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## Visiting the Relatives 2016 Road Trip – Various Locations across the US (R16A)

It was time for my annual trip to visit the relatives, my first such trip since moving to Las Vegas. And since I moved to Las Vegas, a sibling and his family moved to the Dallas area. So instead of flying to the Midwest, picking up a rental car and visiting family in Iowa and Illinois as I have done in past years, I planned on a 3-week cross-country road trip that included stays with family in Texas, Iowa and Illinois.

There was a lot of driving, so sightseeing stops were scattered and somewhat ad hoc, although I had a few specific stops in mind when I set off. I also completed one of my life-long ambitions, knocking an item off my so-called travel bucket list. But you'll have to read further to find out what that was.

The start of the trip was straightforward enough. Get to Amarillo, Texas by the end of Day 2. I did this with a long drive along I-40, with just a few old Route 66 stops along the way.



I-40 bypassed downtown Tucumcari, New Mexico. Old Route 66 through Tucumcari features a number of examples of roadside architecture and related kitsch once common along Route 66, including this Mexican restaurant with the sombrero over the entrance. Alas, the town has faded a lot since I stayed in Tucumcari one night back in 1997.



Big Tex Rex stands in front of The Big Texan Steak Ranch, where I had dinner. At the Big Texan, if you can eat one of their Texas Kings – a 72-oz steak – in less than two hours, it's free. I paid for my much smaller steak dinner.



I spent the night at the adjacent Big Texan Motel. Note the tasseled leather shower curtain and the towel bar made with a horse shoe and spur, creating an authentic Texas vibe.

I only had two real sightseeing stops planned as I made my way from Amarillo to the Dallas area, Palo Duro Canyon and Caprock Canyons State Parks.



West Texas is covered by the Llano Estacado, a flat plain once referred to as the Great American Desert. It is capped by an erosion-resistant layer of caliche, a calcium carbonate. Its eastern edge is marked by the Caprock Escarpment, marking the boundary between Llano Estacado and the red Permian geology of central Texas. Canyons have been eroded along the eastern edge of Llano Estacado through the escarpment. These include Palo Duro Canyon, which at 70 miles long is the second longest canyon in the U.S. It averages about 820 feet deep and six miles wide. Here's a view of the canyon at Palo Duro Canyon State Park's visitor center.



Down in the canyon, reddish orange layers are exposed in places.



Caprock Canyons State Park preserves canyons along the Caprock Escarpment.



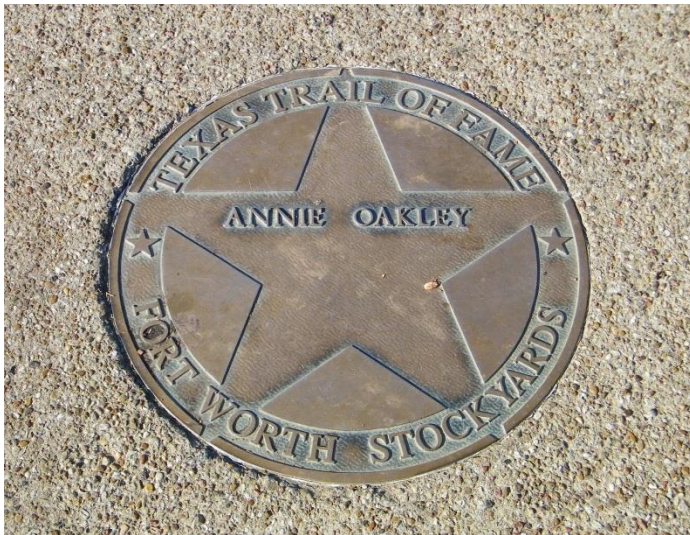
The park is also home to the Texas State Bison Herd. I saw several bison during my visit, but all were along the road, so no pictures of bison with the park's more dramatic landscape in the background.



If you missed the sign at the edge of town, this would certainly let you know that you had arrived at Turkey, Texas. Turkey was home to Bob Wills, King of Western Swing music, occasional actor and member of the Texas Playboys.



While in the Dallas area, we headed to the Fort Worth Stockyards Historic District area for dinner one evening. Once the city's primary livestock market, more than 40 buildings from the era have been preserved in what is now primarily a tourist destination that features restaurants, entertainment and shopping.



Annie Oakley is several inductees in the Texas Trail of Fame, which honors those who made major contributions to Western heritage and way of life.



After leaving the Dallas area, I headed north through Oklahoma and then planned to cut across southeast Kansas towards the Kansas City area. It was mostly an ordinary overcast day with a few sprinkles. But as I entered Kansas on Hwy 77 south of Winfield the clouds looked like a storm might be developing. I stopped in the next town north of Winfield and turned on the radio to find a weather report.

Surprise. A tornado had crossed Hwy 77 south of Winfield minutes earlier, another had been spotted in the next county to the east, and there were reports of large hail accompanying the storm, all moving northeast into the part of southeast Kansas that I had planned to be driving into.

Not wanting to deal with tornados or hail, I instead headed to McPherson, just to the northwest of the bad weather, where I ended up spending the night.



I headed east the next morning via a more northern route than I had planned on, so I was able to stop along the way at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, a National Park Service unit. I had visited here once before, back in the 1990s.



In Independence, Missouri, I stopped at the Harry S Truman National Historic Site, which preserves the Truman home. Built by wife Bess Truman's grandfather in the 1860s, it was home to Truman from their marriage until his death.



Independence was the furthest west one could travel on the Missouri River by steamboat. Westbound pioneers often arrived in town by steamboat and then hit a trail. Independence was the starting point for the Oregon, California and Santa Fe trails.



One of a number of quilt patterns embedded in the sidewalks of downtown Kalona, Iowa.



The David Sim-Duncan Wasson farm near Onslow, Iowa.



After visiting relatives in Iowa and Illinois, I took five days to drive back to Las Vegas, making a few more sightseeing stops along the way.



You probably wouldn't know it by looking at it, but the hill in Havana, Illinois's Rockwell Park is the Rockwell Mound, the largest Mississippian Indian Mound in the Illinois River Valley. It covers two acres and dates back to about 200 AD.



Fall leaves in Carthage, Illinois. A reminder of what I'm missing in Las Vegas.



Also in Carthage, Illinois, the old Carthage Jail, now a historic site operated by the Mormons. In 1844 Mormon leader Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, from the nearby Mormon settlement of Nauvoo, were being held here when a mob stormed the jail and killed them. Brigham Young eventually became leader of the church and led the Mormons to present-day Utah.



The old Monroe Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas, now the Brown vs. Board of Education National Historic Site. Once a black-segregated school, parents of 20 Monroe students fought against segregated schools and the principle of “separate but equal” that had guided school segregation. The US Supreme Court sided with them.



The Kansas State Capitol in Topeka

During the drive west-southwest from Topeka, I passed through Rice and then Stafford Counties. With this I completed my lifelong dream (well, 23-year dream) of visiting all 105 Kansas counties, the 47<sup>th</sup> state for which I have visited all the counties. I also picked off a number of counties in Texas and Missouri, which along with Alaska are the three states with counties/boroughs left to complete.



A “scenic overlook” along Highway 283 as it approaches Dodge City, Kansas from the east features a view of a massive cattle feedlot, although about half of it wasn’t in use the afternoon I stopped here.



The feedlot is reportedly a popular venue for hosting political debates because it is uniquely prepared for cleaning up all the resulting b.s.



Front Street in Dodge City, once the center of town in the city's Old West/cowboy/cattle days. It makes some attempt at being a tourist draw, but a nearby reconstruction at Boot Hill has become more the center of tourism, and old Front Street seems to have faded a lot since I last stopped here in 1994.



The Dodge City Trail of Fame appears to honor, well, mostly actors who had appeared on the TV show Gunsmoke, that had been set in Dodge City. But after a while I found one for Big Nose Kate, longtime companion to Doc Holliday. She eventually followed him to Tombstone where a saloon is named after her.



Dodge City is also home to the Kansas Teachers Hall of Fame. I'm not surprised that the first Kansas Teachers Hall of Fame in the United States is indeed in Kansas.



I followed Highway US 160 across all of southern Colorado. Here's some scenery as the eastern plains gave way to the mountains.



Further west I had planned to explore Chimney Rock National Monument, home to Chimney Rock on the right and the ruins of a 200-room Ancestral Puebloan site. Alas, the site was closed for two weeks of trail maintenance when I got there.



I'm used to seeing Sleeping Ute Mountain from the west. Passing it on the east-southeast in the morning on this trip, it was almost unrecognizable to me.



Here's a previous trip's picture of Sleeping Ute Mountain from the west. The Sleeping Ute is on his back, head and headdress to the left. It's a familiar site for me, visible from a lot of spots in southeastern Utah.



My route took me past Four Corners Navajo Tribal Park on the Ute Mountain (Colorado) and Navajo (Utah, Arizona, New Mexico) reservations. Here's a picture of me standing in four states at once. Although with size 15 feet it's not unusual for me to find myself standing in two or even three states on a regular basis.



The NFL's Washington Redskins team is at the heart of controversy concerning its name and logo, as many Native Americans regard the term "redskins" as demeaning and perpetuating negative stereotypes. That came to mind as I passed through the town of Red Mesa on the Navajo reservation in northeastern Arizona and saw this sign for Red Mesa High School, home of the Redskins. Its logo is also fundamentally the same as that of the Washington Redskins. According to online news sources, most locals have embraced the team's nickname and logo.





Heading north into Utah, I passed the backside of Comb Ridge, an 80 mile long monocline. In the distance are the Bear Ears buttes, which are at the heart of a controversial proposed 1.9-million acre national monument.



A view of the other side of Comb Ridge, this west of Bluff, north of Highway 163. Grading created a pond to capture water for area free range cattle.



Agathla Peak on the Navajo Reservation north of Kayenta. I've got better pictures of it and hadn't planned on taking this one, but I took this from my car as I was waiting for a "pilot car" to lead me through some construction. It's a volcano plug that rises about 1400 feet above the surrounding landscape.



West of Kayenta is this view of Navajo Mountain.



The Little Colorado River flows from eastern Arizona northwest to its confluence with the Colorado River, much of that route on the Navajo Reservation. Here's a view of the canyon that the Little Colorado carved just a few miles upstream from the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon.

I visited the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in April, but clouds, rain, sleet and snow made for an underwhelming visit with few decent views. I returned to the Grand Canyon – the North Rim, this time – in May as part of a Utah/Northern Arizona trip.

I hadn't planned on making a third trip to the Grand Canyon this year, instead planning to spend a night in Page, Arizona, and then cut across southern Utah to St. George for some sightseeing. But the weather forecast for the Grand Canyon area was so good that after spending the night in Page I decided to check out the Little Colorado River gorge and then revisit the South Rim for some sunny day pictures along its many viewpoints.

The Grand Canyon pictures follow.





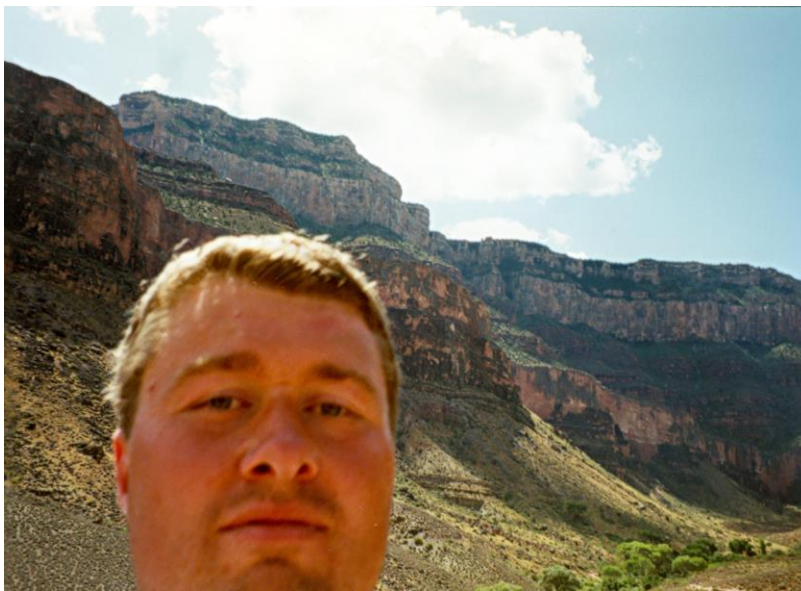
Duck Rock



I first visited and camped at the Grand Canyon back in 1991. While there I hiked the Bright Angel Trail down to Plateau Point and back, a 10.7-mile round-trip hike that descends about 3200 feet into the canyon. Bright Angel Trail leads to Indian Garden and then continues down to the Colorado River. A side trail from Indian Garden leads to Plateau Point. You can see the faint trail just below the center of the picture as it leads out to Plateau Point, center-right. Down in the gorge to the right of that is the Colorado River.



These pictures are from my 1991 hike down to Plateau Point. From Plateau Point you can look another 1300 feet down to the Colorado River.



I invented the selfie at Plateau Point. Just before hiking back up to the rim of the Grand Canyon.

The Grand Canyon was my last stop of the trip. As I had explored sites in northwest Arizona a few times already this year, I headed directly back home to Las Vegas after leaving the park.