

Dear Friends,

There sure are a lot of counties in the United States! In 1971 I made not quite a vow, but at least a resolution, to go to all of them. More than 40 years later I'm still at it, which shows a certain lack of application.

But that's how I found myself on March 4 on a plane to Atlanta, which was only 400 miles further east as the crow flies than Memphis where I wanted to go.¹ Then I changed planes in the quaint and charming Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, which is more than a fifth the size of all of Manhattan, and flew back the other way to Memphis.² On this flight I sat next to a four-stripe airline pilot who was studying a magazine about model railroading. (There's a lesson there, but what is it?) I made it to the car rental counter about 10 minutes *after* it was set to close. But I did make it, and hooked up my GPS, and glided toward a not-very-together Motel 6 (more like a Motel 4½) just off Union Street, the downtown strip. Whoosh!



The next day I stopped at Target to pick up a cooler and a folding chair, standard equipment for these jaunts (it is cheaper to buy them new each time and leave them behind than to pay to bring them on the plane). Then I headed northeast out of Memphis, which is at the extreme southwestern corner of Tennessee. TIPTON and LAUDERDALE were the first new counties before I rolled into the parking lot of Alex Haley's childhood home in Henning. This was to have been my first piece of tourism – there is a sleek modern museum and interpretive center behind the house. But it was Monday, and the house and museum are closed on Mondays, and so began a persistent pattern of not actually going to most of the sights along the way. They were B-list sights, anyway, but still.

Until Henning I was mostly on large highways, to get out of metropolitan Memphis, but after that I took to the small country roads. It was a winter landscape in early March. Brown fields were full of stubble from last year's cotton – a few white wisps remained. Some bright green fields, growing what? It looked like the beginnings of spring wheat or alfalfa, with some orange wild grasses free-riding where they



¹ Old wheeze. A man walked into a crossroads town rolling a car wheel with a flat tire. "How far is it to Centerville?" he asked a bystander. "About twenty miles as the crow flies." "Well," said the man, "how far if the damn crow has to walk and roll a damn tire?" I've waited almost 60 years to tell that joke. Maybe you had to be there.

² Atlanta Airport: 1902 hectares. Manhattan: 8746 hectares. Ratio: 1:4.6, or about 21.7%. You could look it up.



could. Fields were dusted with purple lupine and ironwood. Trees still bare (except for evergreen pine and fir and spruce), but the tips of their branches just coming into red and green buds. Pear trees were already full of showy white flowers. Cows and horses munched on what was left of last year's hay. Cattails by roadside swamp; stands of trees bordered plowed fields. HAYWOOD, CROCKETT, GIBSON, MADISON, CARROLL, HENDERSON, CHESTER, DECATUR, PERRY, BENTON. I filled in all the

counties north of my last visit, as if Tennessee were a coloring book. I did not visit the Tennessee Cotton Museum of the South, because it was quarter to five in the afternoon when I saw the sign.

In Benton County I did go to the Tennessee River Freshwater Pearl Farm at Birdsong Creek. Their website promised a tour, but there was no tour, just a video, a small museum, and the chance to go down to the water and see the booms. The booms are floating PVC pipes from which jillions of mussels (not oysters) hang in baskets and grow pearls around implanted cores.³ It was very mildly interesting, but then what did I expect? Mussels are placid animals, not a lot of roaring or thrashing about at feeding time. Nothing to do really but hang there and secrete and wait to be pried open. Our own lives are much different, because we have the right to vote.

Back on the road: HUMPHREYS, HOUSTON⁴, STEWART. It was Super Tuesday and voting time for the Republicans of Tennessee! To say that I found evidence of a conservative tendency would be understating it. When I checked into my motel that evening I asked about cable TV, because I wanted to watch the Super Tuesday results. Did they get



³ For more on the process, see http://www.tennessee river pearls.com/about_freshwater_pearls.php.

⁴ Named after Sam Houston, who was Governor of Tennessee before he was Governor of Texas.

MSNBC? Well, sir, we got Fox News. But how about MSNBC? The good ol' boy behind the counter paused, looked at my California driver's license, and said OK, *now* I get it.⁵



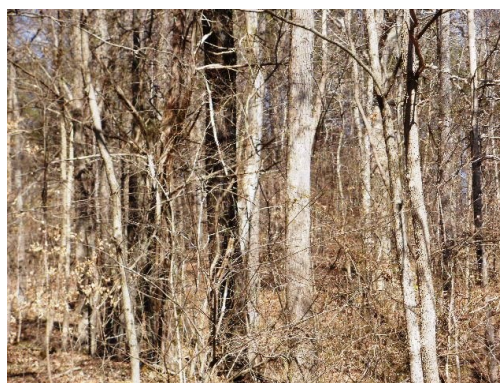
The next day I took a little detour to a ferry crossing on the Cumberland River. I drove onto the M/V *Captain John* and let myself be taken across. On the other side I took out my Target folding chair and sat for a while on the quiet river bank, chilling.

TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION	
FERRY RECEIPT NO.: 486754	
FERRY LOCATION: CUMBERLAND CITY, TN	
CAR <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	TRUCK <input type="checkbox"/>
DATE: 3, 6, 12	
SIGNED: Capt. H. Paul Ritchie	
DT-1316 08/92	

Then I took the same ferry back and kept on going, past Fort Donelson, where Grant famously demanded unconditional surrender (I didn't stop to visit), and on through



pale thin groves of beech and aspen, sometimes, and other times plowed fields, or cool lanes of evergreens. Occasionally there would come a flash of brilliant yellow forsythia, or a bright red cardinal. But usually: brown and green. MONTGOMERY, HENRY, WEAKLEY, and then at a quiet, unmarked



crossroads was the Kentucky state line.



Kentucky didn't look that different from Tennessee, except for the daffodils – none for hundreds of miles in Tennessee, and then they were everywhere. GRAVES, CALLOWAY, MARSHALL, LIVINGSTON, LYON.



The TVA has built enormous dams and power plants on the Tennessee River. On the next page I show a map of the Tennessee Watershed – on this trip I only visited the far northwestern part. Where the river suddenly broadens is where it has been held back by a dam. You can drive on

⁵ Rick Santorum won Tennessee with 37%.

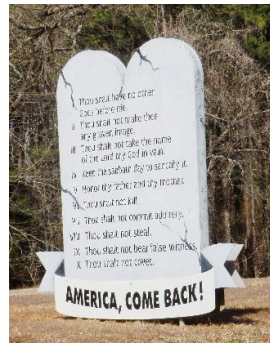
the dam I visited near Grand Rivers KY, called the Kentucky Dam – below are pictures of the dam and a small part of its power plant.

The dam at Grand Rivers created a huge lake, called Kentucky Lake, separated from a similar lake (formed by damming the nearby Cumberland) by a strip of parkland called The Land Between the Lakes. There is a buffalo and elk prairie there, and as I am a sucker for buffalo, and needed to enter Trigg County anyway, my plan had been to cross a bridge over Kentucky Lake, enter the park from the west, see the buffalo and the elk, and continue north. But the bridge was closed, and I had to drive all the way around the northern part of the lake, then south at least to the Trigg County line, and then turn around and go back. I did it because I needed Trigg County, but except for no farms The Land Between the Lakes is not all that different from The Land Beyond the Lakes. So when I hit Trigg County I wrote off the buffalo (and, sadly, the elk too) and headed back north. TRIGG, CALDWELL, CRITTENDEN.



There were some hills now, rather than just flat farm country; the trees grew thicker, gray-green started to dominate over gray-brown. The people in western TN and KY are distinctly southern, and their accents are exceptionally heavy and hard for this Yankee to understand. Also a little hard to understand: the thick coating of Bible everywhere. Below are a few pictures (most of the pictures in this letter I took myself, a change from my former practice of swiping from the Internet). The scene of Jesus praying is a mural in the Reagan Café (!) in Reagan TN. The text is from Hebrews 13:15 – “For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” After trying the hamburger, I thought maybe a better choice might have been John 4:32: “I have meat to eat that ye know not of.” To make up for the hamburger, I treated myself to a very diabetes-unfriendly slice of

sugary pecan pie. “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink.” Matthew 6:25.



Crittenden County was the last of Kentucky for a while, as I drove onto the ferryboat *Lori Jo* to cross the Ohio River to Cave-in-Rock, Illinois. Cave-in-Rock sounds like a good place to be from – no one could ever trump *that* for rural color. Actually the cave was a brigands’ haunt for quite a while during the 19th century, when there were pirates on the Ohio. I planned to visit the famous cave itself, even though it was down a set of questionable stone steps by the riverbank.

But when I got there a harsh and wintry rain was falling, so I added it to the list of tourist sites I came right up to but didn’t see.

In passing from Kentucky to Illinois, I crossed a state line I had never crossed before. I had had only 10 left out of more than 100 – now I had only nine.⁶ The KY-IL border is one of those where things unaccountably seem very different on the other side. TN-KY, no big deal; KY-IL, and suddenly it felt *northern*, even *northeastern*.



It rained all day – maybe that’s why the trees looked dark brown instead of greenish-gray. It was moist down on the old river road along the Ohio, and not just because of the rain. Brown fields, brown hills, brown river; russet grasses gave the scene an autumnal feeling.

⁶ Twelve, really – MI-IL and MI-MN have open-water borders in the Great Lakes; there is also a NY-RI open-water border with a seasonal ferry. I have conveniently tailored my definition of *line* to exclude open-water boundaries. Call it cheating if you like.

I was in a real forest now, and the hills grew very round. I sheltered from the rain in a municipal gazebo in Elizabethtown. Here's the river road, and a view of Elizabethtown. HARDIN, POPE, MASSAC.



I crossed a rusty old bridge back into Kentucky (MCCRACKEN County) to visit Paducah. There were some things I wanted to see there, and I varied my routine by not skipping them. The River Heritage Museum was not much, but I was glad I saw the National



Quilt Museum of the United States, which had many lovely examples on display as well as a terrific bookstore. Not all their display quilts are in the standard patterns of stars or zigzags or patchwork; some of the best are stand-alone designs. I spent a long time with one done in bold Art Deco – I searched for a picture of it later, in the museum and on the Internet. No luck, but here instead is Betty Busby's *Cherry Trees*.

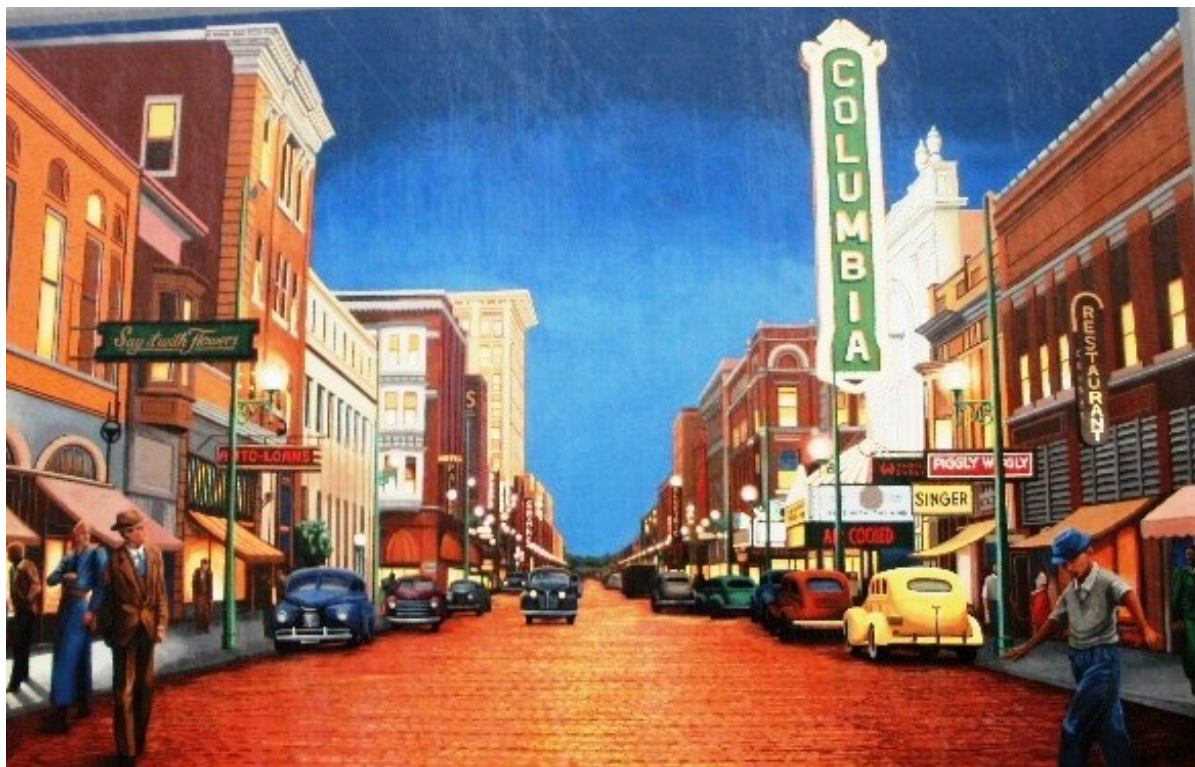
Alben W. Barkley (1877-1956), a Paducah lawyer, was Vice President in Truman's second term. When (after losing the 1952 New Hampshire primary to Estes Kefauver) Truman decided not to run for another term,

Barkley was a presidential candidate for two days until the labor bosses decided he was too old (at 74). They were right about that, as he died before the end of what would have been his term of office. A room at Whitehaven, a historic house that has been transformed into a highway rest area and state "welcome center," is set aside as his only shrine. Although in theory I was supposed to wait for a Whitehaven tour group, the



kindly lady at the front let me in to the Barkley Room to see his two desks (one from his home and one from his downtown Paducah law office, which I had passed by – it is someone else's law office now, but there's a sign). I saw his hats and his vice-presidential car flag and a hand-painted Barkley-for-Senator necktie.⁷

Along the levee at Paducah there is a series of murals illustrating the history of the city. One that struck me especially was this view of Paducah in the 1940s. It was quite a sprightly place back then. Need I say that it doesn't look like this any more? The Columbia Theatre is long closed – I heard that the city owns it now, and anyone promising to fix it up can have it for a dollar.



After Paducah I got back on the road and back to Illinois (PULASKI, ALEXANDER), and rolled into Cairo (pronounced *Karo*, like the syrup) in the latish afternoon. Cairo, on a finger of land where the Ohio joins the Mississippi, used to be a roaring town. Now it is an amazing scene of devastation, and I say this as a connoisseur of devastated main

⁷ He was the first Vice President to have his own special flag. He was also the only Vice President to marry while in office, and could give 16 campaign speeches in one day. What a guy!

streets. Buildings were not just shuttered, they were decaying on the spot. It reminded me of the scenes in “Life After People,” the television series on what would happen to the cities of the world if everyone suddenly disappeared.⁸ Crumbling structures, ruins and empty gaps – the whole commercial district of Cairo looked like a sci-fi dystopia. No wonder the steamboats don’t stop here any more.⁹ I roamed around for a while with my jaw hanging open, taking pictures. I found a motel that looked like a crack house, but it was so ratty even I wouldn’t stay there. In fact, I wouldn’t have stayed in Cairo even if I had found a proper motel – the place oozed dread, as if there were contagion in the air. As clouds of starlings wheeled overhead I fled across the river into Kentucky.



In Wickliffe KY, the next county seat (BALLARD), I found an acceptable motel, but at 6:10 it was too late (!) to find any dinner except for pizza at the convenience store. So I pressed on, miles out of my way, to LaCenter KY, where I found a motel and a restaurant. This seems like a good place to mention some rules for southern dining.

- Don’t let them dip everything in batter and deep-fry it. I was in catfish country and found most places would agree to do the catfish on the grill instead. (This also meant that the catfish were reasonably fresh and local rather than breaded and frozen a thousand miles away.)
- The no-frying rule goes for vegetables too – left without guidance southern cooks will deep-fry everything. Some local dishes are good that way – fried okra, for example, and fried green tomatoes. But fried corn on the cob? Give me a break.

⁸ For some fascinating excerpts, see <http://www.history.com/shows/life-after-people/videos/playlists/what-will-happen-after-people#life-after-people-buildings> and following links. For some non-simulated excerpts based on existing abandoned areas, see <http://www.history.com/shows/life-after-people/videos/playlists/life-after-people-extended-scenes#extended-scene-hashima-island> and following links.

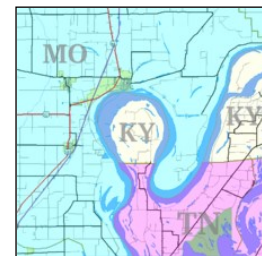
⁹ East St. Louis, also in Illinois, is even worse – there you can hardly even tell where the buildings used to be.

- Don't let them season *anything*. If you do, *everything* will come out drenched in Cajun-style pepper.
- Easy on the starches. Potatoes *and* biscuits *and* hush puppies (deep-fried cornmeal batter) may be a few too many carbs.
- Don't let them put cheese on it.
- For iced tea: don't sweeten it. It comes pre-sweetened unless you ask for *unsweet*.
- For dessert: don't let them heat it up. Southern waitresses would heat cheesecake if they had any.
- For breakfast: always go for the grits. With butter and some sweetening – yum!

Back in Kentucky (and Tennessee) I was in the valley of the Mississippi, and there was significant marginal flooding. Up to now I had seen only the occasional flooded pasture, but here it seemed like there was water everywhere. Roads were closed; water glinted from furrows and covered whole fields. CARLISLE, HICKMAN, FULTON; OBION, LAKE.



One reason I dipped back into Tennessee, beyond picking up two more counties, was to go to the Kentucky Bend exclave, a place that had long fascinated me on the map. The line setting the southern boundary of Kentucky ran west to the Mississippi River, but the people who prescribed that boundary didn't know that an ancient earthquake had twisted the river channel north for a while before turning it back south. As a result there were *two* places where the line ran west to the Mississippi, and a little knob of Kentucky stood isolated, only reachable through Tennessee. Here's a map. Such a place was catnip to me, and I had to see it.



The exclave (*Bubbleland*, it is sometimes called) surprised me when I got there. It was absolutely flat, flatter than Kansas, except for the levees and some berms to hold back flooding. There was practically nothing there but cotton fields. Especially striking was the absence of people. I saw a few cars, but not a single standing person, not all that surprising when you realize that the whole population in 17+ square miles was only 11 people by the 2000 census (in 1880 it was 303). There was an unearthly quiet about the

place – it felt like an enchanted kingdom in a folk tale. Some of the ground was saturated or flooded, water in bright green fields reflecting the sapphire blue of the sky. One field was full of gulls, who ignored all the other fields – had someone used fishmeal as a fertilizer there only? I watched a heron’s ungainly rise from a flooded copse.

The still, enchanted quality made Bubbleland one of the highlights of my trip (Cairo was the other). I’m really glad I went there. But I don’t know what it says about me that I was willing, indeed eager, to drive 60 miles out of my way to visit this place just because of its anomalous boundary. Well, perhaps I do.¹⁰

Back in Kentucky, I moseyed down to a lonely landing on the riverbank and pushed a button to summon the Hickman-Dorena Ferry, the only link between Kentucky and Missouri (cell phones don’t work there). It felt kind of lonesome for a while – was that button attached to anything? But eventually the *Dorena II* chugged over the horizon and pulled up to the shore, and I drove on. The Mississippi in these parts looks amazingly big, almost too wide to be a river.



At the other end, after my second new state line crossing, I was in Missouri. More flatlands, more green and brown, more purple wildflowers. More birds, too, than I had seen on the other side of the river, and lots more flooded fields and roads. It looked a lot like Kentucky Bend, but without the eeriness.

I was now in the New Madrid Floodway, which was deliberately flooded last year when the Army Engineers blew up parts of the levee to save Cairo, of all places, from inundation.¹¹ MISSISSIPPI, NEW MADRID – because of the washed-out roads I saw a good deal more of these counties than I’d planned to. Here’s a levee wall – it may not have been from exactly here, but there were plenty that looked just like it.



¹⁰ This article by an Associated Press reporter gives a really good feeling of the Kentucky Bend: <http://archive.showmenews.com/2002/Aug/20020804Feat006.asp>.

¹¹ For an evocative video about this event, which also gives a good sense of the area, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT78JC9WBLQ>.



At New Madrid I got onto the Interstate to swoop over the high bridge back into Tennessee, both to pick up the last Tennessee county (DYER) and to cross my third new state line of the trip.¹² Then back into Missouri and across the bootheel (PEMISCOT, DUNKLIN) toward Arkansas.¹³

In Arkansas (after crossing my fourth new state line) I trusted the sturdy local gravel roads more than I had in Kentucky. Roads like this give the best view of a countryside you can get in a car, but it is easy to get lost at unmarked crossings. I found my GPS worked really well here. It told me unerringly where I was, and what the road I was on was called (if it had a name), and when I chose as a destination the closest hamlet that seemed like it would be on a direct line from wherever I was, and toggled back and forth between *fastest route* and *shortest route* as needed, it guided me on the right path. Sometimes I still ended up facing a muddy earthen track, and had to back up for a while to avoid getting stuck. But usually I came out, dusty but safe, more or less where I expected to be.

There had been a few hills in Kentucky and southern Illinois, but it was mostly flat. The real hills started north of Pocahontas AR – I was in the Ozarks. They rolled gently at first, then not quite so gently, then with roller-coaster dips and turns. Wooded ridges appeared, and forested hills much gentler than the Appalachians but still serious. Rain darkened the woods. Subtle exchanges of green and brown. Pheasants rose from covert. Deer leapt across unpaved tracks. More rain. Sky dead white, wet road reflecting white too, green and brown now bleached to paleness. CLAY, GREENE, RANDOLPH, and then north back into Missouri.



¹² Would I be obsessive enough to go all the way from San Francisco to the OR-NV and ID-NV borders, in the middle of a remote desert, no new counties within a thousand miles, just so I could say I'd crossed the lines? I wouldn't rule it out.

¹³ The bootheel is in Missouri at all, instead of in Arkansas where it belongs, because in 1818 a well-connected planter had enough influence in Washington to get the borders of the Missouri and Arkansas Territories modified to suit his preference. See <http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/history/bootheel.asp>. For more on eccentricities in the state boundaries, see Mark Stein's very entertaining *How the States Got Their Shapes* (2008). For true mavens, though, the Bible on the subject is the endlessly entrancing *Boundaries of the United States and the Several States*, by Franklin K. Van Zandt (U. S. Department of the Interior Geological Survey Bulletin 1212 (1966)). Copies can be found cheap at www.bookfinder.com.

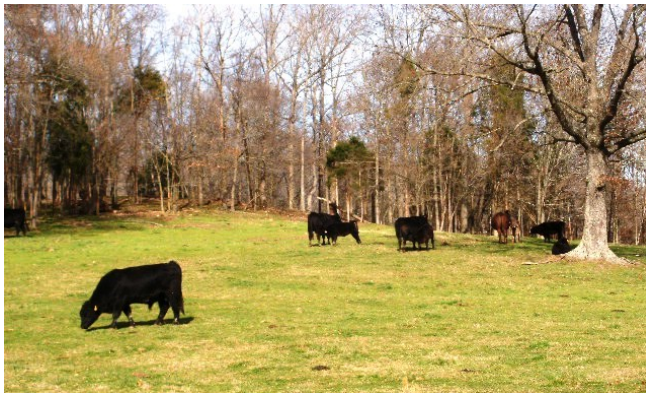


Ozark Missouri was lovely, hills and woods and fat farms and red barns, more homelike and inviting than the flat cotton fields of the bottomland. The country was well forested now, with really steep and winding hills, and occasional tilted meadows.¹⁴ There was iron mining in this part of the state, and a wild and woolly past, but things are pretty tranquil now.¹⁵

My route took me on numbered county gravel roads, two levels below the lettered state highways and the numbered ones above those (four levels actually, if you count US highways and the Interstates). I prefer pavement to gravel because the noise and the bumpiness get wearing after a while, but for relatively short distances gravel is good. You can stop and turn off the engine, sit on your Target folding chair, and listen to silence and birdsong. RIPLEY, REYNOLDS, WAYNE, BOLLINGER, MADISON, IRON, ST. FRANCOIS, WASHINGTON, CRAWFORD, REYNOLDS, DENT, OREGON.¹⁶ I think it was in Ironton that I found this charming clock on a county building, based on the state seal. Compare the seal shown on page 10, at the beginning of the Missouri section of this letter.



Back into Arkansas, finally, and on my way home. More cows; more flooded fields,

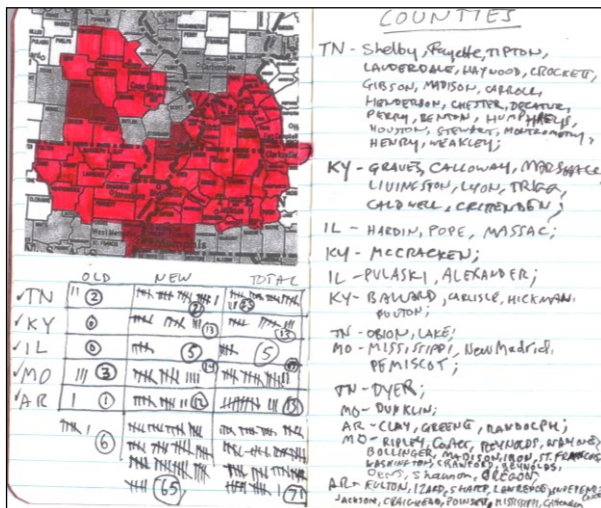
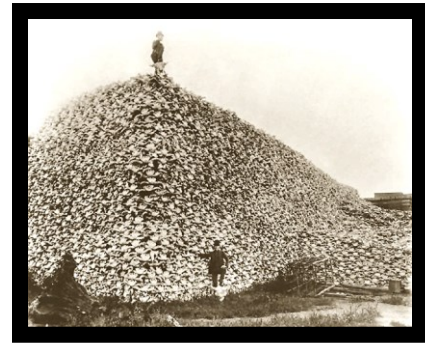


¹⁴ It was for this reason that I thought of calling this a letter from Motnilarky rather than from the Mississippi Valley, because the Ozarks aren't anybody's valley. For that matter the Tennessee, Cumberland and Ohio Valleys aren't part of the Mississippi Valley either. *Motnilarky* – to scan, I decided, with *oligarchy* rather than *soliloquy* – covered it all with a word made of the state abbreviations MO-TN-IL-AR-KY. But in the end it didn't sound right.

¹⁵ I was only here because a bloc of east central Missouri counties lay across the clear path north I was trying to create on my map. So I had to take them out. What choice did I have, really?

¹⁶ Yes, there is an Oregon County MO. There's a Texas County too. Is that any stranger than Wyoming County WV or Indiana County PA? Or Iowa County WI, or Nevada County AR?

In Memphis I had one day left of the three extra days I had included in my itinerary so I wouldn't be rushed on the road. I had already been twice to the National Civil Rights Museum, and once to Graceland and the Slave Haven Underground Railroad Museum; and the Mississippi River Museum on Mud Island, with its enticing model of the whole river, was closed for the season as it always is when I'm in town. But the Pink Palace had a show called *Bison: An American Icon*. As mentioned I am a big bison fan, the buffalo being my totem animal, so I went to the show, and very depressing it was, too, all about the exterminations of the 19th century. Here are some barbarians gloating over a pile of skulls.



And that was it for my trip. Final score: 65 new counties (and six old ones), bringing my new total to 2271 (= 72.49%). I drove 1656 miles (about as far as from San Francisco to Omaha, or New York to Houston). When I got to the airport on March 15, the airline tried to put me in a middle seat even though I had reserved a window seat, but I couldn't allow that after all I had been through. So I channeled Alec Guinness in *Star Wars*, and using The Force told the clerk *You need to upgrade me, then*. "We need to upgrade you, then," he said,

submitting his will to mine, and I flew home in luxury. Still no food, but all the potato chips I wanted. And who says there is no free beer?

March 2012

