

ROAD ROMP 2004

Day 15: Thursday, 24 June 2004

FOCK 1: Nothing To See Here

As Day 15 dawned, I snoozed. There was no snooze alarm to pester me into alertness, so I slumbered the early morning hours away. A long and uneventful day lay ahead – the stovepipe of stupid Texas, the fat belly of Oklahoma, and the west half of bland Arkansas. I felt no urgency to begin this trek, and I languished in Moby's boudoir as the sun climbed higher.

But at 9:12, I shook off downy sleep, death's counterfeit, and pointed Moby east. We reached Tucumcari – Little Feat's 2nd stop, and my 4th of their 4 – before 10:00. Just east of that city, I passed another bike racer. Probably the same one as the night before. Poor bastard. So far to go. Such a long plain to cross.

With just an hour of my own driving done, Moby had another coughing fit. I had to pull off I-40 and drag him, choking and sputtering, into a petrol station. Great. Yet another woe. So now every little shake (even the ones that were already there) gave me trepidation.

At 10:36, a full 6051 miles into the waning ramack, I was back in stupid Texas, and suddenly it was 11:36. Back in Central Daylight Time. Oh yay. Another hour of my life squirted away like a watermelon seed. That is so discouraging.

But, heyo heyo, the road was smootho concreto, and the skyo was perfect summer bluo, with high wispo cloudso. The first few miles of Texas Interstate were flanked by open rangeland. Endless wide fields of tilled brown ground stretched in all directions save the south, where the blank plain was broken by a single tree, about twenty feet tall. Somehow that one tree made the fields look even emptier. Had it been nothing but the simple earth, that would have been just the way it was, but the tree was a striking reminder of what it could be. I felt empathy for the tree; it was alone amid the void, just like me.

Damn, what a morose thing to say.

As the blah miles rolled away, I mused about how much easier ramacks would be if your home base were some place like St. Louis. From that hub, you could spoke out in any direction and reach your destination in three days, tops. Starting and finishing in Key West adds lots of miles and hours to any trip:

- St. Louis to Boston = 1200. Key West to Boston = 1650. Two 600-mile/12-hour days instead of three 550/11's. Kelzo, Bobby and I did the former in a 20-hour span once. Cliff and I did Boston to Sarasota in 24 once, but that's a good 7 hours short of KW.
- St. Louis to Seattle = 2100. Key West to Seattle = 3500. That would be three 700-mile/14-hour days vs. five of them, or almost six 600/12's.
- St. Louis to Los Angeles = 1850. Key West to L.A. = 2900. Three 617-mile/12.5-hour days instead of four 725-mile/14.5-hour grinds.
- St. Louis to Key West = 1400. Key West to St. Louis = 1400.

Actually, that last one is easier from Key West, since you gain an hour by crossing into Central Time instead of losing one going the other way.

Doing four straight days of 700 miles would be nuts. That's putting too much priority on the destination, and not enough on the ride. And the ride, on a true ramack, is just as much the vacation as the destinations are. Generally speaking, even 600 is too much; it's a job, not a pleasure, when it gets to that point. That kind of day is fine when crossing what some would term "the wasteland," but multiple successive 6's is overkill. In 1800 miles, here has to be

something to stop and relish along the way, even if it's just some lame touristy town, or some dinky little dot on the Rand, or a short but pithy chat with a roadside bovine.

With this trip's primary attractions behind me, plenty of time to kill before the one remaining item on the To-Do list, and not much at all to seize my attention, I began to concoct some more adjustments to what was left of The Plan.

Though it had undergone quite a few tucks and snips, The Plan was still pretty much on the mark. This was, in fact, June 24th and I was, in fact, in Texas, just as Plan A had dictated. BUT, Plan A also had Moby scurrying straight across Arkansas, Tennessee, and the Carolinas to deposit that phantom Nate guy home in Charleston, SC. Though I could still have gone that route and asked him how his flight home was, I had a couple other options in mind.

Option One: Natchez Trace Parkway. If you know my ramacking history, you know my passion for this road. It saved my sanity on Independence Day in '00 after that piece of ghetto trash broke into Blue Man. NTP took me to and from the Big Easy in '98. Patrick, Neal, and I drove wounded Max the whole length of it in '92. Alf and I did half of it in '87 on the way to Dallas and Utah. And it was the green dots that made that road the destination – not merely the route -- for the Spuds Run with Dugg in '86 that culminated with Eb's "looky thar" and Mr. Hobson's collapse at the batting cage in Tupelo.

If I find myself anywhere near the NTP, I take it. There would be time, if the timing was right. There were limited hours till that Reality Point where work and routine would resume and this fantasy life of traveling about with my dear friends Whim and Fancy would draw to a close for another year (or more). I hoped I could squeeze in at least a couple of daylight hours on my favorite road. It was not a terribly illogical route (partway) home from Memphis, which was where I was aimed, but it wouldn't have flashed up on Mapquest either.

Still, given the blandness of the current route – I-40 across the Texas stovepipe – just the thought of the lush green of the roadside lawn and majestic trees made me smile. I even sped up a little, trying to bring it that much closer. There was still close to 1000 miles (!) to cover before reaching that coveted road, so even if I averaged just 1 MPH faster, I'd gain about 20 extra minutes (and 17 extra miles) of daylight there.

I have to admit that there is a temptation to synopsise Day 15 -- "Texas was flat and boring. So was Oklahoma. Arkansas was no picnic either." – but I'm trying to recreate the feel of the whole trip, so the highlights share page-space with the lowlights. And this day figured to be a lowlight. How could it not be? I had no Points Of Interest lined up. Not one. There were no side roads or National Monuments or even State Parks along the route. The only cities were Amarillo and Oklahoma City. Ugh.

But you make what you can out of it, right?

Right.

About an hour after re-entering The Lone Star State, I passed a familiar rest area. It was on the opposite side of the highway, but I recognized it immediately as the place where Alf and I had stopped to take a sunset break and cook up a couple of wieners in '87. The rest area itself was not noteworthy at all, but there were two aspects that made it memorable:

We had recently roared westbound past Amarillo, hell bent for New Mexico. We thought about checking out the famous Cadillac Ranch, but when we missed the exit, we took that as a sign to just keep on going, and we just kept on going.

It was still 60 miles or so to reach the border, and we pulled into the last westbound picnic area in Texas at 9:05, just as the sun was setting. We hung out to stretch our legs and try to snap a couple of sunset photos.

It turned out to be one of the nicest sundown shots I've ever caught, complete with myriad hues of gold, a few meandering clouds, some silhouetted sage, and even a strand of barbed wire running right through the half-sunk sun. I don't often title my photos, but this one earned the simple, "Texas." It was how I wanted to remember the Lone Star State.

We were not the only people in that Rest Area, though. Oh, no, no, no. A decent-sized U-Haul truck pulled in just after the sun dropped from view. It parked at a table near the far end. A man and a woman got out of the cab. They had swarthy



complexions. The man was on the thin side and the woman looked like she might've been a few months preggy. They walked directly to the back of the truck and unfastened the roll-up door. As soon as it began to rise, a dog sprang out, eager as hell to go piss and crap somewhere. That seemed pretty cruel to me: making a dog ride in the back of a closed-up truck.

But then the **kids** climbed out! Four of 'em: two boys, two girls, aged ten down to four, we guessed. Four kids and a dog. In a U-Haul. In mid-summer. I was speechless. I still am.

We cooked up our delicious supper on the portable propane appliance: seven bow-wows. Grilled woofers are the best woofers. Boiled ones, like Fenway Franks, or most other ballpark wieners, just aren't as good. Even Hot Dog Annie's, back in Paxton, Mass, doesn't give you the crisp and black edges, with the juice oozing out the sliced flanks, and that singed flavor as you chomp into it. You don't even need condiments when the doggie is grilled right.

Condiments are funny anyway. First of all, is it "ketchup" or "catsup"? Is there a difference? Well, come to find out that, no, there really is no difference. The word "ketchup" actually comes from the Malay word for "fish sauce," *kechap*. Pretty weird that we stole that word and attached it to a tomato puree. And "catsup" is just a bastardization of the previous bastardization. The bastards.

Mustard or Mayo? Is there a more divisive demographic than that? I know very few people who say, "ehhhh, either is fine" about that choice. It's about as split as Democrat/Republican, or Red Sox/Yankees, or morning-person/night-person. You get to some real hard-core, fundamental, cut-of-your-jib, essence when you get down to this. And Lord help you if you are a mayo man and you go to a mustard man's picnic, because chances are that he's said "screw those mayo freaks, I'm packin' 'stard only." Of course, he might bring three or four types of mustard: yellow mustard, brown mustard, spicy mustard, and custard mustard. Custard mustard cannot be trusted; you might get busted, or at least flustered.

I am, and always have been, a mayo man. My first taste of mustard as a little shaver turned me off from it immediately. That ravenous big bite of my much anticipated ham samich

at Aunt Peg's lake house just suddenly slapped my palate and stopped my munch momentum cold. *Ughhh, what's wrong with my samich???* And you can't even scrape it off because it seeps into the bread, leaving its bitter taste behind.

And another problem, I think, was my neighbor Johnny's referring to it as "mouse turds." I mean, I knew it wasn't, duh, but that was a tough enough image to shake to keep me from giving it another chance.

Mayo, on the hand, was truly love at first bite. Being as bored as a six-year-old can get with bologna – actually, "baloney" to me at that age – samiches, I took a chance on mayo. Lettuce too. And Mom lightly toasted it. In an age of Welch's grape jelly samiches on Wonder bread, this constituted a major culinary project. One taste, with that nice mayo tang, and the light crunch of the lettuce, and the still-warm bread, and I became a mayo man for life.

To be fair, though, the word "mayo" is a generalization. What I was really weaned on was Miracle Whip Salad Dressing. We Whippers know the difference. There is a refined smoothness to The Whip that Hellmann's and the other true mayonnaises just didn't have. I never once used MWSD on a salad, though. Ugh, please. But mixed with tuna or chicken or turkey, or just spread on bread to caress my meat, The Whip can't be beat.

Rene, the chef at the Harp & Bard in Norwood MA, once absolutely astounded me by *making* mayonnaise. I probably shouldn't have been so astounded, but it was early in life – I was only a sophomore in college – and I had never had the opportunity to ponder where mayonnaise came from. It was a fundamental food: eggs were eggs, meat was meat, veggies were veggies, mayo was mayo. So, when one of the waitresses came into the dish room and announced, "We're outa mayo, Rene," I, as barback and designated gopher, expected to be sent on a store run to get a big jar o' 'naise. But, instead, Rene, a good-natured, stocky and powerful man whose Austrian accent was Schwarzeneggeresque, [it's a good bet that that will be the longest word (20 letters) of these Blings] simply hefted himself up and casually replied, "OK, I go make some."

"*What?!?*" I ejaculated.

"What?" Rene asked back.

"You're gonna **make** mayonnaise??"

"Ya. Course," he smirked.

"You mean, like, *real* mayo, not some artificial shit?"

"Ya. *Real* mayo," he chuckled. "Where you think it come from? Cows?"

I had to admit that I had never thought about it. Mayo was just always in a jar when I saw it. It was never in pieces. It belonged somewhere on the Periodic Table of Elements: Mayonnaisium (My), right between Manganese (Mn) and Molybdenum (Mo).

Up to that point, the bar and restaurant staff had always regarded me as "the brain" of the place because, instead of wasting my down time on cigarette breaks or watching TV in the bar, I'd use it to read another Shakespeare play, or to rough draft my next paper. To me, it made more sense to do that stuff at work, where I was being paid, than to waste my free time on such things at school when I could be boozin' or chillin'. Anyway, the Origin Of Mayo thing dented my brainiac image a good bit.

Pickles don't do it for me, condiment-wise, unless they're sliced really really thin. Then, I'll have two, but no more.

So, obviously, I won't do relish.

Horse Radish? I can't even get past the name. Animal? Vegetable? WTF?

When you pile all that crap all over your food, what are you doing besides hiding the taste of the meat? I know, I know, spare me the "it enhances the taste" bushwa. It changes

the taste bigtime. Give me a grilled hot dog with none 'o the fixins, any day. That taste needs no help.

Alf and I chowed our seven woofies and made ready for New Mexico. To us, though, the change had already happened, regardless of what the map said. Two miles back, the flat Texas plains had abruptly changed to a ragged landscape of valleys and mesas. I recall welcoming the variety.

Which, of course, meant that I was nowwww about to be leaving that variety behind as I headed back east along the same course in RR04.

There was a sign for Vega, which I assume was a town, not the constellation. Back in the 50's and 60's, Vega, like Holbrook, was a thriving place fueled by the road-happy travelers on the famous Route 66. The Interstate system dealt it a cruel blow, however, and just a shell of it remains. Towns like this used to be places to stop and check out. You were passing right through anyway, so clever owners of ice cream shops or motels or saloons would find a way catch your eye and give you cause to pause. Now, those towns are mere pit stops: you buzz in, get gas and a McMuffin, and buzz out.

Much of the former Route 66 now lies squashed under the wider and thicker crust of asphalt known as I-40. Traces of 66 still pop up through some southern California towns between Barstow and Los Angeles, and it has that desolate loop that escapes I-40's tyranny for 100-something miles in western Arizona, but from Flagstaff through Albuquerque, Amarillo, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, and Chicago, only a few wheezing Interstate-side crossroads are left as "historic Route 66 towns." The title helps a little, but only with the leisurely and nostalgic travelers, not with the "we have to get to L.A." types.

It was The Road in its day, but that day is gone, Ron.