


A Road Warrior's Last Hurrah



A Traveling Trainer Retires His Rucksack, But Only After a Classic Car Road Trip

 By Frank Whyte

Installment Four: The Road Leads Home

This is part four of Frank Whyte's cross-country odyssey. A frequent business traveler, Whyte recently found his tether tightened by the arrival of a late-in-life child. His wife granted one last wish: a solo coast-to-coast road trip in a classic car.

The conditions? Whyte had to buy his "California car" on eBay for no more than \$2500, and he has to sell it upon his arrival in Maryland. In this final installment, Whyte finds his way back to Maryland.

Published online through TSOD's
[Road Warrior's Digest](#)
As seen in [The Frederick News-Post](#)

The Grand Canyon is an awe-inspiring sight too magnificent for words. As such, I didn't go there, ensuring that I wouldn't have to describe it.

Instead, I ponied-up \$10 to tour the Petrified Forest National Park. Interestingly, there's no forest there, but there are rocks that resemble tree segments, owing to the fact that minerals formed in ancient tree segments and solidified into rocks that, at the risk of redundancy, resemble tree segments. Regrettably, with three academic degrees to my name, this is as clearly as I am capable of describing the science associated with petrified wood.

The first one of these specimens is just fascinating to behold, but one's enthusiasm tends to taper-off pretty quickly. There are just so many log-like rocks you can stare at, since they don't do anything other



than sit there. (I bought a petrified tree chunk in the gift shop for my wife, and she still hasn't taught it to do any tricks, as opposed to the Mexican Jumping Beans I bought for myself, which were a wise entertainment investment.)

I moved on to the Painted Desert, which is at the northern edge of the Petrified Forest. It is stunningly beautiful. (Now you know why I didn't even *try* to describe The Grand Canyon.) I stopped at several Painted Desert overlooks, some of which featured a Park Service photograph of the view from the overlook, the need for which probably should have been apparent.

Back on I-40 eastbound, I realized that, if there's one thing the Southwest isn't lacking, it's Casinos and Authentic Native American Art Centers. At each of dozens of interstate exits throughout Arizona and New Mexico, travelers are warned that they are about to pass-up the very last and very best casino and/or handicraft outlet

in the solar system. Some of these billboards are real screamers, their creators having attended the same school of subtlety as the deviants who design those flashing Internet pop-up ads.

It's frustrating that some of the best scenery in America is overgrown with billboards or polluted by graffiti. Even in the Petrified Forest, where preservation policies are so ardent that arriving tourists receive a handy form to squeal on transgressors, smooth stone surfaces often are marred by chiseled gibberish. I overheard some German tourists commenting on how silly Americans were to mutilate their national magnificence. Pride compelled me to argue; the facts prevented me.

At Tucumcari, New Mexico, my eBay Chevy threw its only tantrum. After a long travel day through some hot and hostile terrain, the car overheated. I bought an outpost gas station's last two jugs of \$12 coolant. (I chose to believe that this was some first-rate vintage-year coolant, not that they were gouging people who critically needed the stuff.)

After the car and I both cooled-off a bit, we continued east, where we enjoyed the journey's only rainfall. An unseasonably cool mist drizzled over the car for a hundred miles or so, as if the heavens were assuaging the car's fever. Looking back, this sort of good fortune was my passenger for the entire journey.

What the Texas panhandle lacks in scenic interest, it overcomes with an array of spectacles best reeled-off by a mustachioed barker in a candy-stripe blazer. Here you'll find the Leaning Water Tower of Texas, The Cadillac Ranch, The Western Hemisphere's Largest Cross, the Devil's Rope (barbed wire) Museum, and, of course, the Big Texan Steak Ranch. You've heard tell (note the cowboy lingo) of Amarillo's Big Texan in movies and on TV; it's the original home of the four-and-a-half-pound steak. If you eat this entire zip-code-sized region of a cow, and presumably agree to pay for your own coronary angioplasty, the steak is free. If you're reading this, doc, I didn't try.



Throughout the journey, I encountered several Route 66 museums. I tried stopping at one, but there was a labor dispute going on nearby, and three very large, very surly picketers came and stood in my intended parking space. I am not one to be intimidated. In fact, I was so insulted that they thought I could be intimidated that I left immediately.

The innkeeper at the Wigwam Motel described the Clinton, Oklahoma Route 66 Museum as the best of the lot, but I missed that one, too, arriving in town hours after they rolled-up the sidewalks.

My driving nights extended later and later, as I'd really come to miss my wife and daughter. What began as a journey of independence revealed that I wasn't altogether dissatisfied tethered to a playpen and a pig puppet. Increasingly, I recognized that it's where I belonged.

I certainly didn't belong at some of the venerable motor lodges I chose. I'm not criticizing tourist-class motels, I'm just pointing-out that the people who stayed next door to me in Oklahoma did a tune-up on their motorcycle, in their room, at 3 a.m. Anybody who's ever complained about airport noise should try snoozing while sloshed bikers jam box wrenches into the gullet of a discordant Harley.

The next morning, I made a bleary eyed but surprisingly intriguing stop at the Will Rogers museum in Claremore, Oklahoma. Through theaters and well-crafted exhibits, this memorial showcases the genius of America's foremost rope-trick philosopher. Among Will Rogers' witticisms: "Lettin' the cat outta the bag is a whole lot easier'n puttin' it back."



Continuing on to Missouri, I bid adieu to Route 66. I had either driven or paralleled America's Main Street for more than 1800 miles. But at the silver arch, the Mother Road veered north to Chicago, and I angled east, toward home. My new conduit was U.S. Route 50.



In her day, Route 66 was a pin-up girl, what with her neon lights, her Friday-night TV show, and -- could we possibly forget -- her own theme song. Meanwhile, her plain-Jane cousin, Route 50, stayed home tending to chores.

Route 50 is a fusion of asphalt and hairpins that's delivered public servants to their DC duties, groaned under the incessant stampedes of West Virginia coal trucks, and brought home the bacon for hog herders on Cincinnati's east and west flanks. When you think of Route 50, you don't think about getting your kicks. You think about loading sixteen tons, and whadda'ya get...

This highway must've kept a low profile in the 50's, when most roads of consequence were kneaded into featureless four-lane slabs. East of the big river, old fifty is largely what it's always been: A workhorse highway speckled with fairgrounds and grade schools and speed traps; a link between farms and towns, workers and factories, retirees and VFW posts. Although historically rich and continuously vital, Route 50 never elbowed her way into the limelight. Take that, Route 66. I mean, um, Interstate 40.

A great stop is Parkersburg, West Virginia, where Route 50 crosses the Ohio River. Irish aristocrat Harman Blennerhassett built his colonial mansion on an Ohio River island just downstream. There, he and Aaron Burr conspired to establish a new nation in the western wilderness. Their plan ended in



disgrace, presumably because nobody wanted to settle in a place called “Blennerhassettburrlandia.”

[News-Post Editors: Please note that I should get at least three word credits for “Blennerhassettburrlandia.”] [Times two.]

Both Blennerhassett and Burr were accused of treason, and their remaining days were tumultuous. The mansion was abandoned, and eventually destroyed by fire.

The State has constructed a replica of the mansion on Blennerhassett Island, and tourists are ferried there aboard sternwheeler boats for a nominal fee. Later, those tourists can return to the mainland for an outrageous fee (favorite joke of the sternwheeler pilots). It's a vivid page of history, and well worth the price of admission.

Continuing east on Route 50, you'll eventually reach Grafton, the childhood home of Anna Jarvis, who created (and later lamented creating) Mother's Day. Once a railroad mega-hub, complete with a high-rise luxury hotel, this virtual ghost town now is best known as a resting place for America's heroes. I stopped at both of the national cemeteries there to thank some folks on behalf of my seven-month-old daughter. The men and women resting near Grafton, West Virginia did some amazing things for my daughter.



From this point east, don't plan on making any time on Route 50. Twenty miles past Grafton comes the famous switchback curve, where you'll swear that you complete several full circles before the asphalt serpent slings you out the other side. This curve is famous enough to have its own postcards.

Down a crinkled slope from the big bend is Cool Springs, one of those bygone-era roadside attractions seemingly contrived by Mr. Haney from *Green Acres*. This is utopia for anyone in need of varnish-engulfed cedar knick-knacks, velvet artwork, or outsized flyswatters featuring riotously comical quips: “GIANT SWATTER for HOUSE FLIES and SPOUSE LIES!” Stop, please, the laughter, it's killin' me. And don't get me started on those half cups of coffee.



The contraptions in Cool Springs' metallic garden are racing to see which will fully dissolve into the West Virginia clay first, and some have “tetanus shot” written all over them. But this is one of the few places where you can poke around inside a derelict caboose, fiddle with the controls of an old steam engine, and get goosed by a real goose, all without violating any posted policies.



The familiar greenery really boosted my desire to get home. I bypassed some great attractions, including Davis, West Virginia. Driving through Davis years ago, my wife noticed that a few of the dilapidated storefronts in this Appalachian village displayed spray-painted signs publicizing local talent pageants. “This must be the theater district,” she concluded.

I departed Route 50 at Route 220, another circuitous but scenic byway. This is one of the east coast's better autumn leaf peeping paths. It took me to Cumberland and I-68, where I'd finish my journey on four-lane highways.

Or, so I thought. At Hancock, I encountered a Sunday afternoon traffic jam, the likes of which have become too familiar to our region. Tailed by a flock of bikers, I ducked off the Interstate to finish the trip on U.S. 40. With my arm out the window of my '71 ride, and the Harleys in the rearview, I hummed Steppenwolf. The wind on my face was the feeling of freedom: Confirmation that I controlled a car, an itinerary, a route, and a purpose.

So there: I did it. I ripped free of my day-to-day confines for one last dance with individualism. I might have really enjoyed it if I hadn't missed my little girl so much.



It was a memorable trip. But after 2,788 miles through a dozen states, my journey of independence delivered me to the most captivating sight I'll ever encounter: A big gummy smile.

FOR SALE: 1971 Chevrolet Nova. California car, just driven east...

Frank Whyte is Chief Curriculum Officer for [Training Services On Demand, Inc.](#)