

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Wisconsin, the Badger State! And also from Minnesota, the Gopher State, and Michigan, the Wolverine State. Actually by now I am back in California, the Unicorn State. I usually send these e-postcards from along the way, but I didn't have a computer with me, and didn't see any Internet cafés, only jacks in motel rooms to connect the laptop I didn't have. So this is like a postcard bought on a trip but not mailed, and later sheepishly posted from home.

The basic plan was to finish up the last unvisited 33 of the 72 counties in Wisconsin. And while I was in the neighborhood, there were some leftover counties in Minnesota that were conveniently close to my route, and some other remote ones in Minnesota and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan I had thoughtlessly bypassed on earlier trips, leaving disturbing white patches on the map. So I flew to Milwaukee, rented a bright red Chevrolet, and started in.



Actually I did some Milwaukee tourism first. The most interesting place I found was the fabulously beautiful Basilica of St. Josaphat, a huge Catholic church on the Italian model, every inch intensely decorated in high color, with one of the largest domes in the world and a breathtaking interior as good as (almost) anything in Italy. Here's a darkish snapshot; for a slightly queasy-making virtual tour see <http://www.thebasilica.org/p/hotogallery/virtualtour.asp>.

I looked around Milwaukee a bit – block after regular block of small detached houses. The old bratwurst and kielbasa German and Polish and Slovak sections are either de-ethnicized now, or have been transmuted into black or Hispanic

neighborhoods. They look pretty much like the ones shown below, but without the snow.



I took an excursion boat down the Milwaukee River and out onto Lake Michigan, stopping traffic on the downtown streets as the bascule bridges lifted for us. Milwaukee has a downtown that looks like a real city, with quite a lot of fine old ornamented buildings only about half replaced by featureless modern junk. It is still possible to imagine what a handsome place it must have been before the vandalism started. Out on Wisconsin

Avenue the pompous neo-Flemish mansion of Captain Pabst, the beer baron, still stands, full of corny *echt-Deutsch* decoration.



I set aside some time to visit the famous Milwaukee Domes, actually three dome-shaped glass conservatories loaded with trees and shrubs and flowers and landscaped paths, each dome with a distinct climate. Inside I felt pleasantly like a turtle in a spacious and comfortable terrarium – I kept waiting for an enormous hand to descend from the roof to offer me a lettuce leaf. I have barely recovered from the crisis of faith brought on when this did not happen.

After other, less interesting Milwaukee adventures, I hit the road and started picking up new counties. WASHINGTON, FOND DU LAC, CALUMET, OUTAGAMIE. The middle part of Wisconsin is really beautiful, not prairie flat but not a roller coaster either, as it becomes near the Iowa line. It was fat farmland, very suitable for a Viking raid if you could get your ship that far inland, verdant and neatly plowed, fields and trees a dozen shades of green, hay already cut and formed into massive jellyroll-shaped bales instead of traditional Monet haystacks. Sweet smell of mown grass; soybeans out to the horizon; corn as high as an elephant's knee when I set out (but noticeably higher when I returned two weeks later). Barns and sheds and silos and farmhouses formed a complicated architecture by the roadside; huge wind turbines made patterns with their blades. I got up close to one of the towers, driving on gravel access roads laid through the cornfields – they are astonishingly enormous. And cows, of course, this being cheese country. The brown ones were professional cows, but the black and white ones had been police cars in

a former life. Or that's what they taught us at veterinary school, anyway. White and gray clouds filled the wide sky, so much bigger than it seems in the city.



Cold wind over choppy gray Lake Winnebago, the topless towers of Oshkosh just visible on the far shore. There was no trace of Joe McCarthy left in Appleton – I read that there had once been a statue, but they had to put it into storage because people kept spitting on it. That's a shame – I would have liked the chance to spit on it myself. Passed by a mad sculptor's house in Appleton – Norman Rockwell and Grandma Moses and Toulouse-Lautrec and Van Gogh were sitting companionably on benches in the front yard; Picasso stood nearby with a goat on a leash. Laurel and Hardy, Alfred Hitchcock, John Wayne and Benjamin Franklin had been worked into the structure of the house itself. A knockout!

WINNEBAGO, WAUPACA, WAUSHARA, GREEN LAKE, MARQUETTE. Boarded the *Chief Waupaca* for a cruise on a chain of lakes – all around us families frolicked like otters in the water, pulling each other with speedboats, diving from floats and docks, wading in front of lakeside cabins. Stopped at Ripon to see the tiny schoolhouse where the Republican Party was founded in 1854. Not sure how good an idea that was – Lincoln, of course, but what have they done for us since?

ADAMS, WOOD, PORTAGE, MARATHON, LINCOLN, TAYLOR. Land getting flatter, meadows getting shaggier, woods getting woodsier and easier to see that the farms were cleared from forest. Wild flowers and tasseled grasses filled every untended place. I stopped for roadside idylls, in my folding chair by shady groves and plashy brooks. Sandhill cranes strode through the fields, grouse and wild turkeys crossed in front of my car. Emptiness; quiet except for the birds and insects. At a cornfield crossing I saw a sign marking the



corner of Flamingo and Palm. In your dreams, Wisconsin! RUSK, BARRON, POLK, and suddenly I was across the St. Croix River and into Minnesota.

Another boat ride, through the rocky gorge, and then CHISAGO, ISANTI, KANABEC, MILLE LACS, CROW WING, STEARNS. At Little Falls I stopped to visit the boyhood home of the distinguished

Fascist and anti-Semite Charles A. Lindbergh – readers of Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* will recall his disastrous administration as President, beginning in 1941. Huge rain clouds, black thunderheads in a sky like gray silk, and then rainstorms so thick I could not see to drive, and had to wait by the side of the road until it cleared. At first I sheltered under a gas station canopy, but then thought about lightning and moved out into the rain. It was like being under a waterfall.

Nearing Minneapolis, I went to suburban Maple Grove to see a newly built Hindu temple. By suburban I mean in a remote undeveloped corner of Hennepin County, surrounded by soybean fields. It is in a brand new modern building with a central stepped pyramid in the traditional Indian style, and has 21 separate shrines in the main hall, each dedicated to a different deity. Of course these deities are not really separate, but are just aspects of God.<sup>1</sup> However, in India (with a few rare modern exceptions) you don’t find one temple honoring all the major gods. I am a Ganesh *bhakta* myself, but when I got there a *puja* for Lord Hanuman was going on, so in the non-exclusive Hindu manner I joined in that and received my *tikka*, and an apple for *prasad*, handed to me by the *pujari* from a shopping bag. The intense feeling and powerful energy I felt in the temple hall made this the peak experience of the whole trip. For more on this temple, see



[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/us/29hindu.html?\\_r=1&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/29/us/29hindu.html?_r=1&emc=eta1).



Then I crept exhausted into Minneapolis, wearing my *tikka*, for a day of rest at the Motel 6, broken only by a quick trip to the Institute of Art to see an exhibition about the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt. I parked right in front of the main entrance – there was not even a meter! You can’t do *that* in New York! The next day, after a stop at the magnificent state capitol (by Cass Gilbert), with its gilded *quadriga* above the portico, I picked up my brother Christopher at Minneapolis’ Larry Craig Memorial Airport. We headed north to Duluth, stopping off to see a reconstruction of an 1804 North West Company fur trading post. There were furs available to stroke, and instructions on how to make a beaver into a hat – good information, except we didn’t have a beaver. The *voyageurs* slept in hard, short, narrow bunks, without showers or cable TV or anything; the Indians’ wigwams were even sparer. How both groups would have enjoyed a Motel 6!



At Duluth we took a cruise on the harbor in the *Vista King*. “We are about to pass under Duluth’s famous Aerial Lift Bridge,” they said. Although it wasn’t so famous that either of us had

<sup>1</sup> “Personal God (*ishwara*) is no other than Impersonal God or *Nirguna Brahman* experienced through the veil of time, space and causation.” Swami Bhaskarananda, *The Essentials of Hinduism*.

ever heard of it before, it was still an impressive structure, solemnly hooting back at our boat when we hooted for it to rise and let us through. Duluth is a railhead and port for grain, and iron and copper and coal from the Iron Range, to be shipped on the Great Lakes and sometimes through the St. Lawrence Seaway to the world beyond. We inspected vast grain elevators and facilities for storing and loading taconite pellets to feed the steel mills that weren't making anything at the moment – a lot of the ships and facilities are idle these days, waiting for the slump to end.

Then we set off along Lake Superior for the northeastern horn of Minnesota, through the North Woods on Minnesota Highway 61, which everyone but me seemed to know was the name of a song by Bob Dylan. PINE, LAKE, COOK. Passed a gray timber wolf on the way, patiently waiting to cross the road. Just over the Cook County line we took a gondola ride up Moose Mountain; there was also a ski lift which looked like more fun, but we would have had to come down on a toboggan (really), which didn't seem right for our demographic, so we skipped it.

The thing about the North Woods is that they are full of trees. The first billion or so are picturesque – birch and spruce and lofty pine and oak – but the truth is that the next few billion become a bit repetitive. Maybe Reagan had a point after all. It grew tiresome driving down roads where we could see nothing but trees for mile after mile after mile. We longed for more of the intricate farm scenes of middle Wisconsin, and amused ourselves by speaking in the local accent. *WisKAAANsin!*



The northeasternmost counties of Minnesota are not connected to anywhere else in the United States, so we had to return to Duluth before we could get back into Wisconsin. BURNETT, WASHBURN, SAWYER (I am leaving out the 18 counties on this trip I had been to before). In Hayward the motels were all filled because of the 50th annual Lumberjack World Championships being held in the Lumberjack Bowl (!) on County Highway B. This turned out to be good luck for us, because instead of staying at a motel in the town center, which was choked with lumberjack fans, we found a sort of cabin-lodge combination deep in the woods, 15 miles out of town on Grindstone Lake, at the edge of the Lac Court Oreilles Indian Reservation (*Court Oreilles* means *Short Ears*).

The lodge was ideal – we sat on the deck and looked over the lake, a little too high up for mosquitoes. Woodpeckers and brilliant yellow goldfinches flitted about in the trees; loons called mournfully on the water. Inside the proprietress and her husband sat around the bar with two grizzled visitors who had driven up from Texas to see the lumberjack event. All four were boozy barfly types – it was like being in one of those one-set plays

where unsuspected secrets are drunkenly revealed in the second act. But actually I never saw any of the barflies drink anything stronger than coffee – Christopher and I, with one beer each, were the alcohol champions of Norwood Haven.

Al Capone's Hideout, which was the main attraction we wanted to see in Sawyer County, had just closed its hidden doors, perhaps forever, but we could not pass up the Lumberjack World Championships, so we got tickets and sat in the grandstand. It was, unfortunately, a bakingly hot day (the only really hot day on the trip), so we didn't stay long. But the lumberjacks (and lumberjills, a word I am not making up), some of whom came from as far as New Zealand to compete, gave some fine performances, slicing through logs with chainsaws as if they were made of marzipan, chopping them in half with axes, scooting up 90-foot poles and dropping lightly back down again, running in opposite directions on floating logs to see who could make the other fall off first. Who knew this was even a sport, let alone an international competition in its 50th year? At the Lumberjack Bowl the Ojibways were selling chicken soup that tasted like our Aunt Sarah's, except for the locally harvested wild rice.



We could happily have stayed a week or two at Lake Grindstone, but time started to press. After a stop in Phillips, Wisconsin, where almost every business was named after our family, we went on another pre-planned detour to pick up another isolated set of neglected counties in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. More miles, more trees, more counties. PRICE, ONEIDA; HOUGHTON, KEWEENAW, BARAGA. We had lunch in a town where all the street signs were subtitled in Finnish. The locals in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan call themselves Youpers (U.P.-ers), and who is to say they are not?

The state motto of Michigan is *Si Quaeris Peninsulam Amoenam Circumspice* (If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look about you). But we were getting pretty tired by this time, and sick of seeing almost nothing but trees, and so we were not really seeking a pleasant peninsula but just trying to finish the course. We were tired enough that when there *was* something else to see, we often skipped it. This part of the trip was marked by what we *didn't* do – the (locally) famous mineshaft we didn't go down, the ferryboat we didn't take to the lighthouse, the historic house we didn't tour, the county fair down whose midway we did not saunter, eating cheese curds and cotton candy. We did keep on idylling by woodsy streams and green cornfields and in shady town parks, eating homemade ham and cheese sandwiches on hot dog buns (we carried our ham and cheese with us in a cooler, and mustard in the glove compartment). In Keweenaw County a trapper stood by the side of the road with a clothes-rack full of pelts. We stopped to stroke them – beaver, badger, otter, mink, even skunk, deliciously soft and silky, none marked at more than \$30. For the first time, I wished I had something suitable for putting a mink collar on. The pelts were creepy, though, with little holes where the heads and legs had been. Even creepier, one hanger (marked *Faces* \$5) was full of little animal faces. What could a person possibly stand to use them for?

OCONTO, LANGLADE, MENOMINEE (coextensive with an Indian reservation), SHAWANO (the *w* is silent), BROWN (Green Bay – go Packers!), KEWAUNEE, DOOR, MANITOWOC, SHEBOYGAN, OZAUKEE. And finally back to Milwaukee. By the odometer I had traveled 2600 miles, and Christopher about 1600. We celebrated with a slap-up German dinner at an old-line downtown restaurant, *sauerbraten* and sausages and goose with wild rice. We couldn't have faced even one more home-made ham and cheese sandwich. And then we went to the Milwaukee airport and flew away.

I have now been to every county in Wisconsin and so never have to go back, pretty though most of it was.<sup>2</sup> Even though it was tiring, I had a great time, but I am still intensely glad to be home again.

David

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<sup>2</sup> My county count is now at 2060, or just under 2/3 of the total (3132). I added 45 new counties on this trip, or about 1½ percent.