

Dear Friends,

Greetings from Wyoming and Montana, from which I am now safely back. I went there to finish off the last of the Far West counties, complete two more states, and white out an unsightly bulge on the map of counties left to do. And also to spend a little time in one of the most beautiful parts of a beautiful country.



So on June 8 I flew from San Francisco to Denver, where the airport is so huge they had to put it 25 miles out of town, and then to Casper, Wyoming, on a small cramped commuter plane that felt like a crowded streetcar. It was the last time I felt crowded for ten days.

Indeed, things felt different as soon as I arrived in the Casper Airport (NATRONA County right away!). The luggage carts were free, twice the size of the ones they rent in larger airports, and decorated with wrought-iron images of elk and moose. There was a big statue of a buffalo in the middle of the concourse. And outside a policeman rode by on a motorcycle, flying an American flag but not wearing a helmet. The rental car shuttle picked me up, along with another visitor in town for a week-long rodeo; he and the driver chatted about *bucking stock*. Bucking stock are the broncos and bulls the rodeistas ride, or try to. Of course you and I knew that. I got my car (Colorado license plate!), fitted it out with my trusty GPS, and followed the calm lady's directions to the Motel 6.



For weeks I had been anxiously following the flood news. Heavy rains had



caused many rivers in Montana to overflow – the Missouri, the Yellowstone, the Musselshell, the Bighorn and Little Bighorn, and others. Crow Agency and places on the Crow Reservation in Big Horn County, where I planned to go, had been inundated and the people evacuated to shelters in Billings. Left: Interstate 90 near Crow Agency on May 25. Right: On the Reservation, posted May 27.

In Wyoming the floods had not quite come yet, but bridges were threatened and the North Platte River in Casper was being monitored hourly. It seemed an open question whether I would be able to get there, whether my plane could land, whether the roads would be

closed, or what. In the end I was able to go almost everywhere I had planned to go, because by the time I got there the serious flooding had moved east, following the rivers' flow toward the Mississippi. But it was a close thing.

The morning after I arrived in Wyoming I started out on the highway. Casper is spread out in the typical space-is-not-important western way, but it was not long before I was out of town and onto the open plain. It seemed pretty empty out there. I did see some cattle, and the occasional bird, and a few widely separated settlements, but not many. After an hour or so I crossed into FREMONT County, which is the size of New Jersey. These far western counties are the last of the really big monster counties on my list. There are a few big ones left in Texas, but nothing like these.



Central Wyoming is a huge rangeland, grasses in yellow and green and brown as far as you can see, sometimes yellow and green in the same stand because the recent rains have prompted new growth. The range undulates gently; there are occasional exposed bluffs like one-sided canyons, shark's-tooth outcroppings of white rock, and long moraines like Indian mounds. At least I think they're moraines – I'm no geologist. The blue sky is full of fluffy shining silver cumulus clouds,

row after row miles ahead like a painted diorama, against wispy cirrus in the background. A blue smear of mountains in the distance, snowy caps blending in with the white cirrus.

Cattle and occasional farm buildings; free-standing angled snow fences to remind me how harsh Wyoming is in the winter. I zip along on the highway – there is no alternate route, and almost no one on this route – listening to Duke Ellington and Ravi Shankar and Glenn Gould playing through my car speakers from my iPod. Dinosaur bones have been found here; I pass a sign advertising a Dinosaur Museum in Thermopolis: "Your kids think you're a dinosaur – prove them wrong."

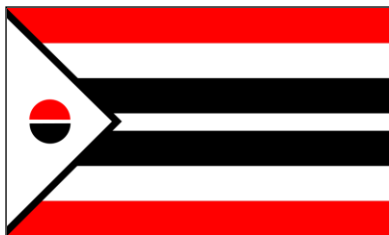
One reason it is flood season is that it rains a lot – a lot. One of the most dramatic landscapes I have seen anywhere was in Fremont County – the sky, as usual in these flat plains states, was vast, and the left part was bright and sunny, with puffy cumulus clouds and yellow sunbeams. But the right part of the sky was black as night, filled with angry

thunderheads, rain pouring down onto the horizon, forked lightning arcing from cloud to earth. A dualistic, Manichean sky like an allegorical painting. I wish I had taken a picture of this – I had a camera with me.

In HOT SPRINGS County I turned north and drove through the Canyon of the Wind River. More mounds on either side of the road, piled to the angle of repose. They were close enough to reach this time, and crumbly to the touch. Gravel or rock or sand? Glacial remains or mine tailings? I saw one mound with clearly sedimentary deposits angled to about 40 degrees – definitely solid rock. Meaning what? I'm still no geologist.



The road, the river, and the railroad all run in one narrow channel, with high walls of rock on either side. I was in the Wind River Indian Reservation (Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone: flags below), passing tall tipis on the inaccessible other side of the river. Tiny fast swallows (or perhaps they were swift swifts) hunted along the surface of the river; above, a boneyard of rocks was embedded in green berm. The rock would recede for a while, leaving space for plowed fields, and then revert back to rock.



At Worland I passed the Libby Mammoth Kill Site, where the Clovis People of 10,000 years ago (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clovis_people) used to drive single mammoths away from the herd and corner them in box canyons. They kept parts of mammoths there over the winter in a frozen food cache – one quarter of a young mammoth could provide 500 kilograms of food, not that they had kilograms back then.

WASHAKIE County, and then onto the Ten Sleep Highway toward the Powder River Pass (9666 feet). I gained 5000 feet in 30 miles. Usually the landscape gets sparser the higher you go, but here were fir forests among the canyon walls and craggy mesas,



the greenest Wyoming yet (Custer National Forest). There was snow all around as I neared the pass, more than in the picture above, dazzling snowy peaks, white snowfields, snow on a frozen lake even though it was June. Flurries started, and then heavier snowfall, and by the time I reached the pass it was seriously snowing, gray fog all around, visibility slight, road slippery. I navigated by following the tire tracks in the snow in front of me.



I headed down the other side of the Big Horn Mountains into Buffalo, Wyoming. Agriculture, cattle, deer, mares with nursing foals. Roadsides green and lush because of the rain. No need to plow here, animals eat the grass. Across the valley, black thunderheads drained water over the hills. Many more strange mounds,

and hillocks, and pyramids. Cows mooed, I mooed back; bulls bellowed; I bellowed back. It was the beginning of dialogue. BIG HORN, JOHNSON, SHERIDAN.



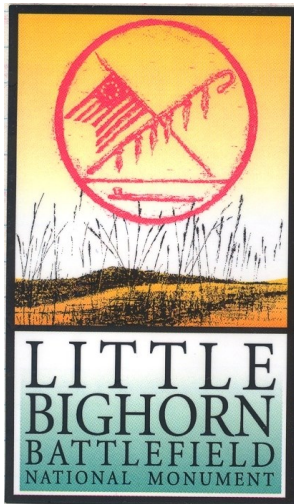
Readers of these letters will have grown tired of my endless lament for the Main Streets of my youth, reduced now to ghost towns of junk shops and shuttered storefronts. It is a pleasure, therefore, to report that Sheridan, Wyoming, is not a ghost town at all, but has a vigorous and well-preserved downtown. It calls itself a

historic district, and for once that title comes without irony. All the cities of Montana and Wyoming have sentimental bronze statues of cowboys (or Indians) and their faithful horses – Sheridan has its share.

After Sheridan I headed north into BIG HORN County, Montana (different from the one in Wyoming), and into what had been a flood zone a week or so before. Montana was much greener than Wyoming, but the Little Bighorn River was alarmingly high. Water filled the ditches and glinted up from the fields. Cumulus clouds rode low overhead – it was like driving under a fogbank. I stopped for the night in Hardin, a town full of Indians, and sat for a while in



the park. Indians were playing volleyball; at the corner of the park was a plaque with a portrait of Custer. Mixed message there.



The water had receded enough that I was able to visit the Little Bighorn Battlefield without incident. The battle took place in 1876, and by 1879 the government had set the land aside for a military cemetery. Over the years more land was added to what became the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. Most of this land has had over a century to return more or less to what it was before: a natural grassland complete with native flora and fauna. It is a magnificent sight, eerily quiet now even beyond the graves

– nothing but wind and bird song and buzz of insects. Many of the graves are those of Indians who fell at the battle – they have Indian religious or national symbols rather than crosses on their headstones.



The small town of Crow Agency, Montana, recently flooded, had dried out but still seemed like a typical depressed hard-luck Indian town of the kind often seen in the far West. But the adjacent Crow Indian Reservation was different – virtually untouched by the flood or by time, except for

the road and a few fields and barbed-wire fences. It was brilliantly green after the rains (which the battlefield area was not), and went on for mile after mile. I drove almost due west over a 41-mile stretch of Indian highway, the only sensible way to get from Crow Agency to Carbon County. The grass was so fresh and rich and crunchy-looking I longed to be a cow myself and graze my way across the hills. I would have preferred a career path as a milk cow, or even better as a stud bull, rather than be a hamburger cow. But you can't force these things. "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen." Matthew 22:13-14.



The road was as empty as any I have ever traveled. Except for the power lines and the road itself, there was usually no way to tell it wasn't still 1875, before the unfortunate battle. Hogback ridges and bluffs littered the landscape, but covered in green grass.

I stopped on the Reservation and sat in my portable camp chair to watch the hills – it was the first time it felt warm enough to do this.

I listened as the silence faded, again, beneath the calls of birds and insects. The clouds sailed by, and whenever one came between me and the sun I felt a sudden chill. (I spent quite a while in such reveries on this trip, whenever the often still rainy weather permitted.) The flower season was mostly over, but there were some white and yellow daisy-like blossoms, and spiky purple racemes of mountain lupine. (The ones at left are from Idaho, but they looked the same in Montana.) The GPS lady went a little nuts on the Reservation, always telling me to turn onto dirt tracks or crash through fences into damp pastures, in a lunatic robot attempt to find the shortest way through. Then came the end of the paved Indian highway – it was a gravel road from Pryor to Edgar. The unpaved road looked more lived-in than the paved one.



After that I came finally into CARBON County, Montana, way west of where I had already been and where I needed to go. I had to go through Billings, through Hardin again where I had started off the day, well over 200 miles east (and through four counties already collected) before I hit the next new county. I'm not ashamed to say I did some of this on the Interstate, although I couldn't go 90 mph as I wished to because the car vibrated horribly at any speed over 60. Later I discovered that the front tires had no treads at all, and indeed the steel belting was easily visible where the rubber had worn away. Thank you, Lord Ganesha, for protecting me from blowout.



I stopped for the night in Forsyth, Montana, a railroad junction. Forsyth is a strange town, bisected by an active railroad yard (Burlington Northern,

carrying mostly coal). The “historic district” is on one side, spacious frame houses with neatly tended yards, and on the other, *wrong* side of the tracks, slatternly prefabs and rusted tricycles. There was a café, open 24 hours a day under contract to the railroad – I had dinner there, and breakfast the next day. It rained that night, and the Weather Channel warned of tornadoes in my corner of the county, advising me to head for the cellar, not that I had a cellar in my flimsy motel. I was awakened several times by sirens and tornado warnings, but there were no actual tornadoes where I was. It rained an awful lot during my trip, though. I didn’t see any floods, but there was a lot of water where it shouldn’t have been (see above). The next day I saw two moose, placidly grazing.



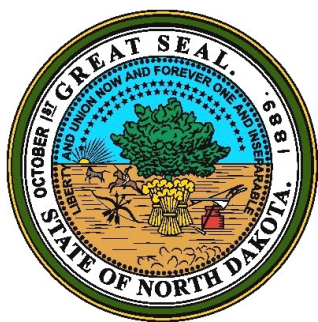
Toward the edges, southeast Montana began to look more like wilderness than farmland. Scrub, brush, high mounds, deep gullies, sawtooth mountain ridges, stands of fir and (along the streams) cottonwood. When it wasn’t raining I continued to stop and sit in my camp chair and listen to the chirps and caws and thrums. Shining sage and leafy green whatsis plants, tall grasses waving out to the distant bluffs. Snakes and field mice coiled and crouched, hidden in the tall grasses, invisible to me but not to the hawks. The sun was hot when it wasn’t raining; the sky grew blindingly bright behind cloudy cover.

FALLON County, and suddenly the green tops came off the mounds, exposing whitish rock. Small cones looked like barnacles (small until you got close to them, that is). These are



some of the most remote, lonely parts of the lower 48. Barbed wire, but no cows, except one lonely bull all by himself – taking a time out? Bad bull! A sign said ROAD WORK NEXT 9 MILES, and then almost at once I was across the state line into North Dakota, a state I had not been to for 29 years. It felt good to be back.

I was just going to skitter along the border in the Dakotas, but I didn't like the look of the unpaved road that had beckoned so invitingly from the pages of my DeLorme state atlas. So I pressed on to Bowman, North Dakota, where I spent the night; in the morning



decided to do an extra tier of counties, since I was in the neighborhood anyway. North Dakota was flatter and more agricultural than Eastern Montana. Smell of new-mown grass; distant lowing. I picked my way along gravel roads between the fields, the shortest routes to the county lines.



SLOPE, BOWMAN, HETTINGER, ADAMS.

And then another state line: South Dakota! More of the same: PERKINS, HARDING, BUTTE. The ND/SD state line was a new one for me, as was the difficult SD/MT line, hard to approach, which I had to get to by a detour onto a gravel road (crossing over into CARTER County, Montana). Only ten more state lines to go! The last one for me will probably be KY/MO, which runs entirely along the Mississippi River with no bridges. I don't know what I'll do there now that the ferry has shut down. Perhaps hire a skiff or a pirogue for the crossing?

In Perkins County I went to check out the Geographical Center of the United States. This is the place on which, if the United States were a piece of cardboard, it would balance on the point of a pencil. When there were only 48 states the GCOTUS was near Lebanon, Kansas. Adding Alaska and Hawaii moved it to a site near Belle Fourche, South Dakota.

For more on how to calculate a geographic center, see

<http://www.apprendre-en-ligne.net/blog/docu/centerus.pdf>.

Exactly how the center is calculated now that parts are separated by water and a chunk of Canada I am not sure. But mine is not to reason why.

The Belle Fourche Chamber of Commerce maintains a very handsome Geographic Center monument in their town. It is more than 12 miles away from the actual center, but they do this

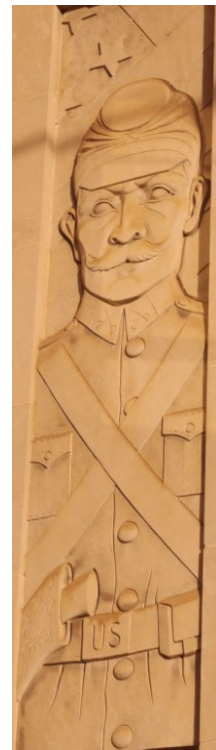


as a “service” for visitors, so they can say they’ve been to the center without actually going there. That seems more like a disservice to me; I insisted on going to the actual site, on land whose owner unaccountably doesn’t want tourists coming to take pictures. There is nothing there but a flag on a fence several miles up an unpaved road. But part of the way up this road the floods had taken out a bridge (above), so that was it for *that* pilgrimage. I continued on to Belle Fourche and found a small motel away from the highway. Five large white-haired bikers were waiting in the parking lot for the owner to show up; I made a sixth peaceful geezer.

By the end of the week I was ceasing to gawk, as the landscape was growing familiar. That is one of the main purposes of these trips – to get to know a part of the country well enough that it no longer seems strange. But still I was glad to be on the last leg of the journey – back into Wyoming (CROOK), back into Montana *again* (POWDER RIVER, the last of the Montana counties: there’s state #26 finished!), and then back into Wyoming one more time (CAMPBELL: there’s #27!). After a night in Gillette, I coasted back to Casper.



I had a final day in Casper, which I spent seeing the sights. When you set a GPS on “shortest route” instead of “fastest route,” it turns every chance it gets and takes you through the residential part of town rather than just to the strip. So I idled along the Casper streets and saw quite a bit of the town, including especially the 1930s courthouse with its Art Deco panels (see sides). I also took a look at the appropriately ugly, unfriendly and forbidding Dick Cheney Federal Building. The North Platte River was filled close to its banks; if it had been a cup a person would have leaned down to take a first sip rather than risk spilling coffee.



These images of the courthouse panels are from the Internet – I took pictures of them myself, but somehow they didn’t make it into the camera. I don’t usually travel with a camera, finding as Susan Sontag famously said that photographing can be a substitute for experience, but I did this time in order to record flood

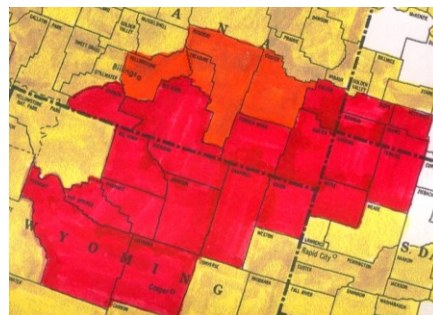
scenes if I encountered any. And indeed three of the images in this letter are mine – they are set off by red borders. But I found that, having the camera, I kept thinking: should I take a picture of this? or that? There’s another sight – should I record it? It took almost no time at all before the camera started to intrude into my experience. Instead of *seeing*, I was *evaluating for photography*. I was becoming Snapshot Man, the kind of tourist I never wanted to be. I think I will continue to leave my camera at home, or at least keep it in the trunk of the car, to be fished out only on exceptional occasions.



Also in Casper, along with a reconstruction of the old Fort Caspar (so named after Lt. Caspar Collins because there was already a Fort Collins named for his father), was the National Historic Trails Interpretive Center. The Oregon, Mormon Pioneer, California, and Pony Express Trails all passed through Casper (red arrow), situated as it is on the bank of the North Platte River. Many thousands trekked across the country on these trails, on journeys that took months, in covered wagons drawn by horses or oxen, starting out fully provisioned and then jettisoning most of the load to save weight, often dying along the way. The journals of the survivors stressed not only the privations but the boredom: “every day the same thing,” one of them wrote, “the same thing over and over.”

On my last night in Wyoming I went to the College National Finals Rodeo, which had run all week, and watched college students compete in bull riding, bronco riding, calf roping (the boys had to lasso a steer and tie it down, the girls only had to lasso), goat tying (the same confused goat was used several times in a row), team roping and steer wrestling. Although the performances rarely approached a professional level, it was fun and a suitably western coda to my trip. The next day, June 17, I flew from Casper to Denver and from Denver to San Francisco, having just left the ground the second time when the United Airlines computers crashed. Since I was already in the air my flight was allowed to continue, although when I got to San Francisco the baggage claim screens were all blank. If the outage had come a little later I might still be in Denver today.

Final score: 1548 miles, 21 new counties; current count 2185 counties, or 69.74%, 27 states finished. I keep inching toward 2200 and toward 70%, and hope to break through on both counts next month in North Carolina. Meanwhile here’s the map I filled in along the way: yellow means done earlier, red means new counties on this trip, and orange means earlier-done counties revisited on this trip. White counties are still untouched. I prefer to think of this as *orderly* rather than *compulsive*.



David

July 2011