

THE COCKEYED CARAVAN

C'mon Get Happy!

Hello, world, hear the song that we're singin'!

Welcome to The Cockeyed Caravan! 54 days of fun, frolic, and wacky hijinks. You see....

We had a dream we'd go travelin' together. We'd spread a little lovin', then we'd keep movin' on.



And here we are!

After a false start on August 14th, we made it late last night to our first stop: beautiful St. Louis, Missouri. Well.... across the Mississippi River in none other than Granite City, Illinois. I must say the weather was delightful. Mid '60s after months of 100+ degrees in Dallas.

So, the Mississippi River. The Mighty Mississip. The Big Muddy. The Father of all Waters.



But hey! Whoa! Back up! Just what the heck are we up to?

During the next seven weeks, you, too, can travel with us as we retrace the footsteps, well... the paddle strokes of Lewis and Clark, that famous vaudeville team that set off on their bus and truck tour of exploration at the behest of that great and noble patriot, proponent of human rights, and third President of these United States, Thomas Jefferson, after he bought what became the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon Bonaparte. Uh.... just disregard the fact that Tom was a slaveholder. Guess he didn't think slaves were human. But hey, I'm just yakkin' and getting ahead of myself.

We all met up in Dallas.



After a bon voyage dinner, three of us got off bright and early on August 14th.



We even made it deep into Arkansas. Then we had a mishap and had to go back to Dallas.

But, with Undaunted Courage, our little corpse of discovery set off again on the 15th, and made it to our KOA at 1:30 this morning, after a grueling 13 hour RV drive.

Life in the RV is loud. It's difficult to hear your traveling companion over the echoing reverberations of the road noise in the RV. This promises to lead to much confusion and missed communication. In what will surely become a comic highlight of the trip, I was chatting with Peter about music. The subject of the theme song to *An Officer and a Gentleman* came up. Peter tried to talk to me about Jennifer Warren. However, what I heard was "Genital Warts" and I must confess that for the next 20 miles I was verily stumped as to what genital warts had to do with an Officer and a Gentleman.

After a fitful sleep in the fo'c'sle, I was up at 6:30 making our Land Yacht shipshape and Bristol Fashion before our crew embarked with Jake and Li, our first guest stars, for the Confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers at the site of Ft. Defiance, where William "Hot Pants" Clark taught his band of brothers the finer points of astronomy before taking off for the Great Beyond.



If you're a Huckleberry Finn fan, you may recall Huck and Jim float down the Mississippi River to Cairo Illinois, so that Jim can escape slavery by proceeding north on the Ohio. In case you were wondering, what they saw looked something like this:



The Mississippi is on your right, the Ohio on your left.

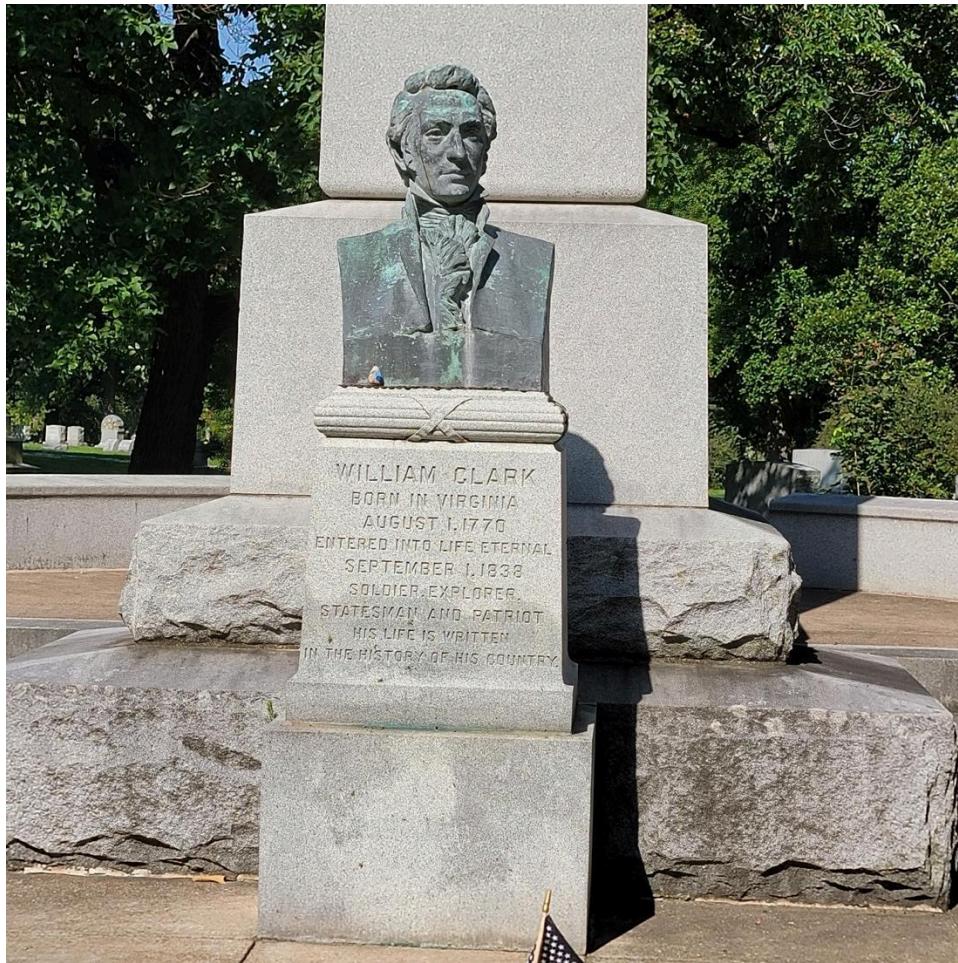
BTW, I've seen some sorry looking Texas towns in my time, but I haven't seen a sorrier looking town than Cairo, Illinois in a good long while. I felt sorry for the one lost soul I saw walking down the sidewalk with his skinny dog this afternoon.

So that's been my last couple of days. All in all, I'd say we've won friends and confluenced people. Hello? Is thing on?

And speaking of Samuel Clemens, we're off to Hannibal in the morning to paint a fence before returning in time for the Mets v. the Cards tomorrow night. I'm sure I'll have more to relate to you tomorrow. In the meantime, sleep well.

August 17, 2023: 12 Feet!

Our first excursion of the day involved trundling over to Florissant Boulevard in search of the grave of William Clark. We finally found him after inquiry with a man wielding a chainsaw. Mr. Leatherface did not know who William Clark was, but he gave me a map of the cemetery (which encompasses an area larger than the Hundred Acre Wood) and, after bidding him adieu as he smiled and throttled up his instrument of destruction, we found General Clark in the northwest quadrant of the Elysian Field.



The General was quite a guy, as you can see. Meriwether Lewis was placed in command by Mars Tom, who told him he could have anyone of this choosing as his second in command. Lewis chose Clark, his former commanding officer, to share the responsibilities of leading the Corps of Discovery.

While Lewis held the superior rank – Lewis as Captain to Clark’s Lieutenancy – they agreed they would be co-equals in authority and made sure the rest of the men knew that. It turned out to be a good plan, as you’ve probably heard.

After visiting General Clark’s final resting place, we crossed the Alps to visit Hannibal. No, not the Elephant Man and do me a fava by not Lectering me. The Hannibal in Missouri that was the childhood home of Samuel L. Clemens, better known as “Mark Twain” – derived from the Steamboat Pilot’s cry signaling a river depth of 12 feet; deep enough to accommodate a steamboat’s keel. You see, Mr. Clemens began his adulthood in fulfillment of his childhood dream – to be a Steamboat Pilot.



Sam's brother was also a Steamboat Pilot, but he got blowed up and Sam never got over it.

Here's a picture of Sam's boyhood house:



You'll notice the white fence next to the house. That's the Tom Sawyer fence.

My friend Dena told me Hannibal was worth a couple of hours if one is a fan. I'm a fan and Dena was right.

Had Hannibal not had the Mark Twain chip to cash in, I fear it would look like Cairo. Even with the Mark Twain cache, it looks like the beginnings of a ghost town. No traffic, no one on the streets. No sign of life except for the obnoxious calliope music emanating from the Mark Twain Riverboat, for which there were exactly six people queued up for the one-hour excursion on the Mississippi River. In fact, there is no shortage of Mark Twain reminders throughout the two block long Main Street – the Mark Twain Laundromat, the Mark Twain bowling alley, the Mark Twain industrial plumbing supply store. The Mark Twain....You get the idea.

After the half hour of exhausting the entirety of the tourist possibilities, we had our afternoon repast at the Mark Twain Dinette.



Yikes.

And so, with a taste in our mouths akin to Mr. Clemens' bittersweet musings upon attempting to recapture the uncapturable by returning to the town of his youth, we set off for our return to St. Louis.

Today's imponderable: Why is it every alluvial plain I've ever seen looks like Mississippi – ugly, monotonous, and deserted? And so it was as we wended our way back to the Granite City KOA.

After picking up Doug, we trotted off to Busch Stadium for the Mets vs. the Cardinals.



It was a meaningless game between two teams that are way out of the playoff picture. That said, Busch Stadium was charming. Old school vibe with its downtown red brick edifice conjuring the ghosts of Musial, Frisch, Hornsby, the Gashouse Gang, and Gibson. For the record, the Mets won 4-2. The game had a little of everything – three perfect innings by the Mets starter, a couple of home runs, a baserunning error, and some late innings strategy that didn't pay off.

We had our obligatory hot dogs, beer, and peanuts. We sang *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* during the Seventh Inning Stretch. The weather was perfect and the little kids in the stands were smiling and laughing. Not a bad night, all in all. In fact, not a bad day. A little history, a wistful memory of bygone youth, and the inimitable sounds of wood meeting cork and cork meeting leather. I think I'll quit while I'm ahead and leave you with some wise words from a wise and funny man.



— LEWIS & CLARK —
BOAT HOUSE AND MUSEUM

1050

OPEN
TODAY

When the Corps departed, St. Charles was a melting pot of French Canadians, Africans, Indians, English businessmen, and any number of hybrid combinations thereof, the amalgam of which eventually being referred to as "Creoles". Clark engaged a number of engages (en-gah-ZHAYS) to row and pole the keelboats upriver to the Mandan Indian villages in what is now North Dakota. I suppose that would make them "roly polys," although I have never heard them referred to as such. Nonetheless, my ancestor, Pierre Roi (later Americanized to "Peter Roy" was one of the engages. "Roy." Oy. That's like my 1967 baseball card of Roberto Clemente where he is referred to as "Bob.")

A seasoned woodsman who had proved his leadership skills, decisiveness and knowledge of native trading practices, Captain Meriwether Lewis was the private secretary of President Thomas Jefferson for three years. Lewis shared Jefferson's interest and determination to explore the land west of the Mississippi River. In preparation for the journey, Lewis was specially trained in botany, natural history, geology and astronomy. He commissioned the Keelboat, personally ordered provisions and even developed a secret code to report back to Jefferson.

Captain Lewis chose William Clark, his good friend and Army comrade, as the man to join him in leading the Expedition. Lewis died three years after the Expedition, on his way to submit his report to Jefferson, under circumstances that remain hotly disputed.

Captain William Clark was an outstanding frontiersman from Kentucky with a fiery temper and flaming red hair. He was a gifted leader who was able to train a group of frontiersmen into the well-disciplined Corps of Discovery through almost 8,000 miles of dangerous travel.

Clark was also a talented cartographer who faithfully recorded and mapped the route traveled by the Expedition. Because Captain Clark and Captain Lewis worked so well together, making joint decisions and sharing responsibilities, the Expedition became a model in leadership, teamwork and scientific discovery that continue to fascinate new generations. After the Expedition, Clark was territorial governor and remained in our region.

The Corps of Discovery Expedition Members

Sacagawea, a Shosone girl of 15

Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, her infant son

Toussaint Charbonneau, interpreter

York, an enslaved black man

George Drouillard

Seaman, a Newfoundland dog

Sgt John Ordway

Sgt Nathaniel Pryor

Sgt Charles Floyd, only man to die

Sgt Patrick Gass

Corporal Richard Warfington

Private Joseph Barter (LaLiberte)

Private John Boley

Private William Bratton

Private John Collins

Private John Colter

Private Pierre Cruzatte

Private John Dame

Private Jean Baptiste LeChamps

Private Joseph Field

Private Reuben Field

Private Robert Frazer

Private George Gibson

Private Silas Goodrich

Private Hugh Hall

Private Thomas P. Howard

Private Francois Labiche

Private Jean Baptiste LePage

Private Hugh McNeal

Private John Newman

Private John Potts

Private Moses Reed

Private John Robertson

Private George Shannon

Private John Shields

Private John B Thompson

Private Ebenezer Tuttle

Private William Werner

Private Isaac White

Private Alexander Hamilton Willard

Private Joseph Whitehouse

Private Richard Windsor

Private Peter Weiser

Engagé Pierre Primeau

Engagé Pierre Roi

Here's a picture of a keelboat.



St. Charles is a prosperous looking suburb of St. Louis. Its old town looks like a mix of Virginia colonial and New Orleans French Quarter. During the third weekend of August, St. Charles closes two entire streets along the River and hosts the largest craft fair in Missouri. Hence, it was pretty busy today with tons of vendors setting up for the weekend's activities. In honor of the fair, a keelboat replica will be roly-polyd up the River. Here it is with Peter checking things out.



Finally, we came to X Marks the Spot where L&C shoved off at 3:30 in the morning after a partying until well past midnight, cheered on by forty assorted denizens of St. Charles who were, no doubt, feeling no pain. The point of departure is memorialized with a statue of those two wacky wanderers and Lewis' Newfoundland dog Seaman, the first enrolled member of the Corps and for whom Lewis paid \$20 – a lot of money in 1803.



What did they see when they pushed off from the dock? I suspect it looked a lot then like it looks today.



And off they went.

We shall hear more of their peregrinations, but first, we had to check out the Gateway Arch. Boy, Hidey! It's the biggest dang MAC-Donalds I ever done seed!



I'll have me one of them Big Macs! Nyuk! Nyuk!

In actuality, The Gateway Arch, commissioned in 1960 and completed in 1965 at a cost of three million dollars (20 million in today's money), at 630 feet tall is the second tallest dedicated man-made structure in the world. And what is the first, you ask? Oui, oui Gustave. La Tour Eiffel. The Gateway Arch is also the smallest of the National Parks at only a few acres.

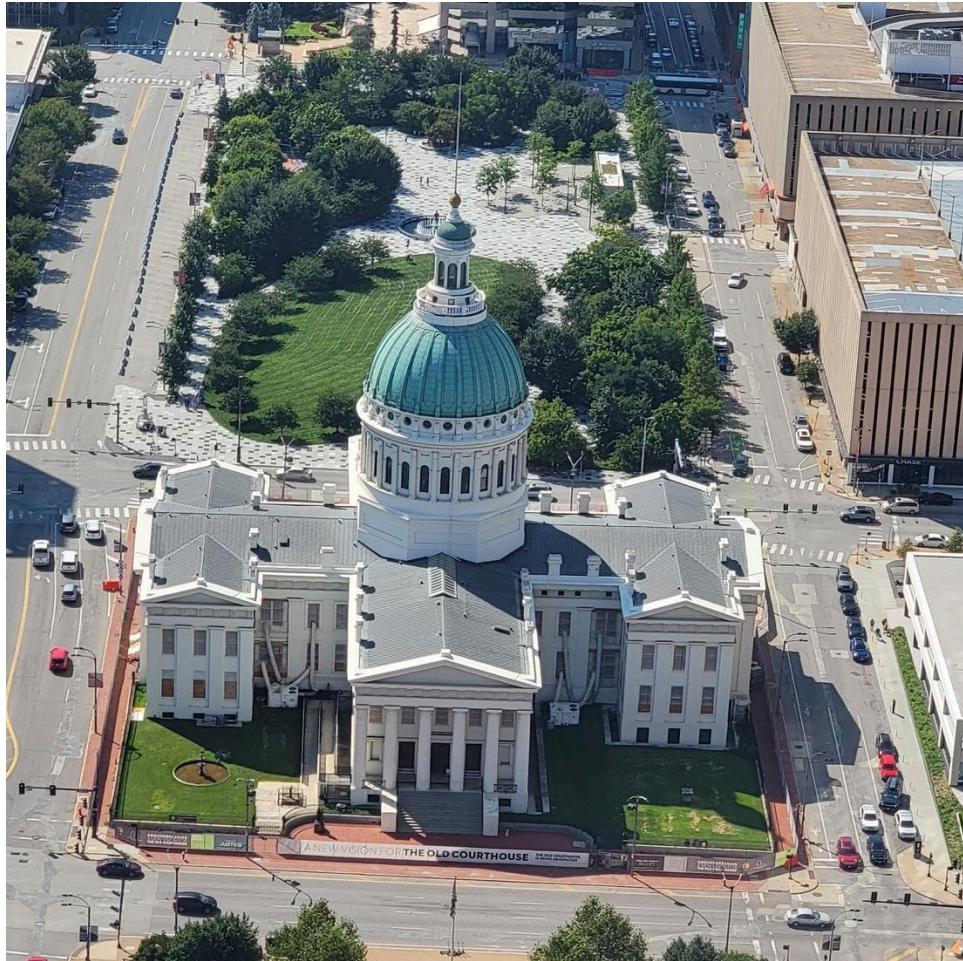


Peter and I took one small step for man by blasting off for the top of the Arch in a pod-like gondola that would not allow us to sit upright for the 4-minute ascent. We named our pod "Dave." Dave looked something like what you see below. Dave rotated to accommodate the curvature of the arch during his ascent – unlike an elevator or escalator, both of which would have required multiple transfers during the trip to the top. Dave is really smart.



And what did we see when we reached the top? Not much different from what you can see when you fly into Lindbergh field. But it was a Spirited ride, I must say. Get it? Spirit? St. Louis? Lindbergh? Sheesh. Doesn't anyone appreciate the light classics anymore?

What we did see when we reached the top was an aerial view of the U.S. Courthouse at which the enslaved Dred Scott began his tortured and futile journey through the Federal Court system in a vain attempt to win his freedom. Thanks a lot, Mr. Justice Taney.



After Dave safely deposited us once again on terra firma, we stocked up on provisions at the Granite City Wally World; populated by several large tattooed persons clogging the aisles with their motorized vehicles. Charming. But worth it as we rendezvoused with Doug, Jake and Li for a terrific meal with fun and fellowship.



Now it is late. I am showered, the garbage is in the dumpster, and I am ready to climb into my hammock for a night of blissful slumber before departing for Kansas City in the morning; assuming the stock car race that I can hear from my bunk ever stops. The roar of the engines takes me back to the spate of dead teenager songs that were so popular in the early '60s.

Thanks for touring St. Louis with me. Tell Laura I love her.

August 19, 2023: Occurrence at Owl Creek

The bulk of today was spent driving from Granite City to Owl Creek, on the outskirts of Kansas City, with a stop in Arrow Rock.

Arrow Rock is located on the Missouri River. Clark mentions it in his journal because its unique profile was spiritually significant to the local tribes, who made their arrow heads out its flinty stone. There are several specimens displayed in the visitor center, where we saw an informative film about the history of Arrow Rock during which I learned two things: 1. the origin of the term "high and dry;" and 2. why so many places in Missouri contain the name "Lick." Arrow Rock is near Boone's Lick - yes, that Boone; well... his son anyway. You see, Daniel lived with his

son's family after he retired from killin' bars and died in Missouri at the age of 85. Betcha didn't know that. But I digress.

Salt was a valuable commodity in the 1820s. There are a great many salt deposits in Missouri. Observant entrepreneurs like Young Daniel Boone started noticing the local fauna licking rocks near the Missouri River, and he eventually sussed out that the salt contained in the rocks could be commercially exploited. Hence, the "Lick" in Boone's Lick, Missouri.

The term "high and dry" refers to once thriving riverfront towns that lose their access to the river trade when the river changes course and leaves such towns without any access to water – high and dry. Like Arrow Rock

We then had lunch at Huston's Tavern, the first hotel/dry goods store in Arrow Rock, which dates from the 1810s. I think my meal also dated from around that time, so enough said about that.

We then took a stroll on the wooden banquette to see such local sites as the jail, that was constructed in 1870 and contains only one cell; which reportedly has never held a prisoner. Until today.





After bailing out Jake and Peter, we arrived at our RV Park in Owl Creek. No danger of a hanging though, as there are no trees. And it's 102 degrees. Needless to say, it's hotter than butt outside. Might as well be Dallas. However, it's totally worth it as my third cousin, Donna, and her husband Walt drove up from NW Arkansas to spend today and tomorrow with us.

While I have talked to Donna on the phone and Zoomed with her a couple of times, we have never met in person before today. We both have an interest in genealogy, and tomorrow we are going to our ancestral home in Orrick (20 miles outside of K.C.) where a heap of Piggs past are buried in the local boneyard. Should be a ton o'fun, assuming we don't melt. As of now, though, it's too hot to do anything except watch a movie on one of the 236 televisions scattered about the interior and exterior of our RV. So, I'll sign off for now and bid a cooler evening than the one I'm currently having.

August 20, 2023: Orricky, You're So Fine

Since I've been in Mizzurah, I've stumbled upon a couple of unplanned family coincidences – a late night Waffle House meal in Rolla, where my cousin Robert was born, and a Panera Bread

lunch in Cape Girardeau, where my grandmother was born. Today was no coincidence; it was planned, and it was terrific. My cousin Donna, Peter and I went to Orrick – ancestral home of many Piggs and a place I've wanted to visit for years.



Stick with me. I'm not going to bore you with a lot of family lore except to say that for a small town, Orrick has seen its share of significant American events. It's on the Missouri River – the dividing line between Unionist and Confederate Missouri, and it was bitter - brother against brother, father against son, etc. Jesse James began his career around Orrick when he rode with Bloody Bill Anderson (who was finally killed nearby) and Quantrill's Raiders during the Civil War. Apparently, Bloody Bill killed one of my ancestors on his front porch by blowing him away with a shotgun because he was rumored to be pro-Union. Those Missouri guerillas were animals, so no need to romanticize them.

Orrick has also seen its share of floods – bad ones in almost every decade since the 1950s.

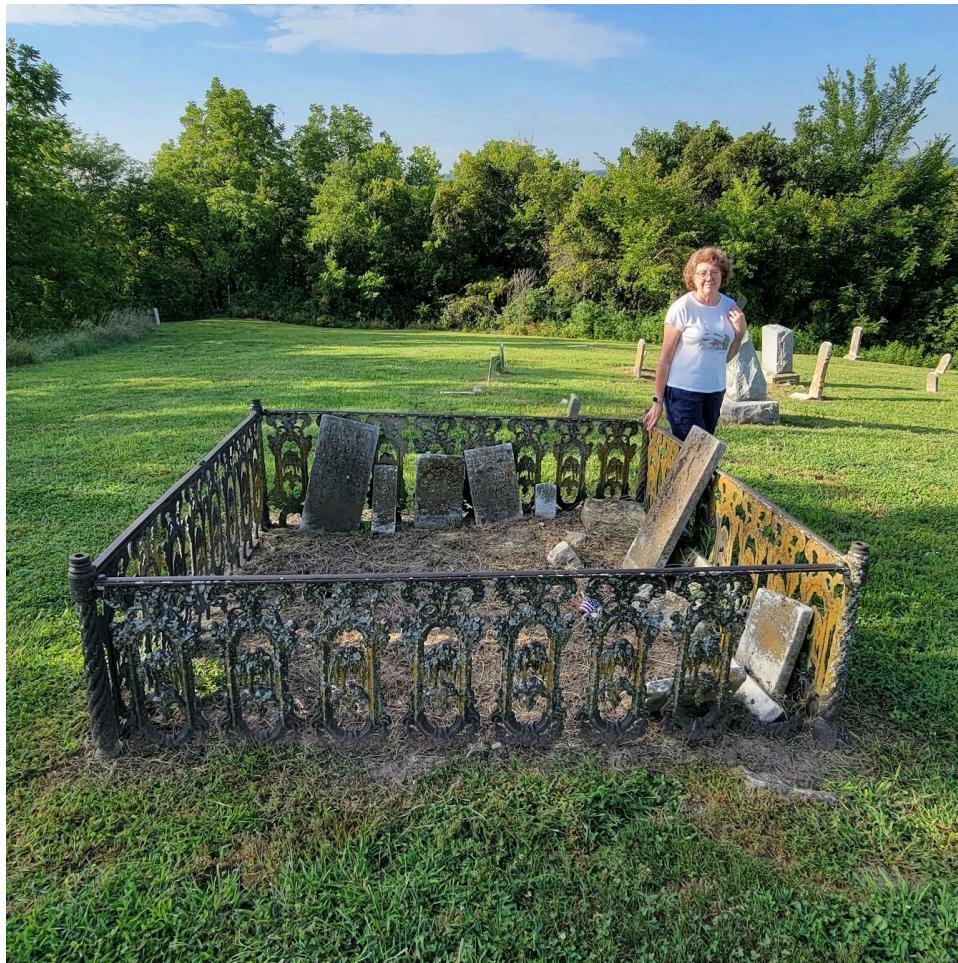
Piggs have been around Orrick for six generations, going back to the 1840s. Some of the earliest cemetery plots in Orrick are occupied by Piggs.



Here's Donna and me with my 2x great grandfather.



Here's the plot of my French ancestors – Joseph Roi and his family (Joseph was the father of Pierre, roly poly for Lewis and Clark). Joseph was my 3x grandfather.



So, for me, there are 6 generations of Piggcestors taking the dirt nap in Orrick. At least they have a nice view. Of corn.



I must say Southpoint Cemetery really rocks. Apparently, if one feels the end is near, he or she can just wait it out and save the rental fee on the hearse.



Once it got too hot to tromp around the cemetery, we went to town, where we met Randy.



Randy Claypole is great. His family has been in Orrick for eight generations, and he knows about all things Orrick. We jawboned for close to an hour as Randy regaled us with tales of the pool hall, the brothels (2), the closure of the mine, and the buildings that are no longer there. He used to build Chrysler dealerships all over the U.S. and I suspect that he's the millionaire next door if his tales of his landholdings are to be believed.

We then went down by the river. There is a place called Pigg's Landing, which is where my forebears had their farms. Fishing River is a tributary of the Missouri. There is a section called Jackass Bend, because, in the old days, mules would pull cargo barges to Pigg's Landing for transfer to the steamboats that plied the river trade. Unfortunately, Jackass Bend is currently dry.



I'm glad there's no such thing as climate change.

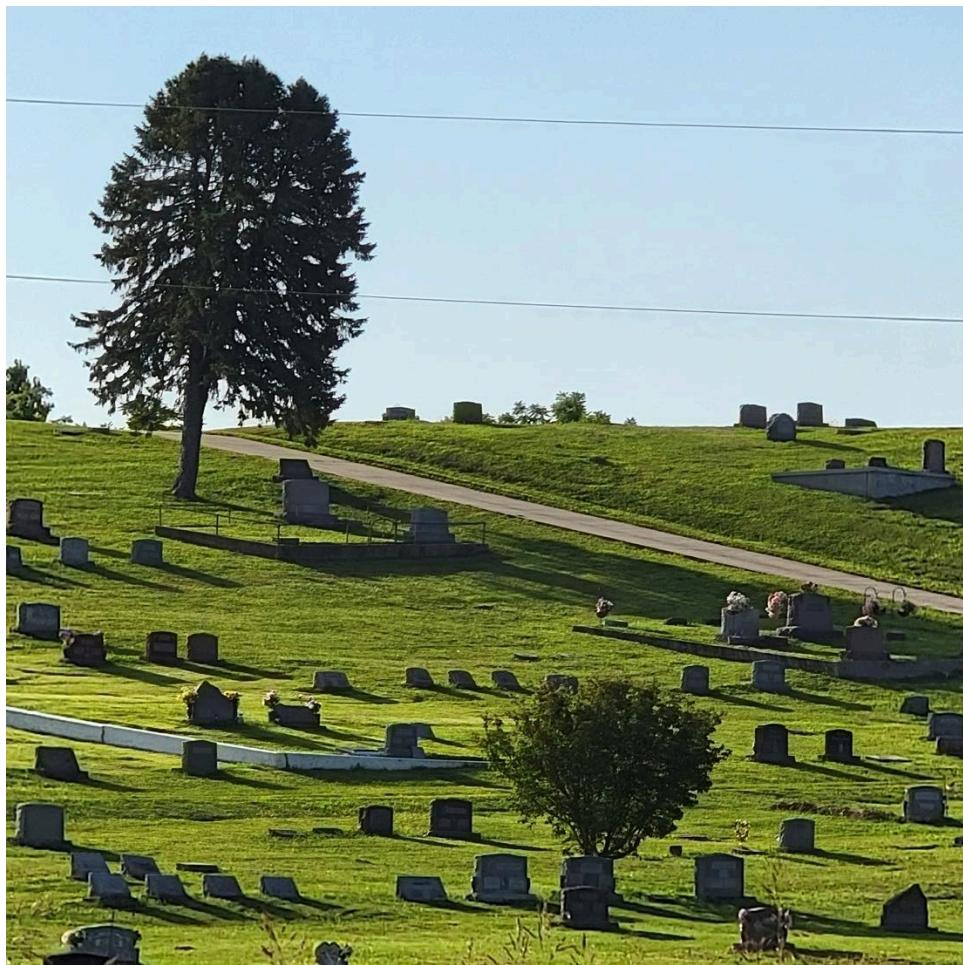
At present, Orrick is a lot like many little towns all over the country. Industry has dried up. Buildings crumble to dust. There's nothing for the young people to do, so they leave as soon as they can. Only a few reminders of the old times remain. Donna's great-grandfather's house still stands, although it is occupied by people from "back east."



My 2x great-grandfather married a Dorton.



Meanwhile, Randy is left to wander the town looking for someone new to talk to and the dead sleep on.



Sibley is across the river from Orrick.



Donna's grandfather used to operate the ferry from Sibley. Harry Truman was a regular customer and enjoyed coming over from Independence to play poker and drink moonshine with the Orrick boys.

Sibley is also the site of Ft. Osage – “The Gibraltar of the Frontier.” The Corps of Discovery passed by Sibley on their way back to St. Louis after reaching the Pacific and Clark thought it a splendid site for a fort. The Feds took Clark's recommendation and, in 1808, built Ft. Osage. At that time, it was the westernmost Fort in the U.S. and controlled trade along the river, along with keeping the Osage Indians at bay.



It must have sucked big time to be an enlisted man stationed at Ft. Osage. No booze, no women, not much to do except drill when it was excruciatingly hot (like today) or freezing cold. Plus, they had to sleep two to the bunk. “Bloody hell, Paddy, ever tink aboat havin’ a wash there?” And we won’t even mention bean night.

Finally, after introducing Peter to American Fast Food, we made our way back to the RV for happy hour and some book recommendations by Donna’s husband Walt, who, unfortunately, had to study for his pilot’s recertification so didn’t join us on our excursion

It was a special day for me. I really like what’s left of my extended family and I am not only beyond touched that Donna and Walt took the time to come up here and show me around, but that they are such great relatives, friends, and comrades. Tomorrow? Kansas City. Where everything’s up to date.



August 21, 2023: Eat. At. Joe's.



Today was the first time I've been in Kansas City. We spent a great deal of time in the downtown area, where the museums are, as it's too hot to be outside. 100 degree temperature, no wind, and 80% humidity. No one was out. It was weird. No traffic, no pedestrians, no dogs sleeping on stoops. I felt like Earl Holliman in that *Twilight Zone* episode.

We started off the day at the Gallup Map Company, in search of a special map for Walt. The map wasn't there, but we had a nice convo with the proprietor who told us all about hiking in Utah. Go figure.

Peter and I next went to the WWI Museum and Memorial, while Doug met up with Jake and Li at the UKKC rock and mineral museum.



The WWI Museum was a nice primer for those who don't know much about the Great War. That said, it naturally focused on America's involvement. The trouble with that, however, is that WWI wasn't really America's war to anywhere near the same extent as it was to the European nations who decided to commit national and cultural suicide over the course of four years. So, while there are a lot of displays of guns and uniforms, the museum is kind of lacking in showing how America fit into the larger context of the war – especially in the run up.

I don't want to get too preachy, but it would be instructive for our national "leaders" to study the period 1900 – 1914 in Western European history. There are a lot of parallels between that period and our own – similarities of personalities, of attitudes and prejudices, of alliances and ententes, political divisions, the widening gap between rich and poor, various nationalist movements and their attendant increased violence. I could go on. But I won't. At least not here, and not now.

After the armistice, we went to the Steamboat Arabia Museum in the City Market. The City Market might be really cool, with a choice of many nations' cuisines to choose from. Yum. Yum. Except nothing was open. At lunch time. On a workday. Did America get blown up or something when I wasn't paying attention?

Although we were hungry, the Museum was great. Not at all what I expected. I thought it was going to be an overview of the roughly fifty years that steamboats plied the rivers to facilitate trade between the U.S. and the ever-expanding westward frontier. Nope. Instead, it was a museum about the excavation of the Arabia and the salvage of its cargo.

In 1856, the Arabia caught a snag six miles downriver from Kansas City and sank. Everyone survived except for one mule. However, 240 tons of cargo went down with the boat. It rested in the sludge of the river for 130 years. During that time, the river changed course, so that by the 1980s, the Arabia was buried forty feet beneath this guy's cornfield.

Five guys decided to dig up the Arabia in 1988. They self-financed the project and did all the work themselves. And it was a job for sure. After locating the boat, they eventually excavated it and salvaged the cargo in what is now the largest cache of pre-Civil War artifacts in the world. You would not believe the displays of fine china, preserved food, clothing, tools, shoes and boots, keys, axes, plows, bricks, boards, windows, and on and on and on. One of the docents was Matthew Hawley. His father was one of the guys who did the excavation. Matt was a font of knowledge and a most personable guy. He told us someone connected with the excavation is always at the Museum to answer questions.



The family is now raising money for further excavation efforts with the aim of creating a national steamboat museum. You should look it up and donate a few bucks.

After the steamboat museum, we headed out the Clark's Point – another place L&C thought would be a good spot for a fort. I'm starting to see a pattern here. I'm getting the sense that in addition to exploring the Louisiana Purchase, L&C were also thinking or, more accurately, probably given the mandate by Mars Tom to think about how to protect American interests as people moved westward by scoping out propitious places for military installations.



Clark's Point is in a dicey part of town. Peter and I shared the little park where the statue is located with a pimp who was putting his girl to work after she finished shooting up. That was our cue to find a Starbucks.

After a refreshing caffeine mainline, we met Doug, Jake and Li at Joe's Barbecue in K.C., Kansas. Joe's comes highly rated. Joe's is located in a gas station. Joe's had many large people eating large meals. I'm not an overly proud Texan, to say the least, but I have to say Texas BBQ is a lot better than the K.C. BBQ I had at Joe's. So nanny nanny boo boo.

Now it is late, and I must sleep. Tomorrow – Peyton Manning's favorite audible. Omaha!

August 22, 2023: Ball Room, Please

The natural retort to the foregoing is “sorry, I didn’t know I was crowding you.” You’ll see what I mean later.

Today was really, really, really hot. The heat index was 115 and it was truly uncomfortable. As in the doctor’s admonition that you may experience “some discomfort” when they remove your spleen without the benefit of anesthetic.

We broke camp and got underway at 8:45. Peter and I picked up Balazs at the KC airport Marriott at 9:45, at which Balazs arrived late last night after spending a week in Vermont. Where it is seasonably appropriate. Nonetheless, we are all very happy to have the Cockeyed Caravan intact once more. And to celebrate, Balazs brought us some tasty pálinka – a sweetly flavored Hungarian moonshine. Like Vegameatavitamin, it tastes like candy. Hic.

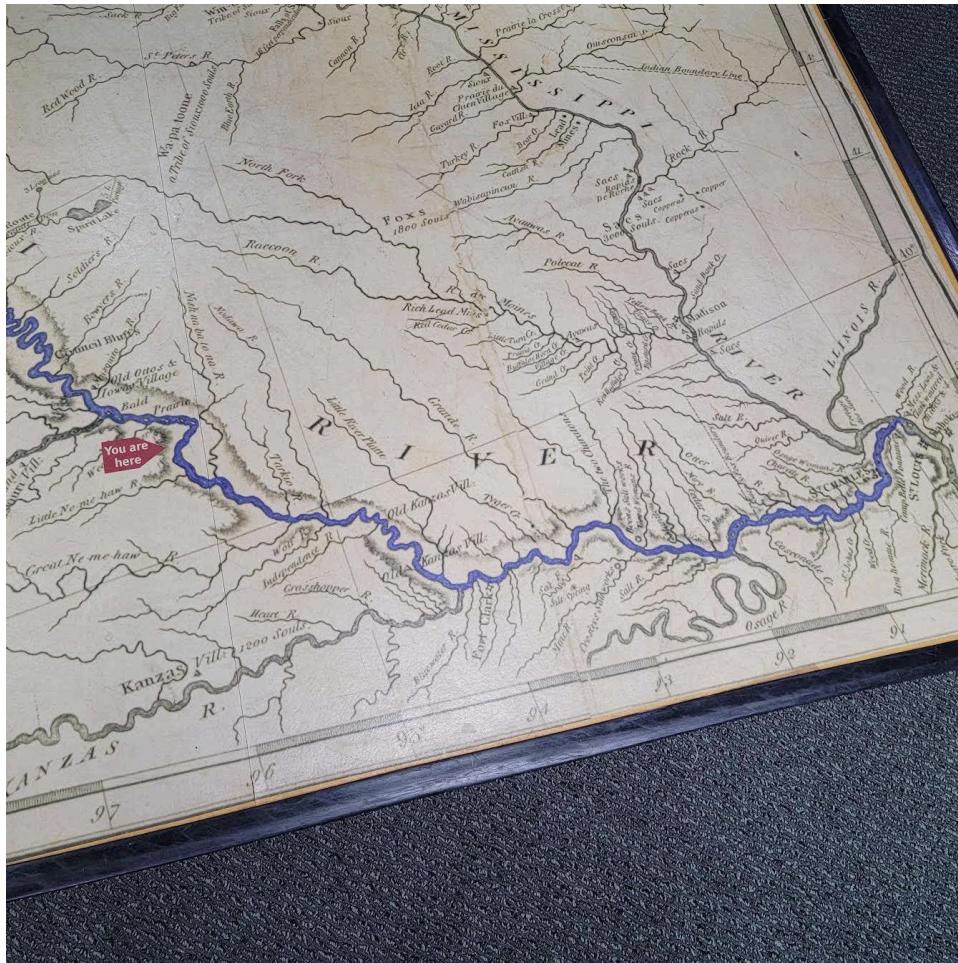
Our first stop was the L&C Interpretive Center at the Mouth of the Missouri River Basin. It was worth going to. Many examples of various animals, previously unknown in the U.S., that L&C first encountered with the Corps of Discovery. There was also a full-scale replica of a keelboat – like the one my ancestor Pierre Roi roly polyd from St. Charles to the Mandan Villages. With a draft of only thirty inches and a cargo capacity of 4-6 tons, the keelboats were the ideal vessels to transport cargo up and down the rivers in the decades before the steamboats (L&C pre-dated the age of steam by a mere seven years. Think of how much easier their trip could have been had Mr. Fulton had only got off his butt and gotten to work). I assume L&C got the only “cabin.” At about 4’x8’, they couldn’t have done much except spread out the chart on the table and sack out on the floor.



There was a lot of good stuff for kids at the center – interactive exhibits where, among other things, kids can see what the underground life of a prairie dog is like. That said, what I can't figure out is why I saw so many elementary school aged children with their parents. I know that school started last week. Why aren't these kids in school?

And speaking of prairie dogs, the center's mascot, "P.D." died two weeks ago. He had lived at the center for thirteen years (the average life span of a prairie dog in the wild is five years) and the staff is still in mourning.

Another fun thing was a large-scale replica of Clark's map that he drew during the course of the trip. You can walk on it and inspect where you've been. It's like Twister.



I'm a cartography fan and Clark's skill at mapmaking was truly enviable. As you can see, so far, we've gone 560 miles upriver from St. Louis.

And since we've been on the road for a week now, here are some things that have made us laugh:

RV Bloopers – never hold the black/gray water hose above the head of the person doing the discharge.

Genital Warts – not Jennifer Warnes

Never put 64 scoops of coffee in a French Press. Damn you, Youtube!

This vehicle NEVER stops at railroad crossings!

The center is located in Nebraska City. Which is in Nebraska. I remembered something about Nebraska City in my reading about the Underground Railroad and, sure enough, the Mayhew Cabin appeared on the side of the road.



The Mayhew Cabin was the first stop on the Underground Railroad in Nebraska for slaves who successfully escaped from Missouri. Reportedly, John Brown built the cabin and gave it to Mr. Mayhew, who was one of the lucky slaves who got out of Missouri with his family. That said, it's probably worth bearing in mind that more slaves were captured than escaped, but huzzahs to Mr. Mayhew nonetheless.

What sucks is that the Mayhew Cabin and the museum of the Underground Railroad next door are closed. As in everyone just walked away closed. The cabin languishes in an overgrown lot next to a slowly deteriorating brick building that once housed the museum. We peered in the windows of the museum, and it was like the Lost Colony. Everything – displays, cash registers, counters, furniture, etc. are as if someone just got up, walked out, and locked the door. It was weird. I'm telling you, something's going on. The part of America I'm currently in is turning into a ghost town. Maybe I am Earl Holliman. Seriously, a museum about the Underground Railroad is worth saving. I think I'm going to look into this if anyone wants to join me.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that Peter, Balazs and I weren't allowed to see the museum of military weaponry at Ft. Leavenworth because Balazs and Peter are not U.S. Nationals. I wasn't going to get into an argument with the U.S. Army, so I just spread out my prayer cloth, knelt

facing the east, and thanked Allah that I live in a free country. Besides, who knows what deep dark secrets Balazs might have purloined about the firing mechanism of a blunderbuss?

So what did we do? We went to dinner.

What is Omaha famous for? No. Not gluten-free tofu. Steak, Baby! And we had some at none other than Round the Bend – Home of the Testicle Festival.



And we had ourselves some nut poppers. So yes, I've now eaten a beef testicle. It tasted like octopus.

The place was packed. So we asked someone for the Ball Room. They reply was “sorry, I didn’t know I was crowding you.” I love that joke. I may be on the brink of senior citizenship, but third grade humor is still the best.



The food was great. Second best meal we've had so far; the first being the potluck dinner we made ourselves in St. Louis last week.

Peter said his ribeye was the best steak he's ever eaten. I had a Cobb salad with sirloin and, in the words of David Graham, it was tasty good.

After a nice meal, we strolled back out to the parking lot, and it dawned on me how peaceful the vibe is here. The sun was just starting to set, the streaks of orange and violet illuminating the verdant rolling hills, teeming with food, and I thought to myself that a life here would not be my kind of life, but I can understand the appeal. So, I'll leave you tonight with this:



Peace.

August 23, 2023: The Spelling Be

I try to be tolerant of others' shortcomings. I really do. But when one is involved in some kind of public act, it is my opinion that one should at least try not to look like a moron. Typo 1: The National Park Service information plaque at Council Bluffs, Iowa states that Lewis and Clark had their first parley with the Otoe Indians in 1884. 1884. Oy.

Typo 2: The Walmart in SW Omaha urges people to get a flew shot.

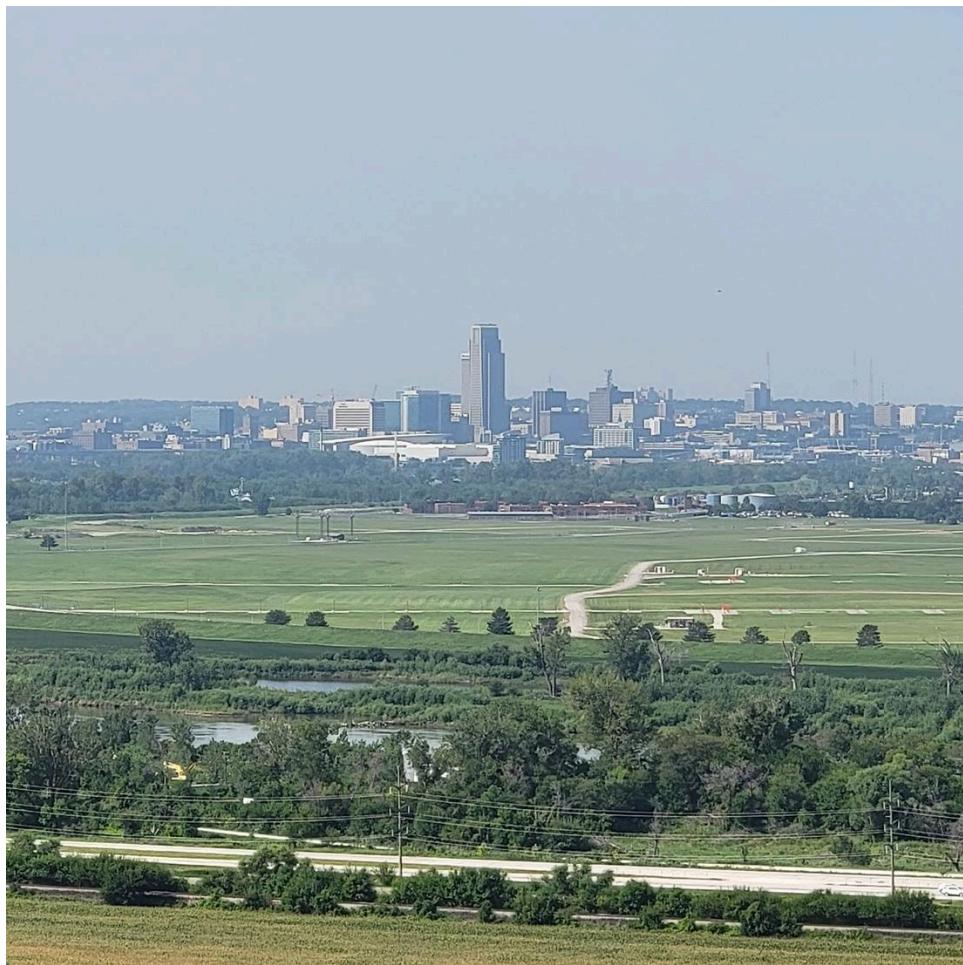
Typo 3: The Baymont Inn near said Walmart imposes quite time from 10 am until 7 am.

I might as well be back in Texas.

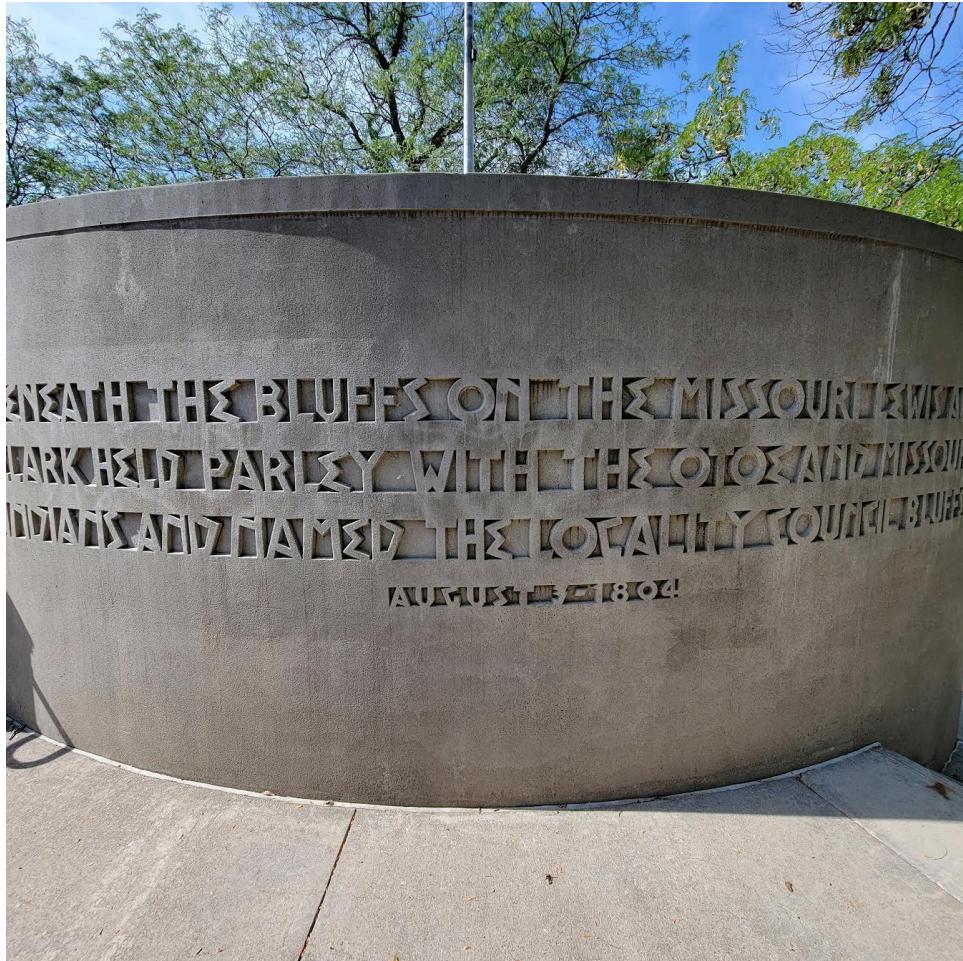
First stop today was the L&C Monument in Council Bluffs, across the Platte River from Omaha.







There's a nifty monument in the Art Deco style.



Doesn't the font remind you of Aesop and Son on the Rocky and Bullwinkle show?

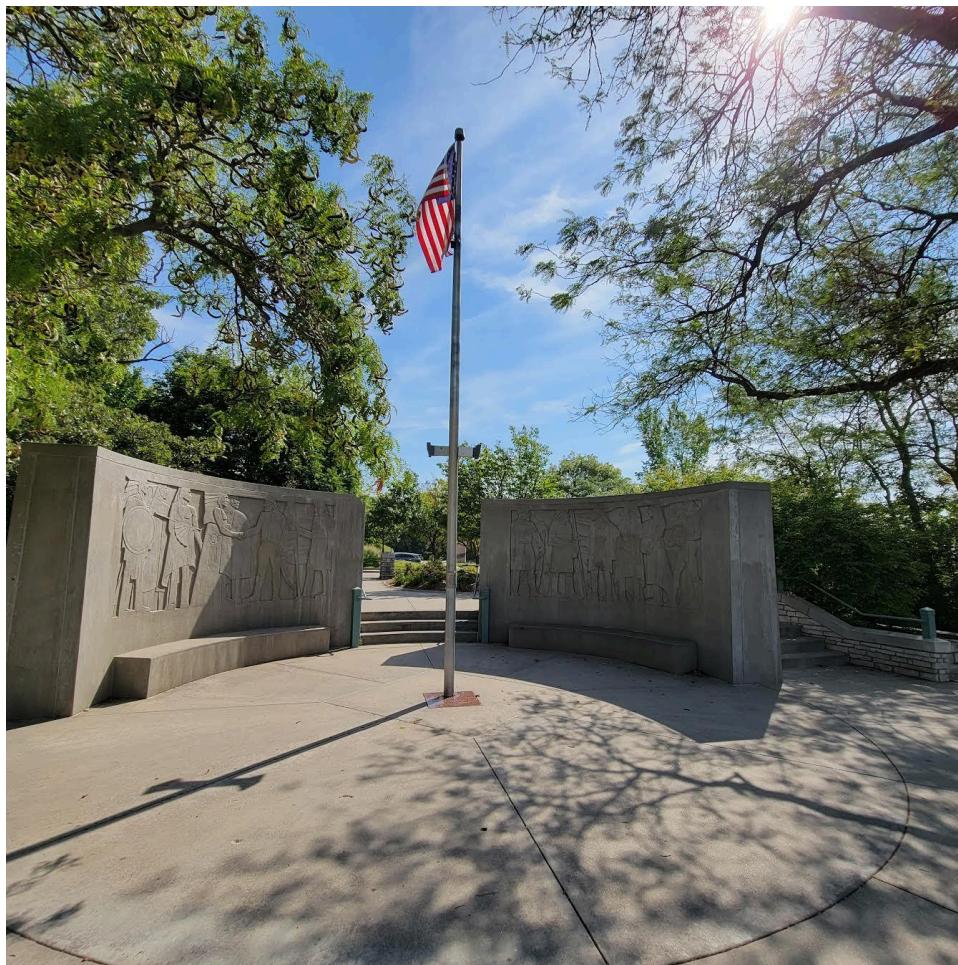


While I kind of like the heroic style, the pedestrian path is situated too close to the monument to get a decent picture. "Back up, Junior so I can get a picture! That's almost it! Just a few more feet!"



Well, look at me, today. Bitch, bitch, bitch.

Actually, the monument, like everywhere else I went today was deserted. Peter and I were the only two souls paying respects.



Our next stop was the Western Historic Trails Center to catch up on some Santa Fe Trail lore. The only problem was that the Western Historic Trails Center is closed. Like Mayhew's Cabin. Replete with padlock on the gate. Oh well, we still had sites to see.

Next stop: The confluence of the Missouri and Platte Rivers. Not. The dirt access road is closed to vehicular traffic and, in 105 degree heat, Peter and I didn't feel like hiking the 6 mile round trip on foot. Man, what a couple of wimps. Coach Ezar would have made us do it. After all, we're Tigers, not pussycats! Guess you had to be there.

So, ever onward we went. Through the historic town of Plattsmouth with the largest Masonic Home I have ever seen. It looked like Warwick Castle. There were many elderly men wearing fezes and contorting their bodies in convoluted handshake gestures walking around the front yard.



Next, we went to the L&C Trail Regional HQ at the Omaha Riverfront. It was kind of short on displays, but we got to see a young man sworn in as a Junior Ranger of the National Park Service. He was obviously in the company of his grandparents and being taken to a number of National Parks, judging from the various pins and stickers on his hiking vest. He looked about eight years old. The ceremony was really great, and he looked very happy. Probably because he was not in school when he should have been! Why wasn't he in school?!? If he was in school, maybe he could learn how to spell "flu."

Not to be deterred, we next headed for the Platte River State Park. No one was there. No one at the campsites. No one at the marina. No one manning the entry gate. One cannot even see the Platte from the base of the observation tower. Which was closed.

Look ma! I went to the Platte River and all I got was this lousy teepee.



I love the Platte River. It is one of my favorite rivers in the U.S. But even the Platte is pulling an Earl Holliman. It's drying up. When I finally found a place to look at it (as I have loved to do in the past), there is more sand bars than there is water. I didn't have the heart to take a picture. I'd rather remember it as it was when it was beautiful.

The one bright spot: Adriana arrived this afternoon. She'll be with us for a week as we're travelin' along with a song that we're singin'. During the next few days, I'll be introducing you to our very own little Partridge Family. So, Come on! Get Happy!

August 24, 2023: A Burst of Vermillion

Our goal today was The Spirit Mound in Vermillion, South Dakota. And we made it. Eventually. I've always liked the word "vermillion." It sounds nice as it rolls of the tongue, and it's a lovely color and flower. Don't you agree?



Apropos of nothing, “A Burst of Vermillion” was supposed to be the title of “One Eyed Jacks” – Marlon Brando’s directorial debut. It’s a great movie in a lot of ways. I didn’t go to my senior prom because it was on TV that night. I also didn’t have a date, but that’s another story.

Vermillion, South Dakota doesn’t look anything like vermillion. . . . But I’m getting ahead of myself.

We started off today by visiting the Missouri River Valley in Iowa, just over the Nebraska Border. The name of the town is “Missouri Valley.” Whoa. Who’d have guessed? Missouri Valley is a throwback to an earlier, more peaceful time, when a person had time to dream.



Clearly, Lowell C. Dirks cherished a simpler time.



Maybe it's the showman in me, but all I could think off when I was in Missouri Valley was the Music Man. A few of you know that I electrified audiences a few years ago with my stunning performance as Mayor Shin (the secret to playing the role is that he becomes progressively crazier as the play goes on). If you'd like my take on the River City P.H. (post-Hill), you can read it here:

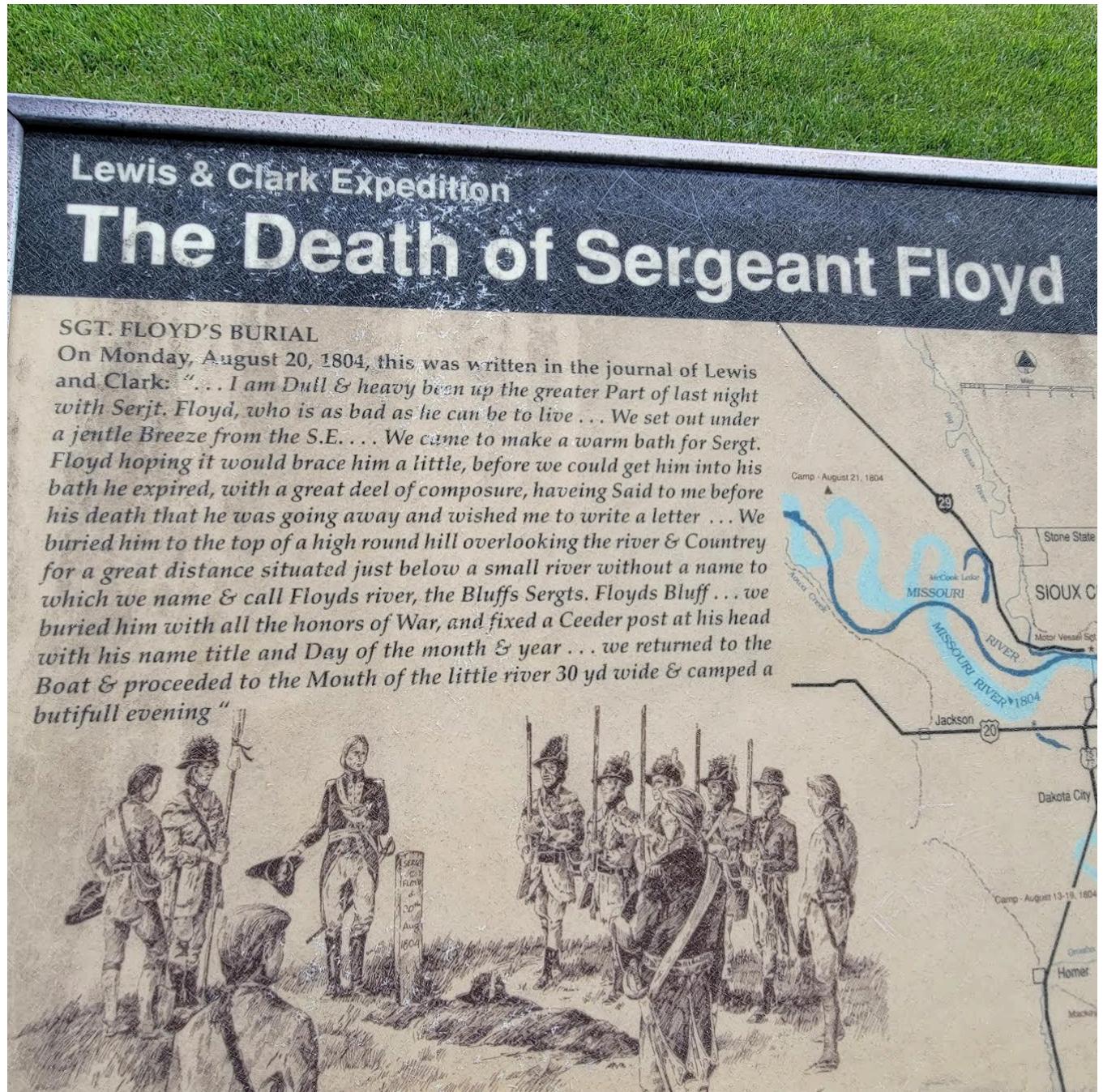
[file:///Users/williampigg/Downloads/No%20One%20Dast%20Blame%20the%20Music%20Man%20\(2\).pdf](file:///Users/williampigg/Downloads/No%20One%20Dast%20Blame%20the%20Music%20Man%20(2).pdf)

After our winsome reminiscences of days gone by, we again hit the road and made tracks for Sioux City. Unfortunately, our tracks stopped short with the approach of a train – four engines pulling 225 cars. Peter timed the procession at 13 minutes, huffing all the while that “the Brits would never put up with this.” Bless his heart.

After lunch, we went to Sgt. Floyd's monument. Sergeant Charles Floyd was the only man to die during the Corps of Discovery; probably of a burst appendix, most likely hastened by the administration of Dr. Rush's Thunderbolts – the only medicine available to the Corps. Dr. Rush's Thunderbolts were.....how shall I say.....explosive in their efficacy. If only the effects

could have been synchronized throughout the entire Corps, my ancestor might not have had to row so hard – they all could have just propelled themselves upstream with Dr. Rush's Thunderbolts.

At any rate, here is what Lewis had to say about Sgt. Floyd:



And here's his monument:



Looks like a rocket about to blast off with Dr. Rush's Thunderbolt, doesn't it?

Sgt. Floyd's Monument was constructed at a cost of \$15,000 in 1900 money and was financed in equal parts by the Feds, the State of Iowa, and private donations. It was the first National Monument.

I don't want to be a curmudgeon, but it all seemed a bit excessive to me for a guy who died of natural causes. I mean, it's not like he kilt a bar or nuthin'. And compared to the hardships and danger faced by the other members, not all that praiseworthy it seems to me. "But what the heck, you're welcome, join us at the picnic. You can eat your fill of all the food you bring yourself. You really ought to give Iowa a try. Provided you are contrary."

Maybe Iowa rubbed off on me more than I care to admit.



Somewhere on the road today, we saw Ron de Sanctimonious' tour bus.



Never back down? Isn't that all he does whenever the fat orange Panty Boy throws a tantrum? Just like the rest of them. What a crock.

In the waning afternoon, we reached Vermillion. I don't know who named the town, but it had to have been a romantic because there's nothing remotely vermillion-esque about Vermillion. But what is there, is Spirit Mound.



Various branches of the Sioux tribe roamed these parts. The Spirit Mound was sacred space to the Sioux, who believed spirit warriors lived at the top of the mound and offered protection to the “People” who worshipped them. L&C met with the Yankton Sioux on August 25, 1804 and brokered peaceful passage through the sacred southern lands of what is now South Dakota. Peter and Balazs walked to the top of the mound in 105 degree heat. They were today’s spirit warriors. Or maybe they’re just insane.

We are now safely ensconced in Yankton. There is nothing spiritual about Yankton as far as I can tell. It’s pretty grim, but the people at the Sports Bar were nice – even if they are Twins fans. Oh well, nobody’s perfect. And with that, I will bid you good night and leave you with this bit of advice that has become my personal credo:



August 25, 2023: There's No Here Here

Today was essentially a travel day – from Yankton down through a bit of a Nebraska encore, and firmly into South Dakota. It was largely a wild goose chase, but with otherworldly, unforgettable scenery that few others take the time to see as we pursued the elusive L&C stops that no longer exist. I feel like Tom Wrigglesworth's mother.

It seems to me that the sites in the guidebook have largely disappeared. We only saw one location we intended to see, without any alternatives. Perhaps no one cares any more. Perhaps the pandemic was the final nail in the coffin. Whatever the reason may be, in another generation, Americans won't even know who Lewis and Clark were or appreciate the magnitude of their achievements.

We started the day with a 2-2-2 breakfast at the Country Café in Niobrara, Nebraska – population 354. Our hostess, Andrea, was delightful. Perky and bright and going off to college in Yankton. She's worked in the Country Café since she was 14, helping her aunt run the place. I hope Andrea gets her degree, sees the world, and continues to make Niobrara proud. And.... of all the gin joints.... we met a couple from Dallas. They're golfing their way through Nebraska. The husband (a lawyer – cue Twilight Zone music) grew up in Niobrara. It is a small world indeed.



After discovering the Corps of Discovery Center is closed and padlocked, we crossed the Big Mo into South Dakota.



We crossed the Missouri via the Chief Standing Bear Bridge.



The Chief was quite a guy. All he wanted to do was live on peaceably on his land and take care of his people. For his troubles, our government arrested him. He was eventually released and became a voice in the wilderness, advocating for Native rights long before anyone even thought of listening.

We then thought we'd try to see some bison. After braving miles and miles of dirt road, we saw them. Not exactly in the wild, but at least healthy and cared for. My heart soared.



We next tried to see the Ponca Museum. We had an address and everything. We found the right BIA Highway. Our GPS steered us to the place. There's nothing there. Just a lonely picnic pavilion on the bank of the Missouri. Miles from anything. It was a lonely place.

There is an empty majesty to the land here. Haunted in a way, yet grand in scope.



The air echoes with the cries of the unseen.



And there wasn't even no dang MAC Donald's.

We are now in Wasta - Population 230. I'll take a snap of our motel in the morning. We'll be here for a few days, using this area as a base for further adventures, as we hop about the Badlands.



With the arrival of my sister and her husband this afternoon, our Cockeyed Caravan is now complete. So without further ado, as promised, “come on down and meet everybody, and hear us singin’.”

You know me, of course. I’m played by Shirley Jones.



I'm "the glue that holds the family together. Extremely attractive, warm, loving and understanding, with a great sense of humor." I "can also be a firm disciplinarian when the occasion arises, being the only one who can call a halt to Danny's wild schemes or the brother-sister arguments between Keith and Laurie."

Peter Zivanovic as Laurie. He's played by Susan Dey.



“Laurie is a Junior at Galaxy High. A beautiful girl, she is cool, hip, and will take no sass from her older brother. While it very seldom comes to a peak, there is a certain competitiveness between Laurie and Keith, despite the love of all the kids for each other. Whatever Keith's put-down line may be, Laurie can usually come up with a topper.”

Doug Smith as Danny. He' played by Danny Bonaduce.



“Danny is in the 7th grade, and a first-class pain in the butt. Money-hungry and scheming, he always has some big plan cooking, which usually winds up getting him into trouble. Or, quite often, getting the rest of the family into trouble.”

So, tune in tomorrow for another episode of The Cockeyed Caravan. Who knows what mischief we'll get into? Because “somethin' always happens whenever we're together, we get a happy feelin' when we're singin' our song.”

August 26, 2023: Les Mauvaises Terres

We had a really super day today. The heat has broken and it was 59 when Balazs and I did yoga. The high only got to 85. Ahhhh.

Here's where Adriana and I are staying. The Redwood Motel in Wasta, SD. Population 394.



One can always spot the Redwood Motel because it has a large statue of Buffalo Bill in front.



As you can see, B.B.'s level of creepiness rivals that of Big Tex ("How-dy...folks. Wel-come to the ... StateFairof Texas") and of the mutant Sam Houston statue on I-45 near Huntsville. Ooooo, scary kids. Makes you drink your own blood.

After a 2-2-2 at Wall Drugs – Home of the 5 cent coffee and free Ice Water with a tackiness level to rival anything Buc-ees, Stuckeys, or Bowlin's can dish out, we set out to pay our respects at Wounded Knee.

The best way to get to Wounded Knee is through the Badlands National Park. We didn't see Sissy Spacek, Martin Sheen or the spirit of Warren Oates, but we did see some astoundingly cool rock formations.

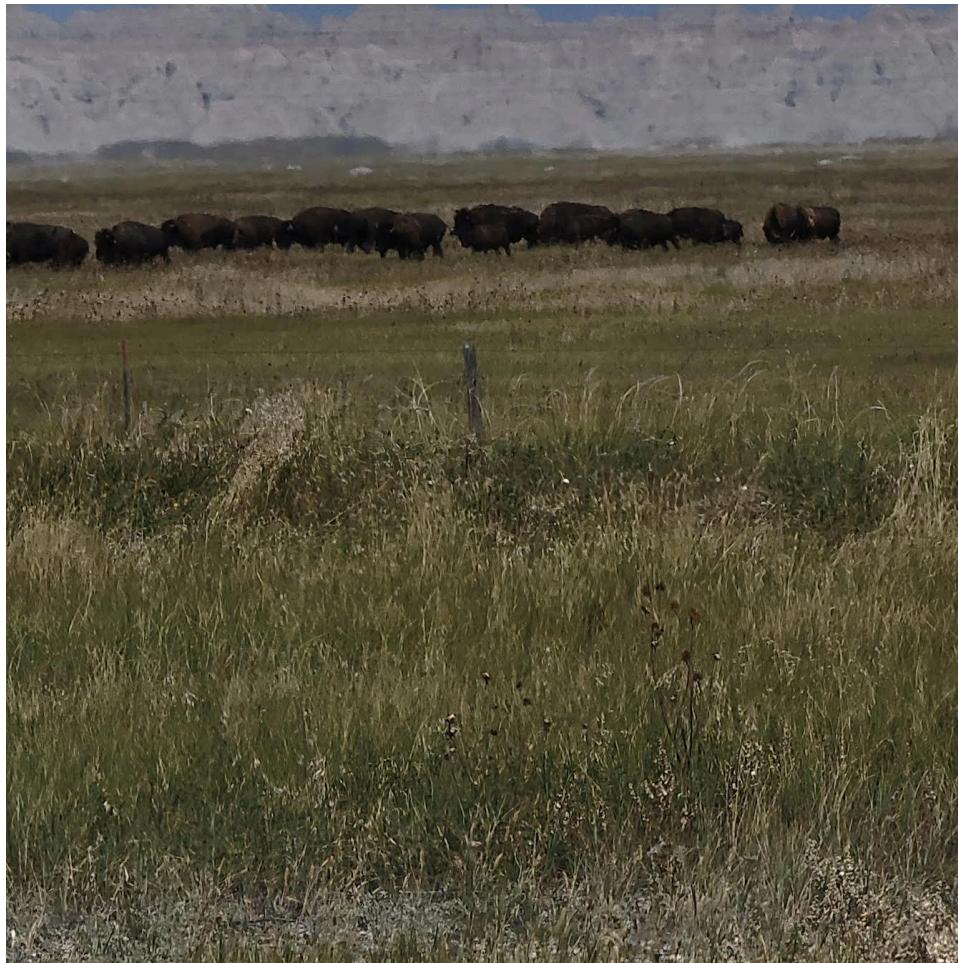
Here's a sample:







But why, you may ask, are they called “Badlands?” I’m glad you asked. When the French trappers came through in the 1700s, they were frustrated with the ruggedness of the terrain, what with those pesky peaks and rock formations. Hence, they termed the area “Les Mauvaises Terres,” which means “Bad Lands” in French. Tres simple, non? But, as is so often the case, one man’s Badlands is another’s Paha Ska (White Hills), as evidenced by the Lakota people’s reverence for the area due to its bountiful hunting; remnants of which can still be seen in the herds of tatanka that are starting to make a comeback.



The Wounded Knee memorial is situated on the Pine Ridge Reservation, which is very pretty. If you ignore the glaring poverty. I didn't take any pictures at the site of the Wounded Knee massacre. To me, it's a place of reverence, not a tourist attraction, and I wanted to show respect. Of course, I knew from other sacred sites I've been to in the West that we'd be hustled to buy some mass-produced garbage in the guise of "authentic Indian handicrafts." Adriana bought a Starcatcher. If you read The Innocents Abroad, you'll see that nothing much has changed in 150 years, no matter where on the earth you may roam.

And speaking of books: If you haven't read the book Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, do yourself a favor and read it. You'll be glad you did.

Our toothless drunken mascot did his best to remember his rap about the events that took place in 1973. . . . AIM? Dennis Banks? Russell Means? Anyone? Bueller? I helped out our friend with the history and gave him a few bucks.

Despite the hustle, it moved me to see the mass grave of the slain ghost dancers. Native peoples tend not to live too long. In the graveyard, overgrown with stickers and weeds, sleep many babies who didn't make it out of infancy. Of those who did, most didn't make it out of their 40s. It's a beautiful spot – situated on a high hill overlooking the grasslands on which are dotted with

stands of pine. Too bad it's so neglected. What has been done to those people at the hands of our government is shameful. The dead deserve better.

We finished at Wounded Knee in time to get to Interior and the Wagon Wheel Bar and Grill in time for a refreshing quaff and a burger before the Frontier Days Rodeo.



Across from the Wagon Wheel, I saw this:



Isn't there some kind of internet game where one is supposed to find various gnomes located throughout the world? If so, I think I found one.

The Interior Rodeo has been around since 1919 and has recently been certified for membership in the PCRA (Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association); meaning it's now on the professional rodeo circuit. It was big fun, although I think it needs to amend its acronym to include women since we some really talented women riders today.



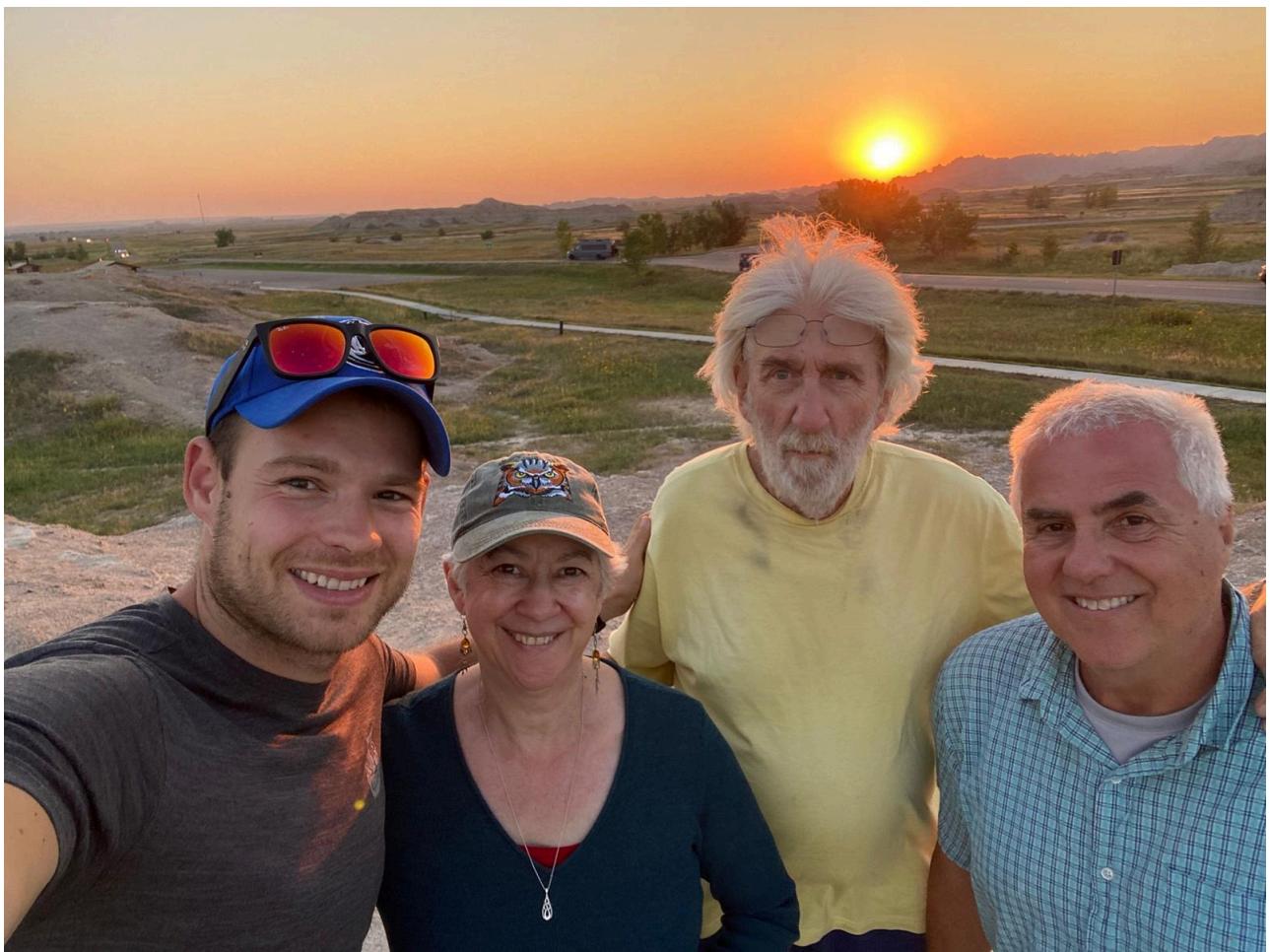


We left the rodeo grounds just as the sun was setting and drove back to camp through the Badlands National Park.





In short, it was a splendid day.



August 27, 2023: I Can See My House From Here

Mt. Rushmore. Yeah, I had to do it. I thought it would be a Griswold moment for me, and it kind of was. That said, the company was good and we got to toodle around the Black Hills, so how bad could it be?



It's smaller than I thought it would be. At some point, there was talk of adding St. Ronald of Reagan to the lineup. I'm glad they didn't.

What is interesting about Mt. Rushmore is how many of us 'Muricans probably can't identify all four of the Presidents whose faces are carved into the rock. But every immigrant can. As you know, I'm pretty cynical about the state of our country at the moment. It's good to be reminded of the aspiration of the American ideal every once in a while and to see the dream of America through the eyes of people who chose to live among us, despite the fact that we don't treat most of them very well. So, thank you Gutzon Borglum for celebrating the promise of your adopted home and memorializing the ideal of America as represented by four of its finest.

We then went to Deadwood.



I have a fascination with the darker corners of the Old West. Although our history books print the legend, I'm drawn to the dichotomy of the characters who populate the Old West mythology – James Butler Hickok, being one. He, along with the Earp brothers, Bat Masterson, one time Dallas dentist Doc Holliday, et al. interest me because they were neither all good nor all bad. It seems to me those kinds of people are the ones who molded this part of the country – not the psychopaths like Mr. Bonney or the James brothers (brother Frank spending his golden years selling men's suits for Sanger-Harris in Dallas). At any rate, Deadwood was what I expected. Cheesy tourist attractions, middle-aged fat people shoving money into the casino games, outlaw biker wannabes sporting mullets and headbands as they give the throttle to their mindless aggression by revving their motorcycle engines all over town. Nonetheless, I still wanted to see where Mr. Hickok was murdered.

The bar was cool. I have no idea if it's the original or not, but it looked good. They even preserved the chair Wild Bill was sitting in when Jack McCall shot him. Why on earth a savvy guy like Wild Bill would sit with his back to the door, I'll never know.



But there's a groovy statue of Wild Bill on the edge of a parking lot. So, Wild Bill was immortalized for being stupid enough to get shot from behind and Jack McCall is. . . . who's Jack McCall.



By that time of the afternoon, it was hot, we were tired, and it was sixty miles back to Wall – home of Wall Drugs. Selling nickel cups of coffee since 1931. After a brief stop at Wally World in Rapid City (if you never go there, you can still have a fulfilled life), we made it back to the Sleepy Hollow RV park for a celebratory birthday dinner for our pal and comrade, Doug Smith.



There we all are. Our Cockeyed Caravan, under the stars of Wall, South Dakota. Happy, content, and cheerful. May we remain that way until the end of our days.

August 28,2023: “You Couldn’t Ask for a More Beautiful Evening”

You may recall that line from Close Encounters of the Third Kind, spoken by my friend, the late Patrick McNamara, as the crowd of scientists, researchers, and the military wait for the craft to descend near Devil’s Tower, Wyoming. As an homage to Mac, we visited what I will call Devil’s Tower for the last time today.



Why no longer “Devil’s Tower?” Because it was never called that by anyone until the Army christened it as such (Thank you Colonel Dodge) in the mid 1870s. Until then, it was called “Bear Lodge” by the myriad tribes who gather there each June to dance and worship, by the settlers and homesteaders of the region – Scandinavian, German, Swiss, Eastern European, etc., and by everyone else until Custer entered the picture when gold was discovered in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. More on Custer in a few days. But for now, suffice it to say that Bear Lodge, while pretty imposing from afar, is a wealth of geological information when examined up close.

There are competing scientific theories as to how Bear Lodge came to be. What scientists seem to agree on is that it was formed when a volcano erupted some 50 million years ago or so. As the magma cooled, it hardened and acted like a plug, stopping the opening of the volcano. All of this occurred when the area was an inland sea and Bear Lodge was under water. As erosion did its thing for the next forty million years or so, the sea receded, and the newly formed soil hardened into sandstone – not the toughest rock out there, admittedly, but it’s only been 40 million years, so lighten up, Francis. Gradually, Bear Lodge rose out of primaeval muck, to its current height of approximately 750 feet.

If you examine Bear Lodge more closely from a lesser distance, you'll see that the millennia of erosion has carved it in a way that the rock is joined together in columns.



What will eventually happen is that the columns will calve away from the main structure and tumble to the ground like Ozymandias. I'm sure you remember the term "calving" from my Antarctica blog as the process by which chunks of ice break away and fall into the sea, forming icebergs. The same principle is operative at Bear Lodge. There is evidence of the calving process all over the place as a large boulder field encircles the entire base of Bear Lodge. However, no calving has occurred at any time in the recent past. Good thing; lest some tourist gets squished in the ultimate bummer of a vacation.

At this point, you might wonder what's on top? It's actually a giant cake out of which Debbie Reynolds pops occasionally, singing "All I Do Is Dream of You." Not really. I was just thinking about Singing in the Rain and thought I'd throw that in there.



Actually, there is a mini-prairie up top with sage, prairie grass, snakes, prairie dogs, and bats in the belfry. How the snakes got up there, I really don't know, but that's what the sign said.

If you climb to the top – and you can do that any time except the month of June, because that is sacred time for the tribes who live in the area – you might see this:



This picture has a lot of stuff going on. You can spot the red sandstone, evidence of a controlled burn the National Park Service undertakes on occasion to replenish the soil, weather patterns written in the tree rings, and the remains of the inland sea I talked about above, all of which remains is the Belle Fourche River.

My companions today were additional members of The Partridge Family, including Balazs Csafora as Ketih. He's played by David Cassidy. "Keith is 18 and a Senior at Galaxy High School. A handsome boy, it's not unusual for him to have big eyes for a girl who won't give him the time of day. Something of a smart-aleck, the usual object of his sharp verbal digs is his sister, Laurie."



Also in attendance was Adriana Bate as Reuben Kincaid. She's played by Dave Madden. "Reuben is the Partridge's agent. Reuben often talks when he should be listening, and as a consequence can be found on occasion with his foot in his mouth. A perfect foil for Danny's barbs, he is totally loyal to the Partridges and can be trusted completely..



So that was our day. How was yours? I, for one, couldn't have asked for a more beautiful one.



August 29, 2023: Dirt Daubers

I love days like this. I learned the answers to two imponderables today. 1. Why were Eastern European immigrant farmers in the Midwest called “Sod Busters?” and 2 Was Pierre, SD named for Pierre Choteau?

It's Adriana's last day with the Cockeyed Caravan and we started the day driving the Scenic Loop in the Badlands National Park. Adriana flipped over the Badlands. She even bought a hoodie with a Badlands print on it. When Adriana buys swag, you know she's serious.

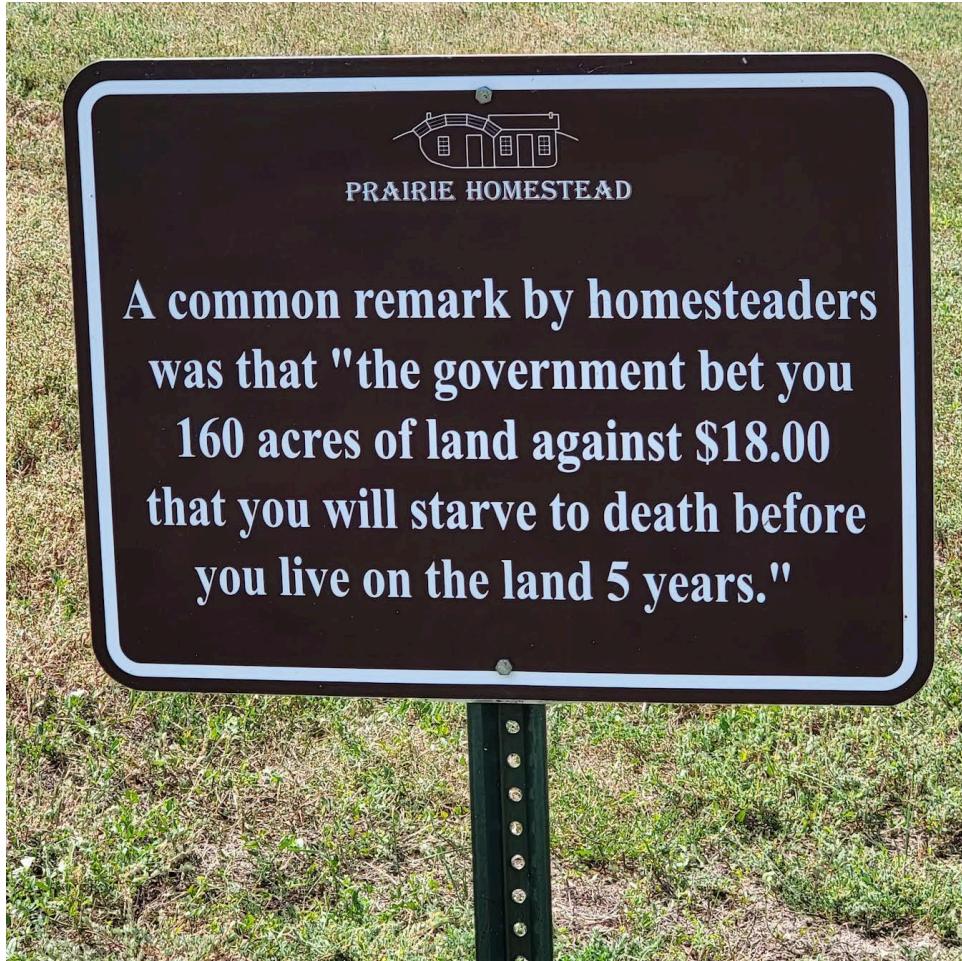
It's impossible to do places like The Badlands, Grand Canyon, etc. justice with mere photographs. I take a few snaps here and there, just to imprint them on my heart and mind, but one could take a thousand pics and still not capture the uniqueness of the place. Here's one I snapped early this morning, as a memento of our last day before moving north:



I have a feeling we'll be back.

In 1908, my great-grandparents on my mother's side immigrated to Texas from Moravia, in what is now the Czech Republic. My grandmother was the youngest of eight and was the only one born in the U.S. While the strange and unknown land to which they journeyed from Katerinice in the Zlin Region is unlike the upper Great Plains, I expect the experience was much the same as the Browns had in 1909 when they bought a homestead in South Dakota.

South Dakota and Nebraska were late to the homestead game because the Indians kept attacking the railroad workers. It wasn't until 1906 that the first train line (The Milwaukee R.R.) came to South Dakota. Once the train came, the people came. Once the people came, what had once been territories then had enough population to petition for statehood. To entice people to come to a place where winters can reach temperatures of 40 below with relentless 70 mph winds, the government offered homesteaders ownership of 160 acres for the grand sum of \$18.00 if the homesteader could "prove up" his claim that he had stuck it out on the land for five years.



Most of the homesteaders lost the bet. The Browns didn't. Here's a picture of their house:



On the left is the first bit. It's a sod house dug into the side of a hill. The sod house contained a big room with a table and stove for cooking and eating. Behind a flimsy partition was the bed where the big Browns made little Browns. The little Browns slept on the dirt floor. As the family began to prosper, they added the parlor on the right. Then a barn and lots of farm tools. They even owned a piano and a Model T and they wore shirts with collars. But no indoor plumbing. They farmed their 160 acres until 1949 when their son sold the property to a neighbor. Despite their relative success, they were never able to rid themselves of their boarders.



I have never thought I'd enjoy being a farmer. I don't like doing things twice and, on the plains, in order to grow crops, one has to plow twice – the first time with a "sod buster," to break up the soil, and the second with a conventional plow to till the busted up soil and get it ready for planting. Here is a picture of a sod buster.



So you see, a “sod buster” is not just a derogatory term for Bohonks who live in dirt houses, but a useful farm implement that will one day allow you to purchase a Model T.

And speaking of fur trading, remember back when I was in Arrowrock, Missourah? Remember when I showed you Ft. Osage where the soldiers slept two to a bunk? Remember I told you about Pierre Choteau, the fur trader who traded useful goods and tools for fur with the Osage Indians? Well, today my suspicions about ole Pierre were confirmed. Pierre was John Jacob Astor's regional Vice-President in charge of the territories west of the Mississippi. And who was John Jacob Astor, you ask? Only the richest guy in America at the time. He made his first fortune selling furs to Europe and parlaying his holdings into real estate. At one time, he owned much of New York City. His great-grandson went down with Leonardo di Caprio and the Titanic. I just knew Pierre had to be an associate of Astor, rather than a competitor, because Astor didn't brook competitors.

For his efforts, Pierre had a fort named after him – Ft. Pierre. It never really got off the ground as a fort; only lasting a few years. But one fort's failure is a city's fortune. Pierre, South Dakota, from which I am writing to you, is the capital of South Dakota with a whopping population of less than 14,000 souls. It's a pretty, little place situated on the banks of the Big Mo which, up here, looks like a proper river, not the dried up, sand bar laden muck we saw further downstream.



Unfortunately, I have to say goodbye to Adriana for a few weeks as I continue my peregrinations in parts unknown. Tomorrow, a new adventure awaits. Who knows, I might bust some sod or trade for some furs. And so I leave you with words Pierre undoubtedly once said, “Bonne nuit.”

August 30, 2023: “Yo, Who Was that? Oh, He’s Just a Friend”

No, not Biz Markie. Bismarck. As in North Dakota. My first time here in the Peace Garden State. And my first stop was, of course,Lawrence Welk’s birthplace in beautiful Strasburg, just over the border from South Dakota! I was so excited. It was gonna be wunnerful! It’s not every day one can brush up against accordion immortality. Except ... it’s not there. I suppose the fading and torn billboard should have tipped me off. Dang. Or should I say, shucks. There’s a lot of corn around there. It would have been easy to stalk someone.

I was downcast, to be sure. But I remained undaunted and took courage. North Dakota is beautiful. Greener than South Dakota, and more rolling hills. Plus, it has a lot of lakes. Not to mention that Bismarck has a Starbucks. Pierre does not. You’d think all the politicos would want to be carrying the familiar green and white cup as they rub shoulders with the big agra lobbyists.

While I was disappointed not to see the birthplace of my personal demigod, I began humming a King Family cover of “Shrimpboats” and drove on to Jamestown, home ofFrontier Village! Yay!



Frontier Village was a blast. It's the kind of place I would have flipped over when I was 10. You know why? Because it's just like a Frontier Village! Yay!



Only it was more like a Frontier Ghost Town. It's their last full week of operation before they board it up for the winter, so only a couple of the shops were open. I did have a great chat with Earl, though. Earl runs a bric a brac shop. Earl told me all about his quadriplegic brother who can still drive a car.

I also had a chat with Carmen, the docent in the saloon. Carmen just retired. Carmen stays inside all winter and plays the piano. Carmen volunteers at Frontier Village in the summer. Yay! I asked Carmen about winters here. Carmen's reply was that the summers are the reason she puts up with the winters. I understand her logic as it's mighty pleasant in these here parts.

I did see some cool stuff, though. All the buildings were open even though no one is in any of them. Here's a snap of the interior of the church. Notice the stove is placed near the pews, presumably so the congregation won't freeze their tuchusses off while the rev drones on. Although, I bet the rev gives fast sermons in the winter. Probably because he's freezing his tuchus off because the congregation is getting all the heat. Of course, since they're most likely Lutherans, they wouldn't complain. Because that's how God wants it. Freezing tuchusses.



Here's one of some of the books a school kid would have used in North Dakota in the 1920s:



It's always good to be well versed in the Handbook of Literature before one goes out to spend one's life planting corn. But hey, they're most likely Lutherans and that's how God wants it.

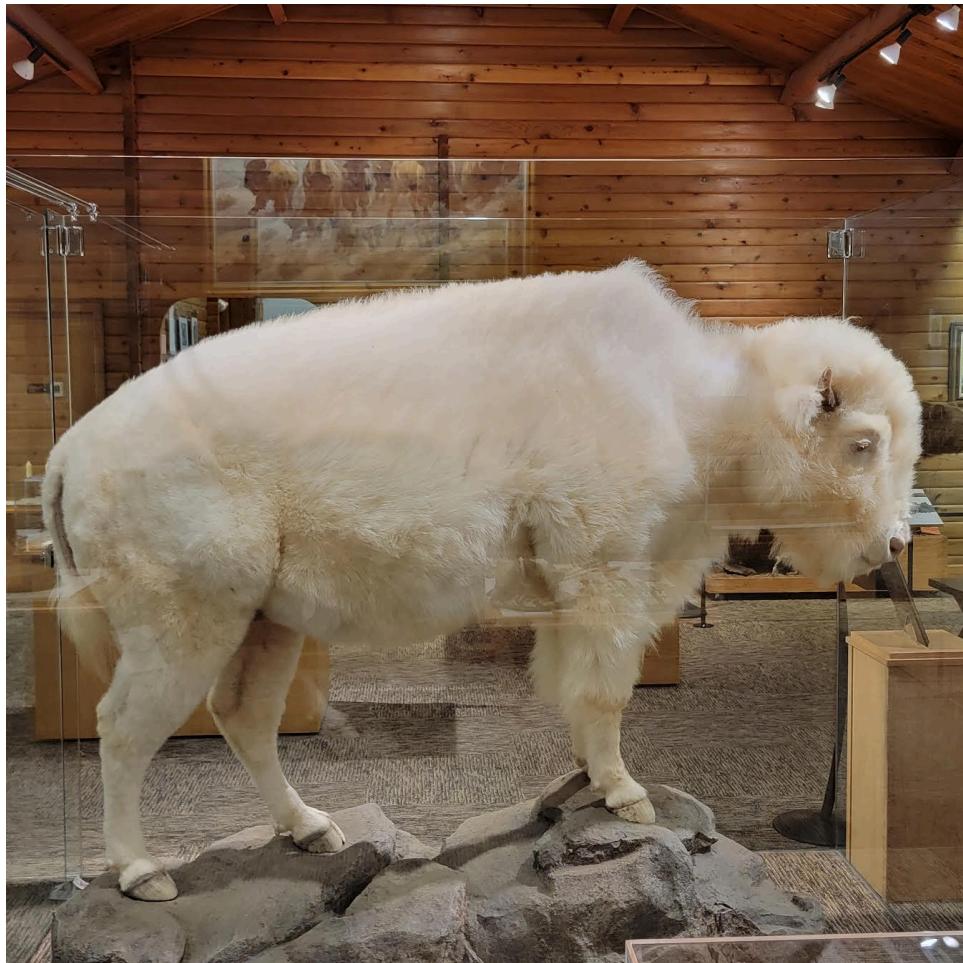
What Frontier Village also has is the National Buffalo Museum. I like Buffaloes, so I liked the museum.



The National Buffalo Museum has a Hall of Fame. Charles Goodnight, he of the Goodnight-Loving Trail, is in the Hall; which is kind of ironic since he made his dough trailing cattle from Texas to Kansas so they could be slaughtered. But what the heck. He seemed to like bison. Ted Turner is also in the Hall. Ted has the largest private bison herd in America. 50,000 head. He may be crazy, but he's a good bison guy. And, of course, Teddy is in the Hall. He was weird, and his racial ideas left something to be desired, but he was our coolest President and he took no guff. I wonder what he'd say about the state of politics in America today.



The National Buffalo Museum has a White Buffalo. White Buffaloes are cool and have great spiritual value.



Do you know how to differentiate between the two main types of Bison?

Plains Bison

- Bulls average 1600 lbs. (cows 900 lbs.)
- Shorter neck
- Rounder hump
- Smaller and stockier
- Chaps of long hair on forelegs
- Lighter-colored cape
- In summer, cape forms distinct boundary with the rest of body
- Frizzy hair on head
- Larger, more rounded beard

Wood Bison

- Largest native land mammal in North America
- Bulls average 1850 lbs.
 - 10 to 15% heavier than plains bison (cows 1050 lbs.)
- Taller and square hump
- Darker in color
- Taller and larger
- Little or no chap hair on forelegs
- Cape usually does not form distinct boundary with rest of body
- Long, straight hair, sloping down on forehead
- Smaller, more pointed beard

Graphic courtesy of Elk Island National Park

There will be a test tomorrow, and I expect all of you to pass.

Finally, Frontier Village is home to the largest Buffalo in the United States.



The mutant Buffaloes have been implanted with AI, so get ready, because the mutant Buffaloes are coming. That's all I'm gonna say.

I rolled into Bismarck (Population 76,000) in mid-afternoon. Of course, my first stop was the North Dakota Heritage Center.



In front, there's a nifty statue of Sacagawea....Sakakawea.....Sacajawea....aw, the hell with it. You know who I'm talkig about.



Ms. S is in front of the Museum, which was pretty good. There's a lot of dinosaur stuff. I took some pics, but I'm going to a primo dino spot in a couple of days, so I'll save pics until then.

When I entered the building, there were a bunch of troubadours jamming away to "Folsom Prison Blues." Made me think of my friend, Henry Vaccaro, Sr.

My favorite part of the museum was the history of the settlement of North Dakota. Native Peoples have been here at least since 500.B.C. as evidenced by the artifacts at the sites of their settlements.

There was also a lot of fascinating memorabilia dating from the turn of the 20th century through the 1950s.

The museum was hosting a retirement party for the North Dakota Attorney General, so there were a lot of politicos around. I sure wish the Texas AG would take the hint.

All in all, it was a satisfying day and a wunnerful introduction to an oft overlooked state. I look forward to experiencing more of what North Dakota has to offer.



Yay!

August 31, 2023: "Well, it's all right, ridin' around in the breeze"

Today, we went to the end of the line for my uncle Pierre. We made it to the Mandan Villages on the Knife River, where the Corps of Discovery spent the winter of 1804-1805. They wouldn't have made it through but for the Hidatsa peoples who traded food for farm implements.

Here is a picture of the Knife River:



The Knife River is a tributary of the Missouri. At one time, the Hidatsa people lived in mounded houses. You can see the remains in this picture:



By the time Uncle Pierre arrived, the Mandan Villages (Hidatsa, Mandans, and Arikara peoples) numbered about 5,000 souls. Uncle Pierre spent the winter and its attendant 40 below temperatures in Fort Mandan, which he helped to build.





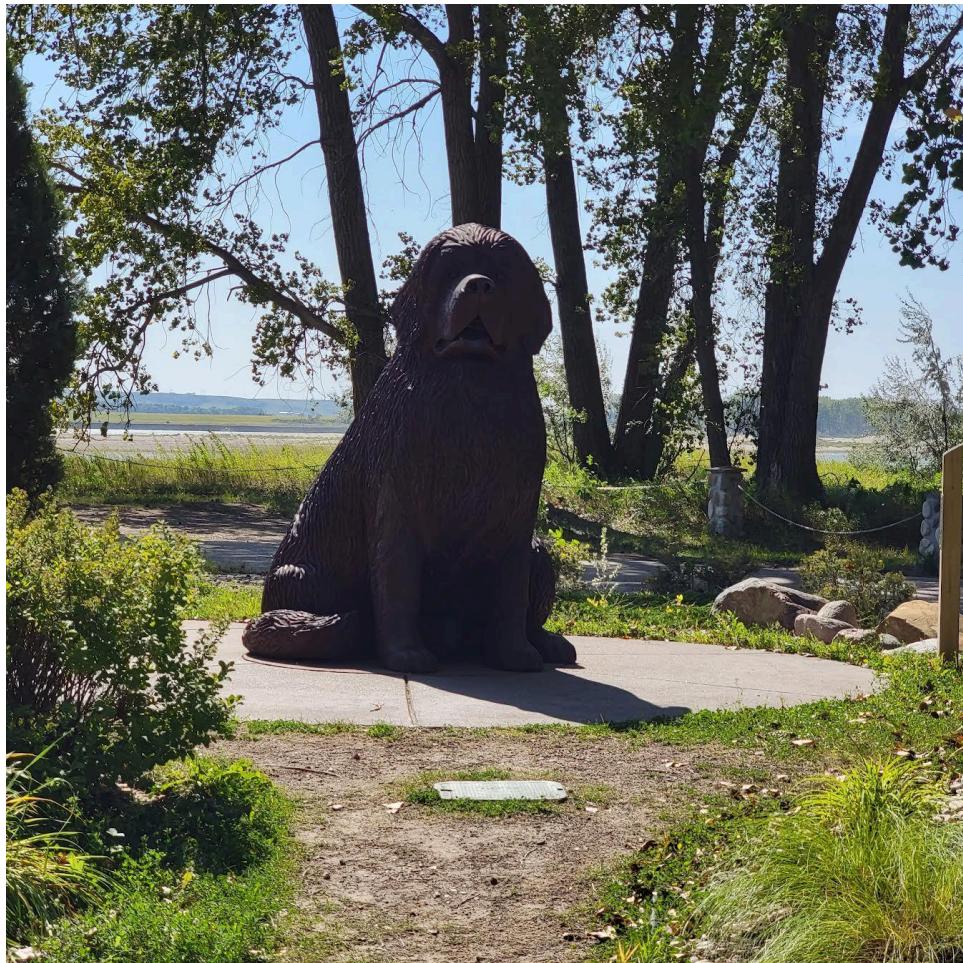
Notice the flag – 15 stripes and 15 stars, just like the flag at Ft. McHenry in Baltimore Harbor that Francis Scott Key wrote a song about a few years after the L&C expedition.



The Fort you see in the pictures is a replica, based on descriptions and measurements contained in Clark's journal. The real fort no longer exists, having burned down around 1808.

Our guide was fantastic. His name is Jacob. You can see him in the first picture. He just graduated from University of Mary with a degree in History. His area of interest is the Louisiana Territory during the period 1780-1803, when it ping-ponged between Spanish and French ownership. He was able to answer all of my arcane questions and even told us a couple of stories I had never heard.

The real Fort Mandan was situated about 14 miles downriver from Washburn, ND, but it's memorialized by a statue of Seeman (Lewis' dog) at an overlook on the banks of the Missouri.





What a lovely river. Don't you agree?

In April 1805, the Corps took off upriver in dugouts one week after Lewis' last journal entry noting ice on the river. Uncle Pierre took off downriver on a keelboat, charged with delivering notes and messages to Mars Tom, along with several specimens of flora and fauna gathered during the first leg of the trip.

—Meriwether Lewis

Keelboat Returns to St. Louis

*T*he keelboat was launched down stream from Fort Mandan on the same day the expedition headed west. It carried letters to President Jefferson, Clark's journal, maps and official reports. The cargo included Indian objects, plant and animal specimens, and three cages of live animals: four magpies, a prairie dog, and a sharp-tailed grouse.



Listed first on Lewis' inventory were the skins and skeletons of two pronghorn antelopes. As with some of the other specimens, they were mounted by Charles Wilson Peale and placed in America's first museum in Philadelphia.

Titian Ramsey Peale. Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society

Oh, yeah. I almost forgot.

1. Which is taller? A Plains Bison or a Wood Bison?
2. Compare and contrast the beard of a Plains Bison with that of a Wood Bison.
3. What is the difference, if any, between the cape of a Plains Bison and the cape of a Wood Bison.

I told you.

No cheating.

First correct answer to all 3 questions will win a memento of my choosing from my current travels. Either that or a Broyhill Living Room Suite from the Spiegel Catalog. That's Spiegel. Chicago, 60609.

In the last 3+ weeks, we have traveled the middle third of the Lewis and Clark expedition. From St. Louis to the Mandan Villages. 984 statute miles. And what is the difference between statute and nautical miles? I told you in my Antarctica blog. First correct answer will win an Amana Radar Range, or a memento of my choosing from my current travels.

Tomorrow, the tenor of our trip will change. No more L&C stuff as we hang a Lou and meander into Montana. It was personally important to me to trace the route my distant uncle rowed, pulled, poled, dragged, or otherwise navigated upstream on the wide Missouri. I'm grateful to the members of the Cockeyed Caravan for putting up with the seemingly endless L&C stops. I have some personal feelings about this leg of our journey and, perhaps, a revelation or two, but I think I'll wait and share them with you once I get back to Dallas. After all, I have to keep you reading somehow.

For today, we've come to the end of the line for Uncle Pierre.



But, as you know, the end of one journey is merely the commencement of another, so I'll catch up with you tomorrow.



September 1, 2023: How Not to Win Friends and Confluence People

We had a North de Coda day today. First stop, by accident, was Theodore Roosevelt National Park on the edge of the great National Grassland and not far east of the Montana Border.

You may not know that T.R.'s mother and wife both died within 4 hours of each other on Valentines Day, 1884. His diary entry for that day was a large black X. What did T.R. do in the midst of his overwhelming grief and despair? He went to the Badlands of North Dakota and became a cowboy for two years. During that period of hard work and intense focus, he worked through his depression and fitted himself for public life. After his return to New York, he became the New York City Police Commissioner and commenced his twisted road to the White House. He referred to his time in North Dakota as the time when the romance of his life began. Ah, Teddy. You could turn a phrase.

T.R. continued a long association with North Dakota for 15 years. He organized the first stockman's association in the newly admitted state, he owned a cattle ranch until 1898, and if you look at the roster of the Rough Riders, you'll see that almost half of them came from North Dakota. He said he never would have become President without his experience in North Dakota.

We were only at the National Park that bears his name for a brief moment, but if the picture is any indication, it will be worth a return trip to more fully explore this extraordinary land.



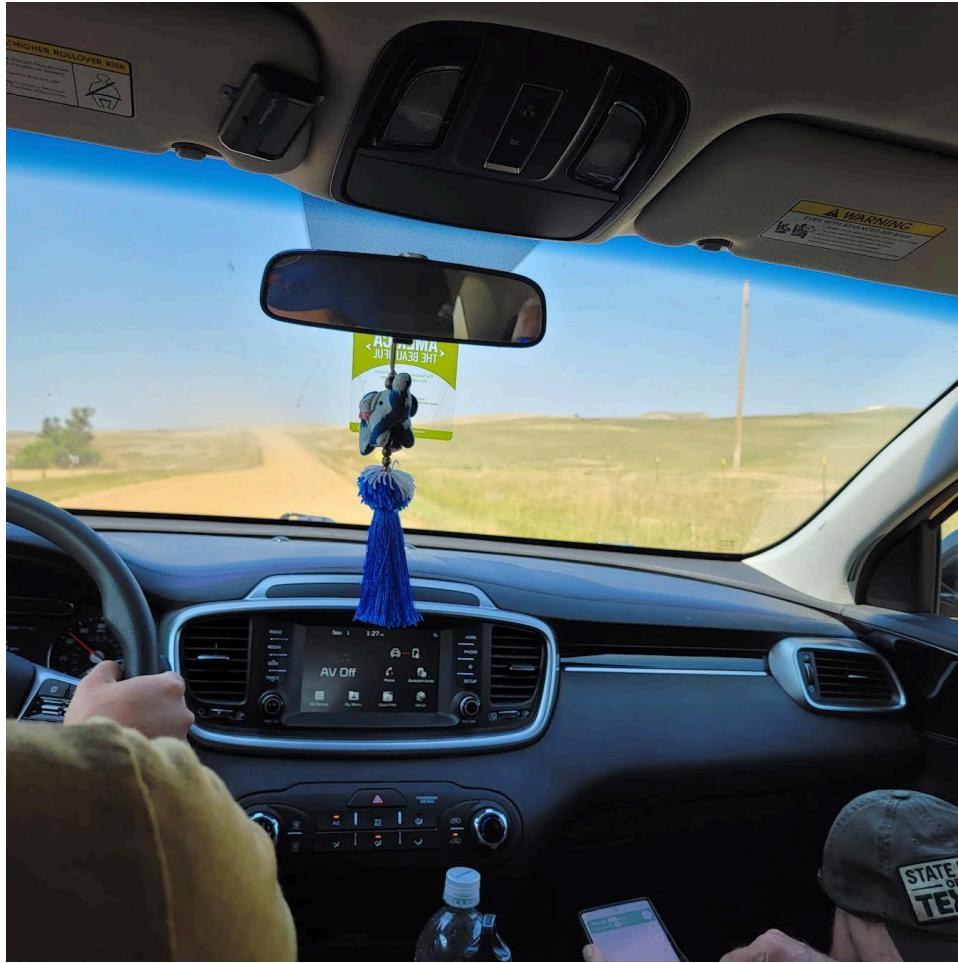
Soon after our departure from the Park, we crossed into Montana. Hmm. I have to say I'm not yet impressed. We are currently parked in a field in Wibeaux, MT. Wibeaux's no Cairo, Illinois, but they appear to be kissing cousins. Wibeaux Travel Tip: Don't go to the Post Office if you have a British accent. I'll say no more.

This part of eastern Montana appears to have a lot of grass.



A person could die very quickly out there and never be found.

Here is the U.S. Highway that runs from Wibeaux to Sidney.



You may have noticed that the road is not paved. I have never traveled on a U.S. Highway made of gravel.

You may ask why we were driving on a gravel road through Sidney, MT. The answer is because we wanted to see the confluence of the Missouri and the Yellowstone Rivers – that “long wished for spot” referenced in Clark’s journal.

After a video at the interpretive center and a mile and a half hike in 90-degree heat, we still didn’t see it. We went back to the interpretive center and asked Anita, the docent, why we couldn’t see it. Her reply was that we couldn’t see it from the path she directed us to that is strewn with interpretive signs every tenth of a mile but, rather, we had to go to the boat landing to see the confluence. We asked how we get to the boat landing. Anita said it would be best if we drove. Perhaps she might have told us that before we shelled out our five bucks each and run the gauntlet of grasshoppers that did their best to eat our clothing. Why I oughta.....

We did see one interesting resident of the swampy muck of the Yellowstone as it nears its junction with the Missouri. I leave it to Adriana to identify this particular denizen.



Despite our travails, we remained undeterred, went to the boat landing, and saw the confluence. Here it is:



The Yellowstone is to the right of the island; the Missouri is to the left. It doesn't exactly make me want to burst out with a verse or two of "Shenandoah," but that's not the rivers' faults. They're both really low in these parts.

And speaking of the Sioux, Anita told us the cottonwood tree in the picture was the tree Sitting Bull sat under and prayed as he came to the decision to turn himself in at Fort Buford, just down the road.



Yeah, right. Has anyone seen my turnip truck? Sitting Bull did indeed surrender to Federal authorities in 1881 at Ft. Buford. 142 years ago. The average life span of a cottonwood tree is 70-100 years. I don't really think the tree in the picture is Sitting Bull's tree.

You probably know how Sitting Bull ended up. He was the star attraction in Buffalo Bill's freak show for a season or two in the 1880s. He was killed by Tribal Police in 1890. Maybe. At least that's the story that's put out. To put the stopper in, so to speak, Anita told us her great-grandfather did Sitting Bull's laundry. I think the only Bull going around the interpretive center today was put out by Anita.

One thing I did learn today, though, involved the Great Western Trail, a series of last hurrah cattle drives from Southern Texas to Montana in the 1880s and 1890s. One of these drives was fictionalized by Larry McMurtry in Lonesome Dove. No doubt Anita's great great grandfather's brother's cousin drove the chuck wagon.



Our final stop was at Lake Trenton for Doug to dig some rocks. Doug dug some good ones and the lake was pretty gorgeous.

After arriving at our field, we had picnic food with my sister and her husband.

I have to say I'm missing North Dakota at the moment, but tomorrow is another day and I suspect Montana will grow on me. Besides, tomorrow I bet I'm going to be humming some Marc Bolan tunes. Get the reference?

Think Zinc!

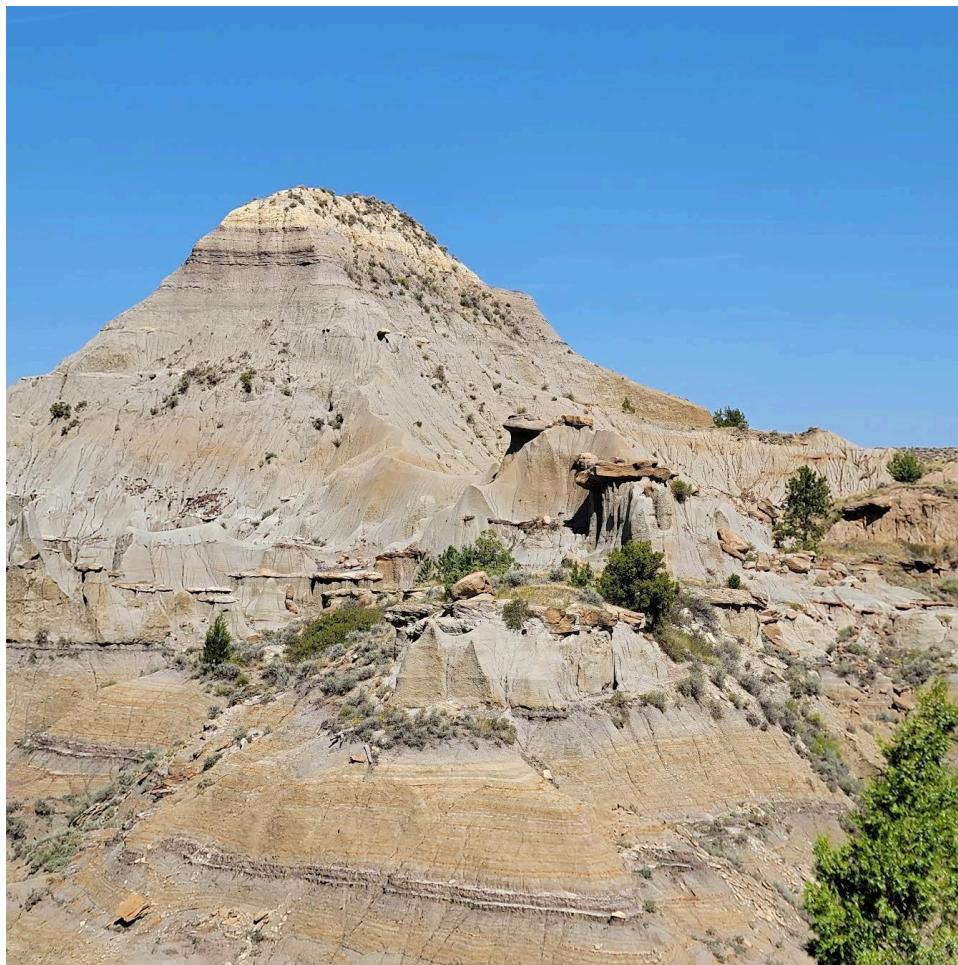
September 2, 2023: "What we're gonna do right here is go back, way back, back into time, When the only people that existed were troglodytes.

We didn't meet Bertha Butt (one of the Butt sisters) today, but it was a weirdly troglodytic day.

We went to Makoshika State Park to see dinosaur remnants.

The day started promisingly. The visitor center staff seemed knowledgeable, and we started off down the park road looking for trail heads so we could hike a bit in the land of cap rocks. Well, that was our first mistake. Very few of the trail heads are marked. So, we floundered around for a bit, but took some representative snaps.







Fair enough. Gorgeous scenery. But we were pacing ourselves for the big hike as it was 95 degrees today and, while we had water, we wanted to be prudent lest we start jumping around like Walter Huston.

The big hike is a trail that takes the hiker from a river bed up a thousand feet or so, through various epochal striations, to a spot in a rock formation where he or she can see a fossilized dinosaur embedded in said rocks. This is where we attempted to hike - to the top of Mt. Crumpet:



Four of us started out. One of us made it to the top to see the prize. That was me. So, I guess I win the Broyhill Living Room Suite. Here is what I saw:

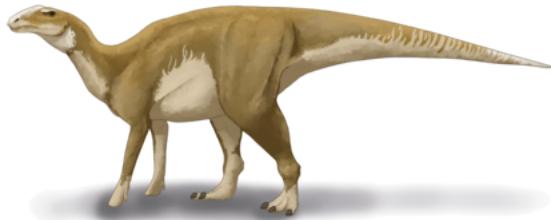


The chap or chapette you see in the picture is what's left of a hadrosaur. Let's see what Wikipedia (the most trusted name in information delivery) has to say about hadrosaurs.

"Hadrosaurus ([/ hædrə'sɔ:rəs/](#); lit. 'bulky lizard') is a [genus](#) of [hadrosaurid ornithopod dinosaurs](#) that lived in [North America](#) during the [Late Cretaceous Period](#) ... about 78-80 Ma. The [holotype](#) specimen was found in fluvial marine sedimentation, meaning that the corpse of the animal was transported by a river and washed out to sea.

They were large animals ranging from 7 to 8 m (23 to 26 ft) and 2 to 4 t (2.2 to 4.4 short tons). Most of the preserved elements are very robust, unusual traits in hadrosaurs. *Hadrosaurus* were ponderously-built animals equipped with keratinous beaks for cropping foliage and a specialized and complex dentition for food processing. *Hadrosaurus* were large sized animals growing up to 7–8 m (23–26 ft) and weighing as much as 2 to 4 t (2.2 to 4.4 short tons).^{[5][6]} According to Prieto-Márquez, *Hadrosaurus* can be distinguished in having a shortened pectoral crest that is slightly over 40% of the total [humeral](#) length, a deltopectoral crest that is developed from the humeral shaft causing the laterodistal border to display a broad lateral facet, a lower greatest point of the supraacetabular crest located above lateral edge from the rear to the bottom on the posterior tuberosity of the ischial peduncle of the ilium, a shortened supraacetabular crest from the front to the rear with its breadth being half the length of the middle iliac plate.^[7]

As in most hadrosaurs, the forelimbs were not as heavily built as the hindlimbs, but were long enough to be used in standing or movement.^{[3][4][5]} The holotype specimen was a relatively large animal at the time of death with a 1.05 m (105 cm) long femur and 93.3 cm (933 mm) long tibia. Most of the preserved elements feature a marked robust composition with the fibula being one of the most robust among hadrosaurs.^[3] “



So there.

Now, it all makes sense if, as the science tells us, the area in which Makoshika State Park is located was once an inland sea; as is readily apparent from the top of Mt. Crumpet. But, as we know, some people think science is bunk. Such is the case at the Glendive Dinosaur and Fossil Museum. The mission of the GDFM is to re-educate its patrons about the true nature of the interaction between dinosaurs and humans. Its chief historical reference and the point at which its evidence starts is, of course, The Bible and its history of the big flood. You know, the Noah one. That happened in approximately 1300 B.C. Apparently, the big flood wiped out most, but not all, of the dinosaurs. The ones that survived were the little ones, and they were called “dragons.” I’m not making this up. I swear.

According to the GDFM, the historical record is chock full of references to dragons. For example, Herodotus talks about dragons. Alexander the Great saw some in India. Marco Polo went to see a few get eaten by some big birds in China. And, of course, the biggie dragon slayer – Saint George. For whom a Mormon community in Utah is named. I could go on, as there are 2 floors of this evidence; all of which begins with the premise that The Bible (presumably, in its current English language form) is the only true received word of God and that because God created heaven, earth, and Man (“mankind” I guess, since there is no mention of women), there is no room for evolution because the dinosaurs still had undigested food in their stomachs. It was all too complicated for me. But the people at the museum were very nice and chipper, albeit the young women at the front were a little too Handmaid’s Tale for my comfort level. Since I’m not a Christian, I guess I’ll stick with the science.

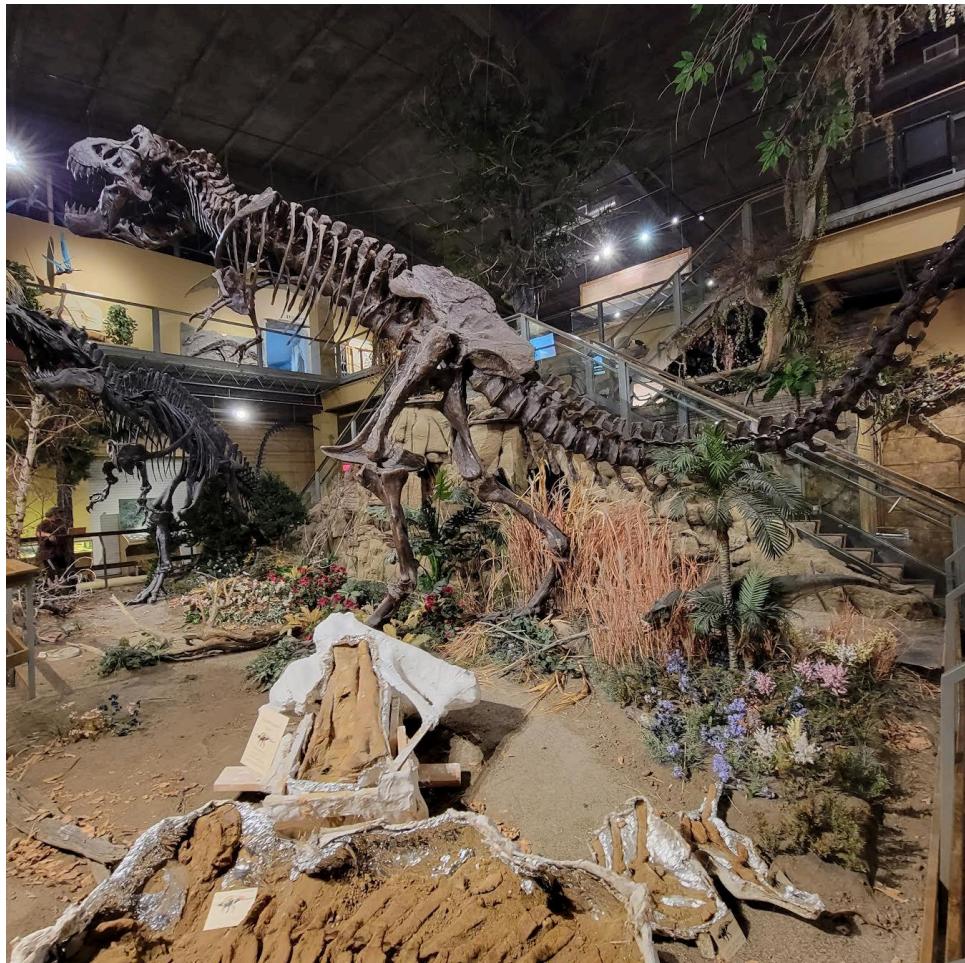
That saidI did see some evidence of troglodytes in the river bottom.



And I didn't think troglodytes had any written language. Silly me. It's probably some archaic history of their interplay with dinosaurs. Either that, or notations of their rhyming lyrical schemata which depends on polychromatic scaling and conventional rhythmic chanting – as in: "Cave man at home, listening to his stereo. Sometimes he'd get up Try to do his thing. He'd begin to move, something like this: "Dance...dance". When he got tired of dancing alone, he'd look In the mirror: "Gotta find a woman gotta find a woman gotta find a Woman gotta find a woman."

And I thought I'd be giving you Marc Bolan T-Rex lyrics today, instead of those by the Jimmy Castor Bunch, but whaddyagonnado?

So I hope you'll put on your hubcap diamond star halos tonight and Get it on. Bang a Gong, Get it On. Just cuz you're dirty and sweet.





Peace.

September 3, 2023: “See Rock City”

Mostly a travel day, today. As I write this, we are ensconced in a KOA in Hardin, MT – a few miles from the site of the Battle of the Little Bighorn, which I will no doubt tell you about tomorrow.

The day started off very well. This guy was one of the highlights of the day,



He's a camp cat and he is just as friendly as can be. He loved getting pets and cuddles from all of us this morning. I was sorely tempted to take him home with me as I've always wanted an orange cat. But then we'd have five and we only wanted two, instead of the four we currently have. So I gave him a nice snuggle and said goodbye.

Montana is called the Big Sky Country. I wonder why.



During our drive, we saw this:



I have no idea. My guess is that it has something to do with anti-abortion and the creed of the GDFM. What do you think? Most imaginative explanation wins an Amana Radar Range or a memento of my choosing from the Cockeyed Caravan's travels.

We got to our KOA in the early afternoon, leveled the RV, hooked up the electricity and water and off we went to Pompey's Pillar, where we learned about what happened on this date during the Corps of Discovery's journey.

WELCOME
TO
POMPEYS PILLAR
NATIONAL
MONUMENT

On This Day

September 3, 1806

"we spied two boats & several men,
our party peyed their oars and we
soon landed on the side of the boats
the men of these boats Saluted us
with their small arms I landed & was
met by a Mr. Ains from Mackanaw by
way of Prairie Dechien and St.
Louis...our first enquirey was after
the President of our country and then
our friends and the State of politicks
of our country and the state of Indian
affairs..."

Excerpt from The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Moulton, Vol. 8





You may ask who the heck was Pompey and why a pillar? I'm glad you asked.

Pompey was the nickname Clark gave to the baby Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, whose mother was Sacagawea....Sakakawea.....Sacajawea....aw, dang. Smoked myself again.

Why a pillar? I have no idea.

The cool thing about the site is that Clark carved his name on the rock face.



If you notice the date, you'll see that he carved his name during the return trip on his way back to St. Louis. Given the quality of the spelling in Clark's journal, I'm surprised he could spell his name correctly (which, incidentally, Mars Tom did not, referring to him as Clarke in correspondence). Clark's signature on Pompey's Pillar is the only surviving physical evidence of the Corps' journey. At this point, Doug should be chiming in with references to the mercury found during the exploration of the Corps' latrines. Sounds like the last campsite at which we stayed. And who the heck explores latrines, anyway?

After the Corps' return, Clark adopted Jean-Baptiste and sent him to school in St. Louis, then college in Europe, where he learned to speak German, as well as the French and English he already knew. Eventually, Jean-Baptiste became a 49er and went to California to make his fortune. He didn't succeed. Word on the street is that Clark impregnated an Indian woman on the trip and took responsibility for that child as well. At least he did the right thing – even if Ron de Sanctimonious's and Greg Abbot's history books forbid teaching such a thing.

After Clark carved his name, he climbed to the top of Pompey's Pillar, then wrote about what he saw. This is pretty close to what he must have seen, even though the Yellowstone is currently pretty low around here.



It is now dinner time and the Big Sky Country is rapidly turning into the Big Storm Country.



It's started to rain, the temperature has dropped thirty degrees, and the wind is blowing a stiff gale. I best help the laddies with dinner, then batten down the hatches.

Hope you have a Happy Labor Day.

September 4,2023: The poison rises from the goonads to the throat and seeps down to various muscles.

Reportedly, Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's last words were: "Custer's luck! The biggest Indian Village on the Continent! Hurrah Boys! Let's get these last few reds then head on back to camp. Hurrah!" It seems to me that, at best, those words, if accurate, were Custer's penultimate words. I have to think his last words were something along the lines of "We are so fu*ked."

Here's the deal about the Battle of the Little Bighorn: On June 25, 1876, Custer and his entire command of 242 members of the U.S. 7th Cavalry were killed by a superior combined force of Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians near the Little Bighorn River in what is now Southeast Montana. That's it. We will never know the true story beyond what I just wrote.

Over 8,000 books have been written about the Battle of the Little Bighorn. It is the most written about battle in U.S. history (Gettysburg is the runner-up in case you were wondering). There are books written by historians, books written by other soldiers, books written by scholars, books written by Indians who were there, and on and on ad infinitum. It is my opinion that most, if not all, advance some particular agenda of their respective authors – apologist, critical, heroic, mythologizing, self-aggrandizing, self-exonerating, vengeful, obsequiousness, you name it, there's a point of view to fit your particular bias. Why?

Custer is one of the big American myths. It's said that America loves a winner but, it seems to me we're more fascinated with losers and work very hard to elevate those losers to heroic stature so we can feel better about ourselves. In my opinion, that largely explains the cult of Trump. If Custer really lost, then America isn't invincible, and we can't live with that as a national psychology.

That said, I found myself fighting back tears today because the whole fiasco was just such a waste. And a fiasco it was. But I also found myself having a little more empathy for Custer than I used to have.

Being as objective as I can, here is what I think happened in simplest terms:

The Plains Indian Wars had a threefold purpose: 1. To protect miners looking for gold in the Black Hills because America was in the middle of a financial panic and we needed gold to shore up the economy; 2. To protect railroad workers who were building spurs off of the continental railroad to entice settlers to the territories (Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas) until there was sufficient population to petition for statehood; and 3. To either kill off the native peoples or pacify them by putting them on reservations. In order to achieve this, the Army sent three columns out west. Custer was the cavalry commander attached to General Terry's column, based in the east at Ft. Abraham Lincoln in Bismarck. General Gibbon was in the West, and General Crook was in the South, based at Ft. Fetterman in Wyoming. A couple of weeks before the Custer debacle, Crook fought a battle at the Powder River, thirty miles southwest of the Little Bighorn. The Indians dispersed after that battle and Crook wanted to find them, so he wired Terry to send out his column from Bismarck to help.

Custer had thirty Apsaalooke Scouts with him. The word "Apsaalooke" means "children of the bird with the large beak" and are known to us as the Crow. The Little Bighorn is on Crow land, ceded to them by the second Treaty of Ft. Laramie in 1868. The Crow scouts reconnoitered to the valley of the Little Bighorn and saw a village of tipis stretching a mile and half along its banks. The estimate is that the village contained 7,000 souls – 2,000 of which, as it turned out, were warriors. The Crow were pissed because their enemy, the Sioux, were on their land, and they duly reported same to Custer.

Custer marched his men 15 straight hours and arrived in the vicinity at 3 a.m. Fearing that the Indians would disperse once they knew the Army was there, and based on the scouting reports from the Crow, he employed the same military tactics that had worked for him in the Civil War – he split his force, with orders to Major Reno to attack the village from one end, while he took his group to attack the other end (At this point, you military folks will say that a cardinal rule is

never to split your force. However, it almost worked for Lee at Gettysburg and it had worked for Custer at Yellow Tavern, and, more importantly, at the Washita River as I will explain below).

Conventional wisdom and prior experience said that if a bunch of Indians see the Army show up, they won't fight. That's because eight years earlier at the Washita River in what is now present-day Oklahoma, Custer attacked a Cheyenne village from both ends, slaughtered a bunch of women, children, and elders, and decimated the morale of the few braves who were there. What he didn't know at the Little Bighorn was that there were 2,000 warriors present, and ready for a fight. In addition, his Civil War success was based on conventional tactics being employed by opposing conventional armies. Not so on the Plains, which was a guerilla war fought on the guerilla's home turf. Gee. What war does that remind you of?

So far, so good. Then things got weird. Reno was trying to get information from one of his scouts when the scout was shot in the head and his brains were spattered all over Reno (echoes of George Washington in the French-Indian War). Reno was understandably upset and reportedly began issuing contradictory orders - mount, dismount, retreat, advance. Stuff like that. Whatever the truth is, Reno's bunch got pinned down by the Indians and couldn't move for two days.

Reno has taken a bum rap in history. The majority of the historical literature excoriates Reno for not coming to Custer's aid, but the fact is that Reno was five miles away over rugged terrain and he would have had to fight his way through Crazy Horse's group who had flanked Custer. There was no way Reno could have gotten to Custer in time to save him as Custer's little party only lasted as long "as it takes for a hungry man to wolf down his meal."

In the meantime, Custer headed for the village, saw that there was a shitload of Indians, and tried to retreat up a hill. One group of Indians chased him up the hill, killing his troops as they went. On his left flank, Crazy Horse's group was attacking across the ridge line that separated Custer from Reno, and from behind, Indians were crouched in the "greasy grass" (the name by which the native peoples call the battle) and were attacking Custer's group from behind. At that point, Custer reportedly gave the order for his men to kill their horses and use them as breastworks. When the boss says destroy your only means of escape, you know you ain't escaping. It didn't last very long.

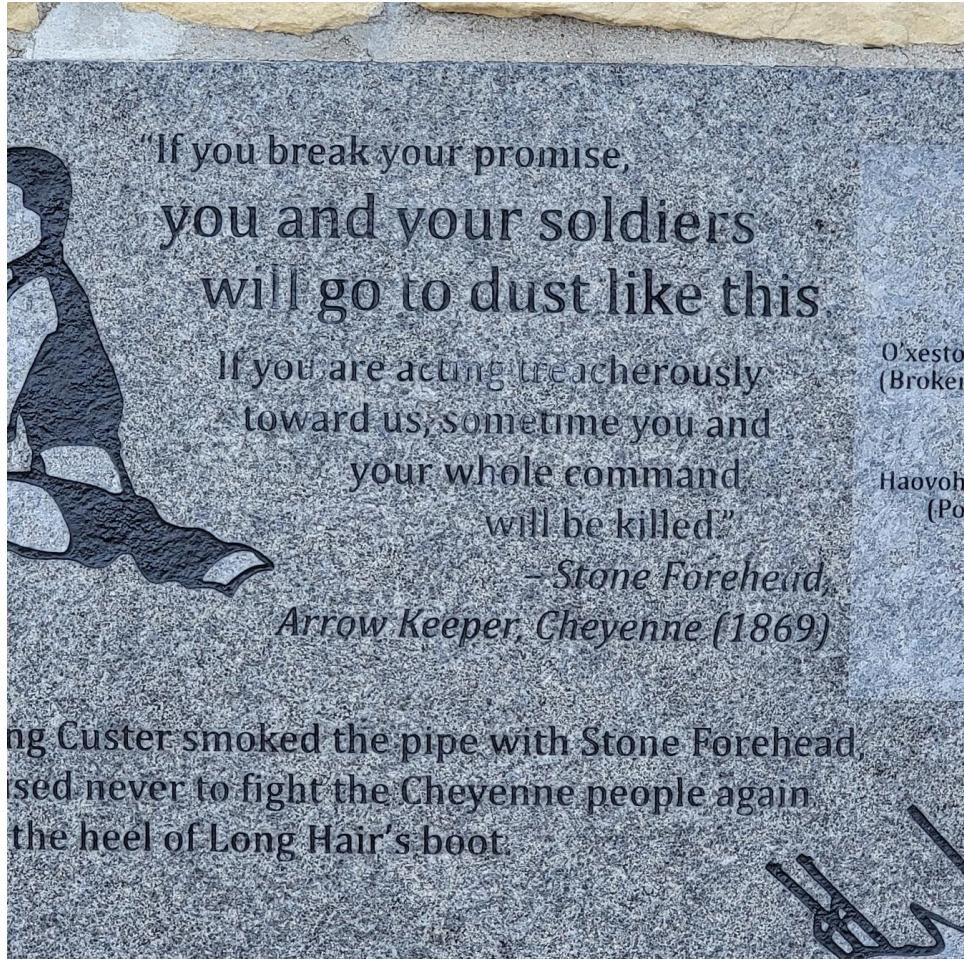
Here's where the last of them fell, sort of:





The tree line that is visible in the first picture is at the bank of the Little Bighorn River. The village was located there.

The soldiers' bodies were mutilated by the victors. Their inner thighs were sliced open so they wouldn't be able to ride a horse in the next life. They were emasculated. The soles of their feet were mutilated so they wouldn't be able to walk in the next world. The women smashed the heads in with rocks. The Cheyenne women stuck beading needles in Custer's ears so he would hear better in the next life. Why? Because after the Washita River, Custer told the Cheyenne Chief that he would never raise his gun at a Cheyenne again. Most likely because he had a Cheyenne woman as his other wife, and with whom he had a son. Here is the Chief's reply to Custer's promise:



No one from the army made it to the site for three days. By that time, the critters had done their thing, so I would think it would be very hard to tell whose body was whose (although they were able to identify Tom Custer's body because of his tattoo). Nonetheless, the burial party marked them in the spots where they fell. That's why you see white markers all over the battlefield. Red markers show where Indians fell, but there aren't very many as their relatives removed their bodies for ceremonial burial shortly after the battle ended. The Little Bighorn was the first battlefield in the world that made a concerted effort to mark the sites where the combatants fell. They also buried the cavalry horses in a common grave near the site of the Last Stand.



I'm glad they did that.

Since the markers were placed, many of the relatives of the fallen have had their bones disinterred and re-buried elsewhere. For example, Custer's white wife, Libbie, had his bones disinterred and re-buried at West Point – assuming they were his bones, which I doubt. I have no idea why, since Custer graduated at the rock bottom of his class (failing his final examination in cavalry tactics by the by), but Libbie was a nut job in the mold of Kathleen Scott, who was determined to be the widow of a hero and, by god, nothing was going to stop her. She lived as the Great One's widow until 1933 and tirelessly worked to promote his legend as a hero for the remainder of her days until she was buried next to what she thought was Boy George at West Point.

Our Ranger's presentation about the battle was excellent. He was the best National Park Ranger I've been around in a long time, so thank you Michael Hasch.



As he was finishing up, the storm blew in and the rain started as if on cue.

We finished the day by going to the Custer County Museum, where this ancient artifact is on display:



While I was at the museum, I was thinking about crazy Libbie Custer and Kathleen Scott (who I talk about in my Antarctica blog. Remember when I told you in my Antarctica blog that I'd talk about Libbie Custer in a few months?). That made me think of Robert Falcon Scott who, like Custer, was a victim of his era and collateral damage of the job of empire building, and who, depending on your point of view, was either fortunate enough or cursed to have a wife who wanted a myth and not a husband. It gets Antarctica cold and Antarctica windy on the Great Plains. If the U.S. Army (originator of the oxymoron "Military Intelligence") was smart enough to figure out that using bison fur and hides was good for keeping warm in the excruciatingly cold and severe winters, wouldn't you think Scott might have explored that option when he was outfitting his little stroll to the South Pole instead of freezing to death in canvas clothing? I asked Cockeyed Caravan Member Peter "Laurie" Zivanovich why this was. His reply was "because we're British and we know better."

So, there it is. Better writers than me can undoubtedly explain the Battle of the Little Bighorn better than I can but my big takeaway today was that Custer wasn't as much of an idiot as I once supposed him to be. He just didn't have enough information and felt compelled to attack before getting the information he needed to make a better informed decision. Ain't that always the way? We 'Muricans think we can do anything, no matter the odds. Sometimes, it works. On June 25, 1876, it didn't.

HEHAKA S

**KNOW THE POWER
THAT IS PEACE**

BLACK ELK

