuquerque, I just had one slice o' 'za.

I am never a big eater on ramacks. That, actually, is a prerequisite of the ramack. With hour upon hour of sedentary life, just sunk into the cushy driver's seat and watching the world go by, it's wise not to take in too many calories. Neither the occasional 10" movement of the right leg from gas to brake or vice versa, nor the casual shift of the right arm to negotiate a bend, burns many calories. Hikes and runs do, but the duration of those activities is dwarfed by the time spent just fat-assin' behind the wheel.

Road Romp '04 figured to be almost 8400 miles. Take that 50 MPH figure that I always use to calculate driving time on a roadtrip, and cipher it into that total. It comes out to 168. That's 168 hours spent virtually inert in Moby's throne. If that number – 168 – sounds familiar, it may be because 168 is the number of hours in a week (24 x7). So, on this 19-day trip, I would be spending the equivalent of **one full week** sitting stock-still. Not even astronauts do that.

So, if you can't burn the cal's, don't take 'em in.

Well, that's the noble rationale anyway. I still guzzle down a good number of liquid cal's in that fortnight.

But the other reason for culinary austerity is money. Compromise is at the very heart of a ramack. Basically, there is gas expense and "entertainment" expense. Gas is gas, and entertainment includes souvenirs, National Park entrance fees, the occasional baseball game, and miscellaneous small diversions that pop up along the way. To balance that out, I cut corners on motels and food. There is an unwritten budget in my head, and if I were to eat at restaurants every night, I'd have to deny myself any souvenir shirts or hats or posters, and take a pass on those occasional baseball games.

Moby and all his predecessors – Blue Man, Rover, Max, Spuds, the Terp, and the Roadhouse – have saved me thousands of dollars on motel rooms over the years. I estimate that I have spent about 260 days "on the road" since Richie and I launched the Roadhouse on the Boston-to-Denver excursion in '82. Of those 260 nights, I bet fewer than 20 have been spent in motels. Motel rooms might have averaged out somewhere around \$50 a night – some fleabaggers in dinky towns would have been less, especially in the 80's, but some urban stays in New York, LA, New Orleans, Denver, Las Vegas or Seattle certainly would have been more. But if \$50 would have been the average, then my van have saved me \$12,000 in motel costs.

Sometimes, I've kept detailed accounting of those things in the Notbook, and it's been fun seeing how little I spent on food and lodging. Adding up the gas is the down side of such things, but that's the trade-off, isn't it? Low gas mileage and sleep for free, or high mileage and pay out the butt for motel rooms? You know my answer.

Also, of those 260 days, I could count on one hand the number of times I ate in a real restaurant. I'd have to use each finger multiple times, though, since there were probably about 40 such meals. And that means a real meal, not a fish samich and fries on the fly at a BK take-out window. But, still, don't envision linen tablecloths, candles, and five forks either. My "meals" are usually at the bar, and usually involve no appetizer, salad, or dessert: a cheeseburger or a chicken sandwich, or a pizza, or chicken fingers, or maybe a chicken parm if I'm feeling really extravagant (recurring chicken theme, you'll notice), and a tasty brew to cleanse the palate. Those meals are usually \$20-25, so up to \$30 with tip, but that's as high as it ever goes, and that's with plenteous palate cleansing. So, my foody frugality has saved me another \$5,000 or so over the years.

But food expense is something I don't even count, other than the fact that I have to bring cash to cover it. If I stayed at home, I'd be eating every day, and probably more than I do when I'm on the road. I'd be grilling up burgers, chowing pizzas, grabbing sandwiches and chicken and fast food for lunch, and treating myself to Hard Rock Café Grilled Chicken Salads, and, even better, the Thursday night Turkey-'n'-Fixins dinner at PT's Late Night. I'm sure the overall expenditure would be about the same.

So, for this ramack, I would end up spending \$1180 on gas and \$320 on lodging. That's \$1500 total for 19 days on the road, or a tidy \$78.95 per day. Not bad.

Are people from Alabama Alabamans or Alabamians? Or Alabamites? Alabamists? Alablammoes?

I passed the Jesse Owens Park & Museum near Moulton, and ended up arriving in downtown Birmingham at around 11:00 pm. It's not an inspiring city. I'm not sure if it would be more inspiring by day or not. Sometimes a skyline that is illuminated from within is more

pleasing than a skyline that is illuminated from without. I suspected that would be the case here.

I had a vague plan to see if I could find the bar that Marc haunts, and see if he would happen to be out reveling this night. I was pretty sure he would be, knowing Marc. He had told me the name of the place, but apart from that, I was on my own.

A quick 411 call got me the number, and soon I was getting the address and general directions from an odd-sounding dude. Sounded like a mixture of redneck and drag queen.

I found it, and an odd and eclectic place it was. The Quest Club – or just Quest to those in the know -- was what it was called. Instead of the standard “cover charge,” you actually had to become a “member” of this “club”. The membership fee was just a few bucks – less than most self-respecting urban nightclubs would charge – and it entitled you to a “preferred rate” on subsequent visits.

For New York or L.A. or Montreal, or even for Rochester or Key West, this place was nothing too whizbang woohoo, but I suppose for B’ham it was the bulldog’s nipples. The front room looked like your classic dingy, old wood saloon bar. Not the rich, deep, polished wood with brass fittings that might be in some nice establishments, mind you; picture the color of a 40-year-old, unpainted 2x4, and now your color coding is more on target. The patrons – I mean, members – at the bar didn’t look a whole lot better than the bar itself. There was nothing urban about the “club” so far. It was just plain hick underbelly. And that was not what Marc had described.

So, I sauntered through to the back room, and was suddenly amid loud dance music, flashing and spinning lights, black-painted walls and ceilings, and quite a few of the bizarre generation X of central Alabama. The floor was vibrating, the shadowy human shapes were squirming and gyrating on the dance floor, and the backlighting behind the bars made the booze bottles shine like beacons. This was much more what I had pictured.

I wandered around and there was no sign of Marc. It was a very mixed crowd. Quite a blend of straight, gay, trannies and whatever from 18 to, well, me. I was there, and it was late enough that there would have been no point seeking another place, so I procured a Tanqueray & Tonic and settled in for some good people watching near the back corner of the bar.

It was a pretty entertaining place, all in all, and, as usual, my cowboy hat attracted some conversations. Nothing too racy or anything, just like, “Hey, cowboy, where you from?” by someone who had come up to my end of the bar to order a drink.

Just before midnight, I recruited the young pair that came up to order drinks – I think it was a gay guy and lesbian, but who knows? -- motioned the bartender over, and said, “In one minute, it will be my birthday, how about the four of us do a shot, on me.”

The two were all for it. The barkeep laughed, “You can buy them a shot if you want, but me and the birthday boy quaff *au gratis*.” Are you kidding me?? An Alabama dive alternoclub barkeep saying “quaff au gratis”??? Fuckin’ A we do! Four shots of Goldschlager, please. Fill ‘em up and throw ‘em back, boys ‘n’ girls. Mmmm-HMMMM, nice and toasty warm. Love that stuff. We clinked and nodded and went out own ways mentally. I kept an casual eye on the mismatched pair, and, sure enough, she eventually went off with some multi-pierced woman, and he ended up dancing with some purple-haired dude. It’s all good. Boats float to whatever.

It got be about 2-ish, and, even though the people watching was still very good, leaving was seeming like a crisp idea. I had been there for a quick two hours, but Key West was not getting any closer by staying here. Once your eyes get accustomed to Quest’s lighting, you see what a cheapo paint job and backroom warehouse kind of place it really is. Probably a bit grim in full light.

My final T&T was down to its last T when I saw Marc come in from the saloon. He looked a bit shabby. I snuck up behind him and tapped him on the arm. "Oh, hi," he said, as if he saw me here every night. No *What the hell are YOU doing here?* or anything like that. He was in some melancholy funk about some personal stuff. Want to hear all the details?? Nahh, I wouldn't do that to Marcus Alabamus.

It was about 3:30 when I bid Marc farewell, wished him luck in his various situations, and got back to the Mobe. Quest's parking lot did not seem like a great place to hang. It was in the urban jungle, and the neighborhood, if you could call it that, made me nervous. I decided it would be in the best interests of my vehicle (and its driver) to skedaddle on down the highway for a bit, and snuggle down in some rest area.

Well, as it turned out, the first rest area on I-65 was some 50 miles south of the city.

Hence, it was about 4:30 a.m. on Saturday 6/26 when I finally called off the chase. A long day and night, covering 633 miles, but at least I was a little closer to home.



