

Dear Friends,

Although I am back home now, greetings anyway from Montana, where the sky is very big. It is a fabulously beautiful place, with clean fresh mountain breezes and snow-capped vistas, alpine meadows and hardy, self-reliant yeomanry. The Flower of the West!

But as my grandmother would have said if she'd thought of it, no Montana until you finish your Texas! Readers of these letters will recall that I have the peculiar ambition of going to every county in the United States – indeed adding new counties was my nominal reason for going to Montana in the first place. This ambition, although peculiar, is not so peculiar that a lot of other people do not share it – hundreds of them, in fact, in the Extra Miler Club ([www.extramilerclub.org](http://www.extramilerclub.org)). The Club was to hold its 2010 annual meeting in Arlington, Texas on July 10, and I decided to go.



Why Arlington, Texas, a disagreeable suburb squashed between Dallas and Fort Worth? That's not a place a body would ordinarily care to go, and especially not in July. But the Club's annual meetings are held wherever ALPCA – not the alpaca breeders but the Automobile License Plate Collectors of America, [www.alpca.org](http://www.alpca.org) – holds its annual meeting and *bourse*. There is considerable overlap in the higher echelons of the two organizations, and ALPCA traditionally lets EMC meet in a conference room at its convention. So I flew into the Dallas-Forth Worth Airport on July 7 (by way of Phoenix) and checked into the local Motel 6 for four nights. The temperature was in the 90s, and the humidity was high – it felt like I was wrapped in a blanket made of hot cotton candy. My glasses fogged up when I left my air-conditioned car.

The next day, since I was in Texas, I took my snazzy Korean sedan in a kind of loop around Dallas/Forth Worth, picking up a passel of new Texas counties. KAUFMAN, ROCKWALL, COLLIN, HUNT, FANNIN, GRAYSON. At Denison, on the Red River, I stopped to visit Eisenhower's birthplace (right), a modest frame house on the wrong side of the tracks. Eisenhower left for Abilene at the age of two, so there was not that much to see – it would have been better to have seen Sam Rayburn's house in neighboring Fannin County. But who knew?



I crossed the Red River to pick up an outlier (LOVE County, Oklahoma), and then came back into Texas for more of the same – COOKE, MONTAGUE, CLAY, JACK, WISE, PARKER. I have to say, Texas is dreary. I loathe the place, and if it didn't have so damn many counties I would never go there again. Agricultural North Texas is ugly, but not as ugly as West Texas. It is not so ugly that I could not have appreciated the same scene in Nebraska or Wyoming, but in Texas I could not love it. Generic, uninteresting scrub and brush; fences for horses but no horses in sight; and haystacks and ploughed fields, flat as

a lumpy Texas pancake, which should have spoken to me of sturdy farmers and their true grit, but didn't and couldn't be made to. Little towns of baked clay and brick, and bigger ones like Denison built for railroads now abandoned, all at least half deserted, emptiness made to seem emptier by the wide western streets.



The next day I set aside for Dallas tourism. First up was the Sixth Floor Museum, in the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald (allegedly) lay in wait for President Kennedy. Although the museum has a tawdry style to it, it helped me understand at long last what the physical situation was in Dealey Plaza at the fateful moment, and where the grassy knoll is, and what all those films really showed.

I also went to the Fair Park, site of a famous exposition in 1936 celebrating the Centennial of Texas. The exposition's buildings were built in the most exuberant Art Deco style, and many survive. Although much of the park was blocked off by preparations for a rock concert, the spectacular Hall of State was open, with its dramatic murals of Texas history, Deco to its rivets. If you ever *have* to go to Dallas, I don't say seeing Fair Park would make the trip worthwhile, but it might mitigate your suffering.



After Dallas tourism I still had some of the day left, and I thought of going to Fort Worth, where there are three distinguished art museums all in a row: one by Louis Kahn, one by Philip Johnson, and one by Tadao Ando; also two cattle drives a day (municipal herd!) through the public streets. But the heat, and the dispiriting quality of these ugly twin cities, with their nasty mix of suburban horror and right-wing triumphalism, sapped my resolve. I went to the movies instead – movie theatres in DFW are identified in the newspaper by their Interstate exits. I saw *Toy Story 3* at a theatre that served full meals in the seats, to be eaten at a kind of dimly-lighted desk. O brave new world!

My last day in Texas I went to the county-collectors' convention, stopping first to see the license plate exhibits – not *exactly* my thing, but I like a good license plate every now and then. There were some great displays – one on the Depression, with some NRA and CCC plates and a 1933 Roosevelt inaugural plate (left), and a Wake Island display, going back to the earliest forms, and a board with a license plate from every Caribbean island jurisdiction. Breathes there a man with soul so dead who could not be moved by a license plate from the French part of St. Martin Island next to one from the Dutch side? Rhetorical question – no real need to answer.



The county-collectors' convention itself lasted only about an hour. Almost all the members present were paunchy balding gray-bearded white men in their sixties – I was really an anomaly in that crowd. The president called on each of us to say what we had been doing in the past year – I said I had finished Virginia and was on course to break 2100 later that month in Montana. It felt like an AA meeting as person after person stood up and gave his statistics. One fellow, having finished all the counties, was starting in on townships; another had a map showing that he had traveled on all but about eight miles of the Interstate Highway System. Every *mishegos* was treated with outward respect, because we knew that we were all a little cracked.

The climax of the meeting came when a number of us (excluding some with pressing license plate business) got in our cars and drove out to the Tarrant-Wise county line, Wise being one member's *very last county*. We pulled up just beyond the county sign, hoping the Texas Highway Patrol would not notice us, and waited as the Completer stopped a little behind the sign and slowly, gleefully walked across. Much congratulating and shaking of hands. We were taking refuge in the Buddha – our colleague's example showed that it *could be done*. In fact nearly 30 members have done it – if I'm spared I may some day do it myself (I have only a little more than 1000 counties to go).



At last Texas was over and I was free to fly to Great Falls, Montana (by way of Salt Lake City), where my friend Lee Oestreicher was waiting with another air-conditioned car to take me to another Motel 6. It was a relief to feel the cool mountain zephyrs of Montana after the dank steam bath of Texas.



The first thing we looked at, still in Great Falls, was the grandly named Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center, located near the (Great) Falls of the Missouri River. L&C had come up the river on boats, but couldn't sail over the falls and had to portage, dragging dugout canoes and tons of supplies and delicate instruments overland (and eventually over mountains) to get through to the Columbia Basin on the other side. The museum was exceptionally rich both in artifacts and in imaginative displays – after several hours we were saturated but still hadn't seen everything and wanted more, which is the mark of a really good museum. Huge picture windows looking out on the Missouri helped a lot too. The exhibits were unusually respectful of the Indians and their cultures, for example always naming them in their own languages rather than calling them Blackfoot, Crow or Flathead in the Eurocentric style.



- One of the most effective exhibits showed the negotiation between Lewis and Cameahwait, in the original languages but with English subtitles. Lewis in English to Drouillard: we need horses. Drouillard repeats in French to Charbonneau, Charbonneau in Hidatsa Sioux to his wife Sacagawea, Sacagawea



in Shoshone to her brother Chief Cameahwait. Cameahwait replies to Sacagawea in Shoshone: we'll trade horses for guns. And then back to Lewis through the series of interpreters.

The next day we headed out northeast to Fort Benton and idylled for a while at a scenic overlook over the Missouri. Fort Benton, once the furthest inland port in America, is a charming shipshape sort of place, with an old-style motor court downtown which would be a great place to write a book – pleasant surroundings, a café for meals, electricity and mod cons but no distractions. It was tempting just to settle in. But instead we turned north, on increasingly minor roads, through regions of vast hayfields. Many fields had cylindrical hay bales scattered around – they looked like spools of thread until you got close enough to them to see they were each five feet high and six feet long – about 120 cubic feet of tightly-packed sweet-smelling hay in each one, and we saw thousands.



In some places the hay lay on the earth, cut but not baled, pale yellow stripes on the darker stubble. All around the hayfields were untended grasslands, the wind made visible in the waving of the high tassels. Buttes and knolls varied the flatness of the plain; Lee spotted a pronghorn antelope.

As we headed to the Canadian border the new counties started – LIBERTY, TOOLE. The pavement stopped and we kept going on gravel roads – one gave out in the muddy range so we followed another until we came to the border station at Whitlash, Montana. There a high-ranking border official – posted in this desolate spot for who knows what reason – amused himself by questioning us at needless length. The Canadians at Aden, Alberta, were less hesitant to let us in than the Americans were to let us out, and we rolled on into Canada. Unfortunately on the stamp in my brand new passport the word *Canada* is smudged and almost illegible, while the word *Aden* is bright and clear, so it will seem to later officials that I have been in Yemen, no doubt studying explosives at some dusty *madrassa*. I may have to put a Post-It note in my passport, explaining.



It is always fun to be in Canada (arms at left), and this was my first time in Alberta (arms at right). The air in Canada seems very different – refreshingly clear of the civic pollutions of our own half-civilized country. It is hard to say how much of this is just expectation or projection, and how much is “real,” whatever that might mean in terms of



atmosphere. But it felt good to both of us. The scenery was much as it had been in northern Montana – seemingly endless stretches of gravel road, green grass, yellow hay and brown stubble, with hardly any sign of habitation beyond hay bales, barbed wire and occasional cattle. Huge mountains appeared abruptly in the distance, *rocky* mountains in fact, running from southern to northern horizon and carrying their own clouds with them. Out on the prairie, an enclosure full of buffalo! They looked majestic, especially the bulls with their massive shaggy heads, but oddly calm for animals soon to become heart-healthy burgers.



We stopped for the night in the little town of Cardston, Alberta – a dry town, dominated by a Mormon temple. Again, who knew? The next day we entered Waterton Lakes National Park, where does and their fawns wandered unconcerned through the park village like suburban mothers with their kids; later we saw grizzly bears with two cubs each, foraging by the side of the road. We were interested in them, but they seemed bored with us.

We crossed back into Montana and drove through Glacier National



Park – it was hard to tell which park was the more spectacular.



A snow-white mountain goat stood by the side of the road, looking as if he personally had posed for the park's logo. Mountains, rivers, even a glacier; thick straight forests of pines ranged up 75° hillsides; vistas plunged to

gorges far below. Lots of scenery! We breathed some of it in from camp chairs we had brought along for the purpose. And two more counties: GLACIER on one side of the Continental Divide, FLATHEAD on the other.

After the parks we went back (through PONDERA County) to Great Falls, in time for a concert by the Great Falls Municipal Band (founded 1895) at the town bandshell. They

began with the National Anthem and ended with the state song “Montana,” which goes like this:

Montana, Montana, Flower of the West,  
Of all the states from coast to coast you’re easily the best.  
Montana, Montana, where skies are always blue,  
M - O - N - T - A - N - A,  
Montana ...

... but I forget the rest of the words.

We set out the next day for Helena. A beautiful old U.S. highway ran along the Missouri, snaking over and under the sleek new Interstate that had superseded it. The old road was much nicer than the new one, with hardly anyone on it; we broke out our camp chairs again to sit by the river and watch the flights of white pelicans. In Helena we paid the obligatory visit to the State Capitol, Beaux-Arts all the way (see right). In the Senate chamber we admired the mural of the negotiation over the Louisiana Purchase, with Jefferson at one end of the table and Napoleon at the other, which of course never happened. There was also a bronze statuary group of Senator Mike Mansfield and his wife Jayne.<sup>1</sup> After a look at the state museum we took a stroll through the well-preserved downtown



business street of Last Chance Gulch, noting especially one building with a stone telamon figure supporting the façade – it looked just like me in a loincloth. We had dinner on this street, served to us by a tall young waitress so beautiful and graceful that just hearing her recite the specials was like an ambrosial course all its own.

The next morning I took Lee to the airport and struck out east on my own. MEAGHER, WHEATLAND, GOLDEN VALLEY, MUSSELSHELL. Green hummocks dusted with goldenrod and purple lupine, stands of darker pine, opulent ripening summer grain, the Crazy Mountains in the distance. The mountains grew more distant and finally disappeared, the plains rolled less and less, but the grass and the hay went on as before, without apparent limit. I turned north along the Musselshell River and followed a gravel road from which all marks of surrounding civilization, except the road itself, soon dropped away. No signs, no telephone poles, no structures, not even any barbed wire – nothing but the prairie and a distant line of green trees marking the riverbank. All colors dropped away,

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<sup>1</sup> Just kidding. Her name was Maureen.



too, except for yellow and pale green, and the flawless blue and white of a sky so static it could have been painted on the wall of an elementary school. Fragrant sagebrush. Blue cornflowers. No people anywhere. A group of antelopes grazing on the road slowly made way for my car. I saw a herd of horses that could have been wild – they were smaller and shaggier than domestic horses, and there were no fences.

Finally I emerged from the emptiness, back onto the paved roads, and began my journey back to Great Falls. PETROLEUM, GARFIELD, FERGUS, JUDITH BASIN. Total new counties



on this trip: 26 (12 in Texas, one in Oklahoma, 13 in Montana). Total counties to date: 2103, or 67.15%. Past the two-thirds mark; slowly getting there. The last eight counties alone took me three days. Finally I made it back to the Motel 6, ready to fly the next day to Helena, and then Seattle, and finally home to San Francisco.

My last night in Great Falls I stopped to watch the huge American flag I passed each time I crossed the river. It was illuminated from below, and as the flag moved in the wind the light caught the silver stars against the darkness. It seemed as if each star flashed independently, the flag reminding me that, beautiful and varied as Montana was, it was only one state out of fifty in our enormous country, and that each of the others (*maybe* even including Texas) offered sights as moving, and experiences as rich, as Montana. Long may it wave.

David

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