

# CROSSING USA

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It is June, 1999, and Catherine and I have been attending a conference in Denver. Now is the time to do what I have always wanted to do – drive across the USA. I arranged to pick up a hire car at Denver Airport.

The first car we are given is a Mitsubishi Lancer 1600. However, on switching the engine on a notice flashes up: “This car is need of an oil change”. Not what I want at the beginning of a long trip. The second car has a jammed boot. The third has no licence plates. We are assured this does not matter. Maybe not in Colorado, but I imagine it would begin to matter in at least one of the dozen States we would be travelling through. By now they have run out of cars, so we settle for the first car anyway, 1½ hrs after arriving at the depot. I am assured the message only means the gas tank cap hadn’t been tightened when it was last filled, which translates into the need for an oil change. We learn something every day. The desk informs me: “Man, when I first saw you come in, I said Uh-oh, here’s trouble.” Now, if I had said that when I first saw him, I would be arrested. The guy is black.

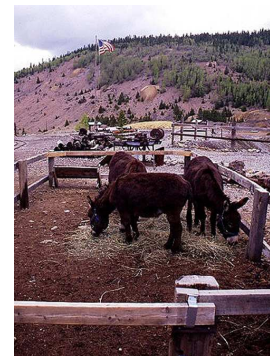


The car was gutless, the slowest thing on the road in mountain country. Our first stop is Breckenridge, billed in the tourist literature as an old gold mining town, an unusual way of describing a very up-market ski resort. Our hotel, Tannenbaum, is okay, nicely situated beside the river. There are several restaurants, we decide on a simple pasta meal, at Rasta Pasta. It is as awful as the name itself, pasta with a soul-food flavour.

The old goldmine is a few miles from Breckenridge, at Silverstone. It is fairly unremarkable except for two huge black St Bernards and some mini-donkeys in a corral. We follow a road to the mountains to the north side of the highway. En route we stop off at a little walking trail to a look-out over the lake, where hundreds of squirrels dart around your feet. Driving round the lake edge, I notice a striking line of cliff-top high



houses: what a photo. But nowhere to stop, so I attempt to photograph the houses while driving, the which causes Catherine to become rather agitated. In the mountains, fog and rain descend and stay with us so we don’t see a thing, which is an awful pity, especially at



Rollings Pass (11,600 ft), judging from what the guide books tell us.

We take the train to Pike's Peak, rather than force our weakling car up that fearsome drive, which is a Grand Prix route. While waiting at the ticket office, we hear a loud monologue addressed to a 10 year old girl. It is very interesting. The child is instructed: "Do not look at my feet when you speak to me. I shall ignore you if you don't look at me when you speak...."

Wonderfully they sit behind us on the train; out comes my notebook. The tour guide announces a stop to look at some item on view.

"Why are we stopping?"

"If you had paid attention, you would know why we are stopping here. Listen carefully when anyone tries to tell you something. Don't expect me to tell you afterwards"

"I don't like this ride."

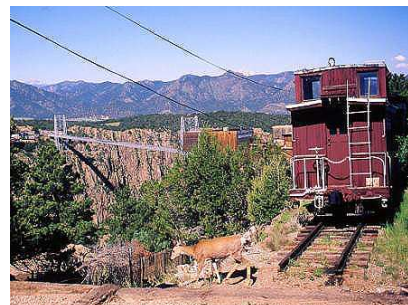
"Do not complain. Remember, you did not like camping, but when you got there you thought it was real neat. So don't complain now. You don't know what you want..."

Husband and wife begin cuddling. "Why don't you two lie down and do it?"

Another passenger, obese, his black shirt proclaiming "Rocky Mountain Gun Owner" across his chest, is tattooed on every visible square inch of flesh. Opposite us are two pink whales, father and son. Across the corridor sits more obesity. They pay for their years of indulgence when we get to the top, 14,000 ft up, where they waddle around in pain, the cold, thin air unable to fuel their enormous bodies. The views on the way up and at the top are stunning. Our guide tells us one view in particular inspired Mary Baker Eddy to write *Hymn to America*. Huh? I thought Mary Baker Eddy founded the cult of Christian Science. Google later informs me I am correct. *Hymn to America* has several authors, none of whom is Mary Baker Eddy, who did indeed found Christian Science.



That night we return to Canon City, to the cheap but clean Canon Inn, which drums up custom by drawing on celebrity: "Goldie Hawn slept in this room" a plaque on one door proclaims but



omits to say with whom. The major showpiece here is the nearby Royal Gorge, a mini Grand Canyon, with sky tram, inclinator, and a stunning bridge over a 1,000 ft drop. Underneath flows the fast running Colorado River, with yelling white water rafters carried rapidly along. On the way back to Canon City is Buckskin Joe's,

the set for *Cat Ballou* and other Westerns. Quite photogenic, nice shots of old wagons and horses against the mountains in the background, but the place itself as corny as hell, with very badly acted *High Noon*-type sketches on the hour, as on the last page.

Colorado now becomes endless plains and desert, but not as picturesque as Arizona



desert with its brilliant flowers and three-pronged cacti (as you may see this website: *On Guns and Testosterone*). We stop-over at Lamar, and sample for the first time the Days/Comfort/Sleep/Econo-Inn chain, here good value at \$63. We have dinner in the Best Western restaurant opposite and begin to learn the rules of dining out in the USA:

servings are huge, medium rare means raw, an entrée is the main course, and a green salad must be eaten before the main course will be served. A rule we don't learn until our last days in the US is that for \$1 extra, they will provide a plate and cutlery so that one huge entrée becomes two large mains for ordinary people.

We are now in Kansas, and the rich mountain scenery is a memory. Here it is flat and dull agricultural country, corn, wheat and cattle. The farms seem very prosperous, unlike similar country in Australia. This is because these mid-Western farmers get full government protection in the name of free trade, whereas Australian farmers don't get government protection, also in the name of free trade since our free trade agreement with the USA.

Wichita marks the boundary between rural prosperity and poverty. Our target for the night is Fredona, but we bypass it on finding it is a dump of old cars, with bored looking people hanging outside their poor houses. Only rich farmers get government protection in the US.

We finally make Parsons before it is too dark, and find an acceptable Comfort Inn. The best restaurant in town we are told is The Silver Stockade, where we pay \$6.50 for the privilege of an enormous smorgasbord: soups, roasts, ribs, pasta, veg, cakes, ice-cream. American eating traditions must be a subtle plot to undermine the health of a nation. Nine years later, Australia has caught up with the US in the obesity stakes.

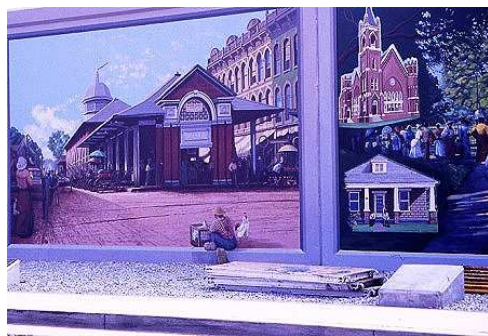
We cross the Missouri into Indiana and the country changes: rolling hills, forests, then flat plains again. The ever-present search for a toilet assumes major importance. In many towns the nearest to a public toilet is McDonalds. But at Cabool, desperate, not a McDonalds is in sight for once. We finally find a park with a toilet block. It is locked with a big padlock. There are council workmen nearby. I ask, bursting: "How do we get in?"

"I'll letcha in," a young guy says.

I ask the obvious, “Why are public toilets locked?”

“The kids smash ’em is why.”

We cross into Illinois at Cairo, which is a shambles of a place, the poverty and dirt are Third World; we can’t get out fast enough. North to Paducah, Quilt City, where we come across a huge motel complex, a Marriott Courtyard, an upmarket chain we hadn’t known before, but this one is cheap at \$79. Beef at O’Charleys just down the hill was fantastic, succulent tender, with good wine by the glass. Paducah is an historic old place on the Ohio River, very



heritage proud as the quilt-making centre of the US and with nice murals depicting the historical past but which don’t photograph very well. .

The map showed an alternative road east between two lakes, Kentucky and Barkley, but in fact the road is fringed with tall trees that completely block the view. Then we are in agricultural land, farms, prosperous, but not particularly interesting, giving way on slow Route 80 to acreages and some nice houses. I’m reminded of the inland of the Central Coast of NSW.

Here and at many times along the highways we notice truck lay-bys with signs like this one: “Girls! Girls! Girls! All naked!” outside a small shack. What goes on inside must be the stuff of fevered imaginations.

We have to get back on the freeway to make time, which takes us to London. Sleep Inn motel looked good so we booked in. However, a restaurant across the way was appallingly bad, “cajun” hake and “roasted” potato served by grim old ladies. We should have made a fuss about it, it was so bad, but we didn’t say anything; in the US, no tip is fuss enough.

“For spectacular views take the Daniel Boone Parkway through the heart of Kentucky to Manchester!” says our guide book. However, it looks more interesting on the map to drop off and take the side roads; we take Route 421 to Cumberland through very poor mining villages, which are picturesque in a grim sort of way. They remind me of poor Midlands England. We should have followed the guidebook.

Crossing the border into Virginia at Norton we make it to Lynchburg Comfort Inn, which looks great in the tourist guide and with restaurant, so we advance book. When we arrive, we find it is undergoing repairs and not very good at all. Nearby is an

Outback Steakhouse, a US chain, where crumbed and deep-fried onions are made to look like a pineapple, served with the inevitable ribs and prawns, presented as dinki-di aussie tucker.

Now we are in historic and pleasant country. The Civil War ended at Appotomox, which has some very nice old houses, and a good museum. Then to Richmond, the centre of the Civil War. Just out of downtown is Hospital Hill, where thousands of wounded were sent, and only 10% died. I find that hard to believe, after seeing the conditions and some surgical tools on exhibit. We see a film of the Civil War, which only made the whole thing quite inexplicable. In an attempt to explicate the inexplicable, we bought Stampff's *The Causes of the Civil War*, which only confounded matters more, and the lugubrious Ambrose Bierce's *Civil War Stories*, where emotion gains strong traction where logic doesn't.



Then to lovely Fredericksburg, where Washington's sister and aunt lived at Kenmore House. Finally, Washington itself, which is built in four quadrants, around Capitol Hill. We navigate to the right address but find ourselves inexplicably and infuriatingly lost in SW at the very street corner where the Marriott Courtyard should be. The sensation is like a sudden memory loss. A passer-by kindly explains the problem. Each quadrant is given the same streets and avenue: 1 - N St, A- X Ave. The



trick is to note the quadrant (SE, NW, NE, SW). The outer quadrants are poor and violent, but the Centre is showcase clean and very prosperous. We gingerly negotiate the battlefields of SW quadrant and find our nice Marriott and an excellent seafood restaurant, for which we have to queue for over an hour. The rich quadrants do very well indeed, clean, plush, America's showcase – but turn the corner and you will find America's filthy and dehumanising underbelly.

We take a Grayline Tour to tour Washington. It should include the White House, but doesn't; the consolation prize is Washington National Cathedral First stop is the Capitol, which houses the US Senate and the House of Representatives. The tour operators dump their busloads at the end of huge winding queue; only forty people are allowed in at a time. We pass the time listening to a thin man with prophet's beard, flapping cloak and a massive but unspecified grudge. He strides up and down our queue, arms upraised, ranting: "God will strike all politicians. He will take Senator Jess Hand and He will *shake* him like a fig tree in the wind!" Why God should want to do

such a thing to the hapless Senator Hand is unclear, but His prophet gets a round of polite applause when he finishes.

Now it's our turn to enter the Capitol. The security is stronger than at any airport. My guess is that this is not because security is a real risk – this was in Clinton's time, well



before 9/11 – but because, I think, we mostly foreign visitors are to be impressed by the power of the US at its mightiest; you might also read that as paranoia – theirs, not mine. We admire the splendid 1829 neo-Classic building and the little of its interior we are allowed to see. We enter the Rotunda but do not see the spiked hand of Peter Solomon on the steps – ah yes of course, Dan Brown wrote that some years later – and neither do we see other reputed wonders of the Capitol: the ghosts of several workers, a soldier who appears, salutes and disappears, the statues that come to life. Nor do we see

the top of the Washington Monument with the words *Laus Deo* written on top (according to the know-all Dan Brown anyway). We go to Ford's Theatre where Lincoln was shot. The emphasis, in the spiel and exhibits, is on specifics, the more bizarre the better: here Booth fell and broke his leg, the room opposite is where he was hidden, and – gasp – here is the *exact spot* in the box where Lincoln was shot. But just *why* did Booth attack Lincoln? What were the issues? None of that head-shit here, boy.

The National Archives displays more US paranoia. We queue to see the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, The Declaration of Independence, and in a display of internationalism, Magna Carta. While we queue to see these, on the side are some other documents, the most interesting a quote from Lincoln:

Upon the subject of education... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in." (9/3/1832)

To show us how important education is, we are taken to the Smithsonian Institute, a huge science complex. We are urged to see Washington's false teeth, Archie Bunker's beer can, and Evel Knievel's motor bike. At the National History Museum, we can see the biggest elephant ever shot, the biggest whale ever caught. The USA is a country that has its priorities straight. But in instead of taking part in this trivial pursuit, we spend our time outside, where there is an exhibition of food and arts and crafts from Romania, South Africa, and the State of Maine. The food and the handicrafts are interesting, but unfortunately we'd filled up on junk in the Smithsonian fast food hall.



Washington Cathedral, our compensation for not visiting the White House, looks strangely familiar. And so it should have; it was designed by architect George Frederick Bodley, who also designed St. David's Cathedral, Hobart, on a rather smaller scale. During our visit an orchestra, choir and soloists were rehearsing and they were top class. Washington Cathedral is famous for its music and concerts.

The Cathedral is our last stop for the day. We are dropped at the bus station and given contradictory instructions to pick up our hotel bus. A Frenchman is so angry he yells abuse for minutes at the driver for her inefficiency and poor attitude. We can only agree. Basically the tour was sloppily organised, the timing poor, with no attempt to be tourist friendly.

We drive North on our own next day, stopping at Washington's home at Mt. Vernon. The gardens are beautifully organised with kitchen and flower gardens, the home is impressive yet basically quite simple, with excellent views over the river. We are greeted at the car park by a section of soldiers.



Gettysburg, at the time of the Battle a small Pennsylvania town of only 2,400 odd, is today a larger-than-life, obsessive museum of the Civil War, when 160,000 fellow Americans engaged in bitter war with each other. Today earnest families reverently walk the site where Pickett charged, where Lee's horse stood here, where General



George Gordon Meade walked under *that very tree!* A fat man is loudly telling his friends about the wonders of grape-shot: "it takes y'apart like a sawn-off shotgun." There were over 46,000 casualties in the Gettysburg battle, fellow American taking fellow American bloodily apart with grapeshot. They laid their graves out in nice

circles, as we see from a tower that thoughtfully allows us the view. Folks assert their patriotism by striding the battlefields, taking ghost tours, or setting up tawdry shops and associated touristic events to make money The American Way. So the Civil War was worth it, commercially speaking, but Abraham Lincoln had a different take on it, as he explains to Catherine and a passing Afro-American. His Gettysburg Address has the famous words stressing equality: "That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people,



shall not perish from the earth.” The day I write this, Barack Obama in his Inaugural Speech as President echoed Lincoln’s sentiments. There’s hope yet.

We drive from these blood-thirsty fields into town to get accommodation: the only thing left, we are told, is Econo-Inn back at the battlefield, which turns out to be dear and disgustingly dirty, but we stay because we are told there is nothing else. It was so bad I wrote to Econo-Inn head office on our return as they stressed they were interested in feedback. But they weren’t interested in mine; I received no reply.

Back in town, we have an excellent Pennsylvanian dinner, with lots of apple condiments. Attached to the restaurant is a bookshop and B&B; they have rooms and not only are they cheaper than the Econo-Inn shit-heap, they are haunted with the



ghosts of Gettysburg soldiers. While we eat, a group dressed in period clothes appears. They sing old American folk songs so beautifully, so full of love and innocent wonder. I have to stop eating during “Oh Shenandoah”, for to swallow is impossible. Outside are horses and carts, more people in period costume; it’s time for the Ghost Tours in houses where soldiers had died to celebrate hatred and death instead of love and

innocent wonder.

Driving north through Pennsylvania, we see several Amish on the road in horse drawn carts, but we don’t visit the Amish villages, as in *Witness*. We would have, but we didn’t see any signs. The Susquehanna River interestingly acts as road divider for a stretch. We go north to Corning, which, strangely enough, is where Corningware is made in a town called – yes, Corningware. We tour the display museum displaying not just oven-proof kitchenware, which I thought Corningware was, but beautiful and expensive jewellery, ornaments and vases. We gape through heat-proof glass at a man blowing these objects, his cheeks wobbling, pink balloons.

From there to pretty Ithaca, home to Cornell University, which straddles a gorge that runs through the town. Unfortunately, we have booked the Clarion hotel in advance, which turns out to be an out-of-town, barn-like conference centre. The restaurant, another reason for choosing this place, is not working. We ask to move out but sorry, too late, it’s on your credit card. A restaurant is nearby, and we try racks of rib: two huge ones per serving, we have yet to learn the \$1 trick. Local wine, Buff Hollow, is poor.

I ring an old colleague who works at Cornell; he meets us at the hotel. He is on a weight loss kick, and has just returned from a workout. He won’t touch alcohol these days, and asks for coke, without much ice. The barman serves him his Coke. “This

godamm thing is all ice!” he yells. The barman brings him another. I later pay the barman, who turns out to be an Australian. I apologise for my friend. The barman dismisses my concern: “Oh you meet all types here”. We talk about Australia; he tells me the GST is through Senate. Thank you Meg Lees, you bitch, I offer. He grins agreement. I pay him, wondering if I should tip him. No, I decide, we are Aussies, friends almost, he would surely be offended. I review his reactions later and decide that somehow he wouldn’t have been offended.

It is a short drive from here to Buffalo. We take our time, stopping at Tauhannoch Falls, which are long, thin and unremarkable, and thence to Lamoreaux Winery. This is set on a hill, with nice lavender-lined drives, overlooking New York’s famous Finger Lakes. The wines are not bad, New Zealand-ish. I taste and buy a reasonable merlot.

At Buffalo airport we drop the car, and taxi to Depew Station, where we are to take a train to Toronto where Catherine’s brother lives. Depew Station is seedy. Passengers are waiting, bored. Some have been here for hours, one woman with a child has been waiting overnight. A girl is on a very public phone, asking for money from her father: “Don’t lay that on me!” she yells. “Lookit, I only need a few dollars. I wanna get out of here!” Embarrassed, you try not to listen. We have been here nearly two hours. I ask the station-master when the train will arrive. “Sir, you can see as well as I can when it rounds that bend there. That’s when we know it is coming.”

What is harder to explain: the sheer inefficiency of American trains in this technological age, or the bloody rudeness of railway staff? Not to mention the one-way insensitivity of Alamo car rental staff, over 2,000 miles back in Denver.

Don Watson, who travelled Amtrak a couple of years ago and wrote it up in *American Journeys*, answers both questions. He says that rail travel in the US is not a middle class option and so no-one with any clout cares what happens. Freight is given priority over passenger travel so if a freight train needs right of way, the passenger Amtrak train sits and waits. Which accounts for the station-master’s comment; neither he nor anyone else had any idea as to when the train would arrive. As to the perceived rudeness, Watson, an Australian, had been there long enough, as we hadn’t, to translate rudeness as friendly directness. You are expected to be friendly direct back.

Well, we had crossed the USA, most of it. Whether or not we liked all of what we saw, let alone understand it, we had some fascinating insights into America. It wasn’t too long after our trip that George W. Bush took over, and he had crossed the whole world for eight disastrous years, with a directness that was not at all friendly. And America has now taken a new turn, along the lines that Abraham Lincoln was telling Catherine about after the Battle that had officially settled the matter of human rights and slavery.

So we had thought, in those times of innocence back in 1999.

