

To the Midwest and Back (R17A)

For my last trip of 2017 I hit the road for Illinois and Iowa to visit family. There were a few all-day drives, but unlike last year's visit I padded this trip's itinerary with a few sightseeing days. Some sightseeing, though, didn't go as planned especially early in the trip when some winter-like weather kicked in.



I pretty much drove straight through from Las Vegas, Nevada to Las Vegas, New Mexico before I started any sightseeing. My most noteworthy stop in northeastern New Mexico was Fort Union National Monument. One of a number of US western frontier forts, Fort Union would become the most dominant. It was established along the Santa Fe Trail (the depression in the foreground of the picture is the old Santa Fe Trail) so that it could protect pioneers and others passing along that route from Indian raids. Because it was on the trail, it also began to function as a supply depot, not only for pioneers but also for the extensive network of southwestern forts. It would become the biggest American fort in the southwest. Union troops from Fort Union headed south to Glorieta Pass where they ended the Confederacy's attempt to capture New Mexico during the Civil War. Remnants of the old adobe fort, its arsenal and a segment of the Santa Fe Trail are protected at the monument.



Fort Union parade grounds



The next day I hoped to see something related to the Folsom Archaeological Site, where evidence was discovered of an early Native American culture from about 10,000 years ago. I knew from maps that the site itself was likely not accessible, but I hoped for a highway marker or something. No such luck. But I did get to deal with snow, sleet, ice and wind as I crossed some mountains in the area.

The Folsom Site itself is a couple miles in that direction.



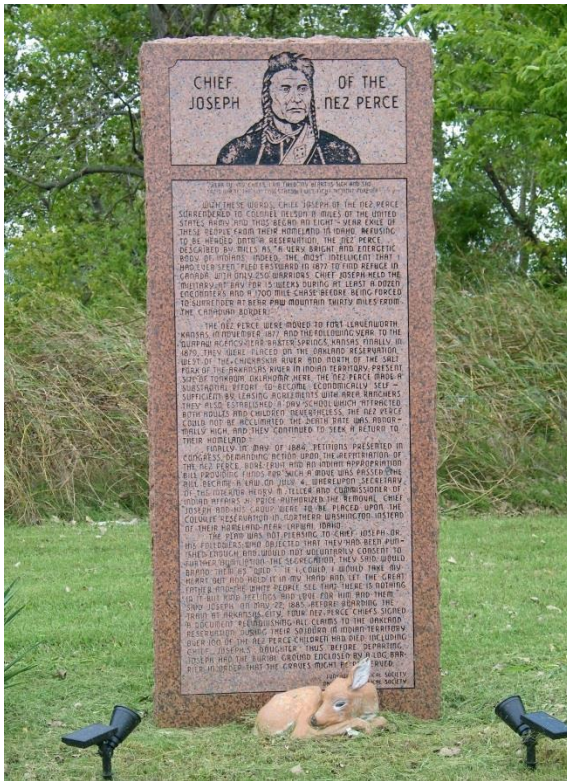
Capulin Volcano National Monument preserves a fine example of an extinct volcano cinder cone, part of the Raton-Clayton Volcanic Field in northeast New Mexico. I first visited this site 23 years ago, and after driving up to the rim I hiked down to the bottom of the crater. This picture is from that trip. This time, the low winter clouds covered the summit, so although I got up to the top I couldn't see anything. I'll have to go back.



I made a couple return visits to park units in Texas north of Amarillo, too. This time the Lake Meredith Reservoir (Lake Meredith National Recreation Area) had a lot more water than when I last saw it – it was mostly dry back then. And Alibates Flint Quarry National Monument now has a visitor center. But visitors have to be part of a group to see the actual quarries (the National Park Service has a number of inconsistencies regarding when visitors can see things on their own or when they must be chaperoned).



I spent the night in Canadian, Texas where I had dinner at the Stumblin' Goat – due in no small part to the sentiments of this sign. That said, my entrée featured *grilled* chicken breasts, and my dinner appeared to be gluten free.



One of my all-day drives was from Canadian across Oklahoma to Mt. Vernon, Missouri. At one point I thought I should make at least one photo stop in Oklahoma, so I pulled off the road at the next historical marker I saw.

Turned out to be related to the Nez Perce Indians from the Pacific Northwest, whose efforts to remain independent in their homeland became a topic of interest to me when I explored that region.

Captured in 1877 as they attempted to go to Canada, the Nez Perce were moved to Kansas and then in 1878 to a reservation at what is now Tonkawa, Oklahoma.

In 1885 the Nez Perce were relocated to the Colville Reservation in Washington, close to but not at their traditional homeland.

Because I left a day early on this trip, by the time I got to Missouri I had enough time to take a county drive, finishing off the last of Missouri's counties as I made some minor sightseeing stops along the way. At this point I have been to all of the counties in 48 states, with 89 of Texas's 254 counties and 6 of Alaska's 20 boroughs remaining to visit out of about 3100 counties in the US.



Elephant Rocks State Park in Missouri features an outcropping of Precambrian granite that includes many granite boulders.



Surveyors exploring the St. Francois Mountains in Missouri came across this plaque atop Taum Sauk Mountain and realized they had discovered the highest point in Missouri. At 1,772 feet, it's about 600 feet lower than the elevation of my backyard.



Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site in Illinois just east of St. Louis is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that preserves several earthwork mounds from what was once the largest settlement of the Mississippian culture. It is the largest and most complex pre-Columbian Native American archaeological site north of Mexico, and at one point included about 120 earthen mounds across six square miles. Settlement started here around 600AD, but the site appears to have been abandoned by around 1300 AD.

The site today contains about 80 mounds. The largest, pictured, is Monks Mound. It's about 100 feet tall, 950 feet long and 836 feet wide. It covers almost 14 acres, and it contains about 22 million cubic feet of earth, all of which was moved by hand from around the area. It is the largest single Native American earthwork in the US.

Places like Cahokia, the Puebloan ruins at Mesa Verde or Chaco Canyon, Peru's Manchu Picchu, Egypt's pyramids, the Great Wall of China, the Colosseum in Rome... It's pretty impressive what ancient cultures were able to build without anything remotely close to modern day transportation and technologies.

And then there's the Twistee Treat building, a great example of "novelty roadside architecture", which emerged with American highway culture. A number of examples survive along Historic Route 66, which roughly follows Interstate 55 in Illinois.



I stopped for a late lunch at Livingston's Twistee Treat Diner.



Mt. Olive's Union Miners Cemetery includes the grave of Mary "Mother" Jones, a union activist and strike organizer. The progressive magazine Mother Jones is named for her.



After spending the night in Springfield, Illinois, I spent the morning re-visiting various sites associated with Abraham Lincoln, including his Springfield home, the site of one of his law offices, and Lincoln's tomb, where Lincoln, his wife and most of his children are interred.





I also walked around Springfield's downtown, checking out a number of historic markers as well as Illinois's old and new state capitol buildings.



The city of Lincoln, Illinois is north of Springfield. It was named for Abraham Lincoln in 1853 at a town christening ceremony. Lincoln himself conducted the christening, using the juice of a watermelon to do so.

This historic marker and sculpture of a slice of watermelon are located near the train station in downtown Lincoln.



Atlanta, Illinois was one of a number of towns along Route 66.

One popular stop was its Palms Grill Café. Established in 1934, it closed as Route 66 was replaced by I-55, which bypassed the city's downtown.

But the Palms Grill was restored and reopened in 2009 to take advantage of Route 66-related tourism.

I had a "horseshoe" for lunch, something I saw on a few south and central Illinois menus. Apparently the horseshoe originated in Springfield. (meat option on grilled sourdough topped with fries and a gouda cheese sauce)



Across the street is a Muffler Man, now holding a giant hot dog.



Dwight, Illinois is another stop along Historic Route 66. But it also has these decorated basset hound dogs located around town. It turns out that Dwight is home to the Illinois Basset Waddle.



View of the Mississippi River along Highway 52, just south of Guttenberg, Iowa.



After finishing my visits with family members, I headed west across Iowa and much of Nebraska to get positioned for some western Nebraska and Wyoming sightseeing. I made only a few minor sightseeing stops on that stretch of the drive.

The “world’s largest covered wagon” is really just a roof rather than a wagon.



The Great Platte River Road Archway Monument spans Interstate 80 near Kearney, Nebraska. The archway includes tourist information and a gift shop.



It also features this maze. Because people don’t seem to be motivated by hunks of cheese, the makers of this maze located the restrooms in the base of those towers at the far end of the maze.



A park in Gothenburg, Nebraska preserves this building, an old Pony Express station.



In addition to the Pony Express, other historic trails that followed the Platte River and then continued west through Wyoming included the Oregon, California and Mormon Trails. Markers associated with each of the trails appeared at several points along my route.

Sand, dust and volcanic ash deposits reached western Nebraska from the Rocky Mountains area, creating layers that were eventually capped by a hard layer of calcium carbonate. Erosion over millions of years left behind a number of buttes, bluffs and spires. These became prominent landmarks for westward-bound pioneers traveling along the historic trails.



Jail and Courthouse Rocks



The natives named this spire for part of the male elk's anatomy, but that name was too risqué for the Victorian standards of the pioneer era. Several more acceptable alternatives appeared in pioneer journals, with most settling on Chimney Rock.



Scotts Bluff mesa rises as much as 800 feet above the surrounding plains.



The view from atop Scotts Bluff includes a distant Chimney Rock.

The sand and ash deposits also helped preserve fossils. Agate Fossil Beds National Monument preserves Miocene era fossil beds. Hiking trails lead to some fossil sites, although you will see most fossils here in the visitor center.



An ancient type of beaver created burrows that were accessed through a corkscrew-like tunnel. A number of these “Daemonelix” are preserved in the park.

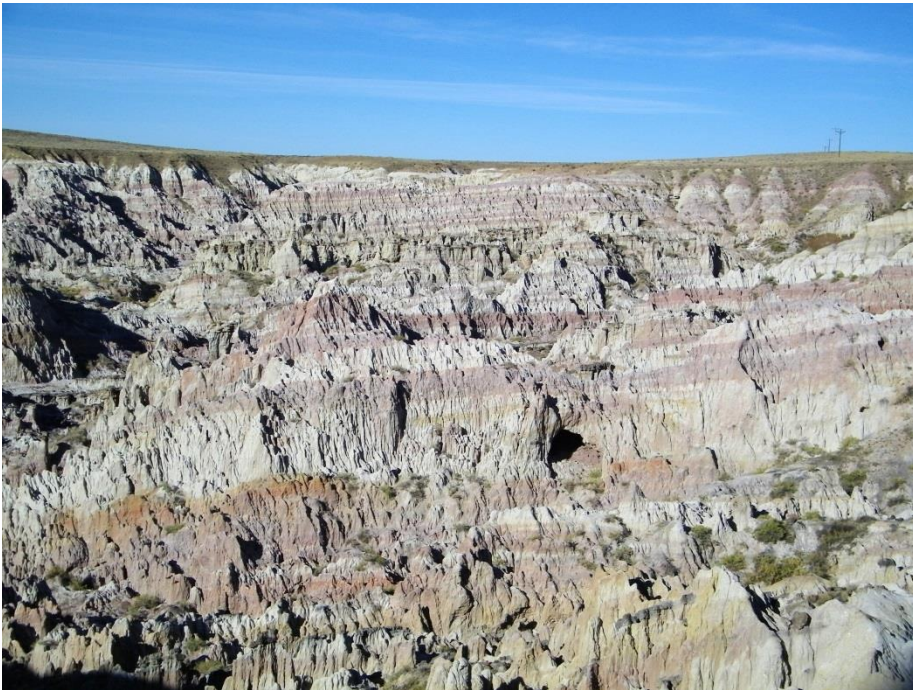


View of the Niobrara valley and distant buttes that feature fossil excavation sites.

On to Wyoming...



Ayres Natural Bridge, near Douglas, Wyoming



Hell's Half Acre, a 320-acre scarp, basically a colorful eroded pit, further west along Highway 20.



At Fort Washakie, Wyoming's Sacajawea Cemetery is what is argued to be the grave of Sacajawea, who accompanied the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Most believe that Sacajawea died in 1812 at age 24, but some claimed that the woman buried here talked of being part of an expedition and reportedly had a coin like the ones that the Lewis and Clark Expedition handed out. If this is indeed Sacajawea, she died in 1884 at age 95.



Red Canyon. Places like Red Canyon, Hell's Half Acre and Ayres Natural Bridge hint at what Wyoming's scenery might be like after another million years of erosion. Perhaps they'll advertise "Wyoming is the New Utah".



At Sinks Canyon State Park, the Popo Agie River flows into an underground cavern here...



... and reemerges here, a quarter mile downstream.



The False Parting of the Ways site of the Oregon and California Trails. Basically it marks the start of a short cut, much shorter but a lot less water, along the trails. Except that the actual Parting of the Ways junction turned out to be about nine miles off the highway.



Heading south from Green River, Wyoming into Utah, I made some stops at Flaming Gorge National Recreation Area and I took the Sheep Creek Canyon Geological Loop drive. Signs along my route noted about 20 layers of rock formations, and provided information about the fossils they might contain. Evidence of the regional geological uplift here is visible at this stop in Sheep Creek Canyon.



Buckboard Marina area at Flaming Gorge Reservoir.



Red Gorge along the Green River, part of Flaming Gorge Reservoir just upstream from the dam.



The College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum features a number of fascinating fossils from the Dinosaur Age as well as displays on Fremont Culture Native Americans who had made the region their home in pre-Columbian times.



I spent two nights in Green River, Utah, giving me a day to check out hiking along the Dirty Devil River near Hanksville. But the day got off to a much colder start than I had counted on, so I did some sightseeing on my way down there.

This included a return visit to Goblin Valley State Park, which features a number of sandstone pillars, hoodoos and, well, goblins.



This goblin greets visitors at the start of a trail down into Goblin Valley.

Goblin Valley. It turns out that early morning October sun isn't the best time for getting pictures in the valley.



Wildhorse Canyon Road leaves Goblin Valley and heads towards some trails along the San Rafael Reef, including some I plan to hike on future trips. But I decided to head down the road for a few miles so that I could check out the area around the Little Wildhorse Canyon Trailhead. I only hiked as far as the start of a slot canyon, which had some water in it.





The Dirty Devil River near Hanksville. Hiking along Utah's canyon country rivers can get a bit tricky as there are usually several river crossings – that's why I wanted the temperature to warm up a bit before I started. But it turned out that the Dirty Devil was running higher than I had expected for this time of year.

And there was a lot of what's pictured here. Looks like a sandbar to the uninitiated. But it's a big patch of quicksand. More than waist deep in places according to my walking stick. Quicksand isn't the deathtrap that's depicted in bad movies – the density of the human body is a lot less than quicksand, so you won't sink completely (although you might get stuck if it's thick enough).

Quicksand is actually pretty common along rivers in Utah's canyon country, so I've come across it a number of times now. Generally harmless most of the time, but it can slow down a hike.

The white patches on top of the sand? There's a lot of salt in the soil around here. It becomes visible in places where water has evaporated.

Because the hike ended up being shorter than I expected, I had a little time left to explore the area due south of Green River, Utah before it got dark.



If you see formations like this, there may be dinosaur fossils in the area. And indeed there's a bluff nearby that I visited last spring that has fossils of dinosaur bones.



Horse Bench Reservoir had dried out by fall. But the lake bottom looks different than the typical dried mud patterns. That's because there's a lot more clay in the soil here. So the dry reservoir bottom had the popcorn look of dried clay.

An “I wonder what’s down this road” drive led me to a parking area along the Green River, where I capped off the trip’s sightseeing with some pictures of the fall leaves.



The Green River with the Book Cliffs in the distance



And that was the end of my sightseeing. I returned to Las Vegas the next morning.