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Cross Country Relatives Road Trip (R22A-2)

Returning to Las Vegas

My drive out to the Midwest went well as did visits with my relatives. After finishing my visit with my sister and her family seventeen days into the trip, it was time to start my journey back home to Las Vegas.

But first, I headed a bit further to the east, to the Pullman National Monument and State Historic Site. Over the years I had made a point of visiting the official units in the National Park System. There were about 370 such units when I started targeting them, but new sites have been added to the NPS over the years since. By the start of this summer, I had been to about 380 of the 423 units. I visited 8 newer ones during my Eastern United States road trip this past June. Pullman National Monument was created in 2015. This was my first visit to this unit.

Pullman preserves the site of the old Pullman Palace Car Company manufacturing facility. They made Pullman cars – sleepers, dining cars and other cars that added some luxury to rail travel starting back in the 1870s. The railroad cars were generally leased to the railroads and staffed with trained employees, many of whom were former house slaves freed by the Emancipation Proclamation.

But Pullman National Monument preserves more than just a former factory site. Founder George Pullman built the company town of Pullman around the plant, designed with open spaces and indoor plumbing in the 1880s which were huge improvements over the typical worker tenements at the time. This planned community became a popular attraction during the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition.

However, employees spent most of their paychecks on rent and at company stores, and during an economic downturn, Pullman raised rents to improve its cashflow without raising pay, often leaving workers with just pennies to live on between paychecks. A major strike here was one of the first to show the impact that a union could have against an industry, as well as affirming the right of the government to intervene in some strikes, both adding to the historical significance of the site.



I toured the factory grounds as well as the museum at the site. Surprisingly, they didn't have any actual Pullman cars on display (although the rangers staffing the museum told me that some are on display at a casino in Las Vegas).



The town of Pullman was long-ago absorbed into the city of Chicago. After finishing up at the museum, I took a walk around this now-Chicago south side neighborhood to check out its architecture and other features, much of which date back to Pullman in the 1880s.



The former Hotel Florence was built in Pullman across the street from the factory to accommodate the factory's many visitors and traveling salesmen. It had the only bar in the city of Pullman, but it was off-limits to the factory's workers who lived in Pullman (and likely was too expensive for them).

Now it was time to head south and west. That afternoon, I was well on my way towards southern Illinois when I stopped at the Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site. Alas, I was disappointed to find that there were no Lincoln Logs in sight.



Instead, the site preserves what was the last farm of Thomas and Sarah Lincoln, father and step-mother of President Abraham Lincoln. The park features a replica of the Lincolns' log cabin and other buildings in order to depict the farm as it may have appeared in 1845.



Thomas and Sarah Lincoln were buried in the churchyard of the nearby Shiloh Presbyterian Church, now known as the Thomas Lincoln Cemetery.

Kaskaskia, Illinois, was established by the French in the early 1700s, and soon became the capital of France's Upper Louisiana. In 1763, after the Seven Years War, France ceded Illinois Country including Kaskaskia to the British. The city fell to American forces led by George Rogers Clark in 1778 during the American Revolution. It would go on to serve as the capital of the Territory of Illinois, and then from 1818 to 1819 as the capital of the state of Illinois. After an 1844 Mississippi River flood, Kaskaskia residents relocated the town a bit to the south. An 1881 flood destroyed what was left of the original town, and moved the main channel of the Mississippi River a bit to the east, leaving this small portion of Illinois on the west side of the Mississippi River. After the 1993 Mississippi River flood put the new city underwater for a time, the population dropped to just 9 people, making it the least populated city in Illinois.



To protect Kaskaskia, the French started building a fort on a bluff above the town in the 1750s, but it was never completed. All that remains of the fort are some of the earthworks at the site, preserved in Illinois's Fort Kaskaskia State Historic Site.



The old fort still looks over the Kaskaskia site as well as the Mississippi River. An ongoing multi-year drought in the Mississippi River watershed has left the river at record low water levels, hindering barge traffic. As this is expected to be another La Niña winter, the drought will likely continue at least into next year. If conditions worsen, perhaps the Midwest will have to adopt some of our Nevada water conservation practices, such as bans on lawns, outdoor watering restrictions, and mandated group showers (awkward at first, but proving to be a great way to get to know your neighbors).

To get from the Fort Kaskaskia side of the river to the Kaskaskia side of the river, I passed through the town of Chester. Chester was home to Elzie Segar, a cartoonist who created the *Thimble Theatre*. That name might not ring a bell, but the strip introduced us to the world of Olive Oyl and her family, her boyfriend Harold Hamgravy, and eventually (after about ten years) Popeye. The city celebrates this connection with a number of sculptures around town that depict several *Thimble Theatre* characters.



Popeye (left); Olive Oyl holding Swee' Pea and standing with Eugene the Jeep (right). Eugene the Jeep is regarded as one of a few possible sources for the name Jeep for vehicles.



Harold Hamgravy (left); Bluto (right). Bluto and not Brutus? The character was originally Bluto, but a mix up over who owned the copyright on the character resulted in the creation of an essentially identical character named Brutus. Once that was resolved, the two characters were positioned as twin brothers. This happened after the death of Segar, so Bluto was his creation.



This fellow, J. Wellington Wimpy, approached me in the parking lot of Chester's McDonalds, where he told me, "I'd gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today." Seeing as it was Wednesday, I wasn't going to hang around town for six days waiting for him to pay me back.



There isn't much left to see in Kaskaskia. Jacques Marquette established the local Church of the Immaculate Conception's congregation in 1675, but today's building is much newer. However, the city is home to the Kaskaskia Memorial Bell. King Louis XV of France gave the bell to the Catholic Church of Illinois Country in 1741. The people of the town rang it in celebration after George Rogers Clark and his men captured the town from the British on July 4, 1778 during the American Revolution, leading to its nickname as the Liberty Bell of the West.

In addition to Kaskaskia, the French established the town of Ste. Genevieve, Missouri a little further up the river in 1735. It was the first European settlement in today's Missouri, although it moved to its current location after a massive Mississippi River flood in 1785. A number of buildings constructed following the move still stand, reflecting the French colonial architecture style of the day (although for a time France had ceded the Louisiana Territory to Spain). Ste. Genevieve National Historical Park, a official National Park System unit, was established in 2020 to preserve this history and some of the city's architecture.



Bauvais-Amoureux House



Green Tree Tavern a.k.a. Janis-Ziegler House

Ste. Genevieve National Historical Park was my second first-time NPS unit of the trip, and my 10th this year getting me closer to having visited all 423 National Park System official units, although most of the ones remaining that I haven't been to are located in Alaska, Hawaii and various U.S. offshore territories.

Well, 424 units. That evening I read in the news that President Biden had signed legislation establishing the Blackwell School National Historic Site in Marfa, Texas as a new NPS unit. I'll have to check it out the next time I visit Big Bend National Park in southwest Texas.

From Ste. Genevieve, I drove across Missouri and almost half of Kansas without any sightseeing stops. But I had a number of targeted destinations in western Kansas and in Colorado.



Rock City Park near Minneapolis, Kansas is home to about 200 large sandstone concretions, large balls of sandstone rock that form underground but were exposed as the resulting land has eroded away. This is the largest concentration of huge sandstone concretions in the world. The concretions have been exposed long enough that they themselves show a lot of evidence of erosion, but it's still interesting to walk among them.



Further west in Lincoln, Kansas, I stopped at the local cemetery to check out the headstone of James S. Jacobs, a traveling salesman. It was carved to resemble his merchandise bags.



Lucas, Kansas was the home of S.P. Dinsmoor, a retired school teacher and Civil War veteran who in 1907 began construction on the Garden of Eden, a sculpture park that turned more than 100 tons of cement into a set of about 150 sculptures, many inspired by Biblical and patriotic themes. He also built an 11-room limestone “log” cabin. His body is interred in a mausoleum that he constructed on the site. The sculpture garden, cabin and mausoleum are open to tourists, and draw about 10,000 visitors a year to the 500-person town.



Lucas is also home to the World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things. Artist Erika Nelson travels around the country to see and photograph some "world's largest" thing. She returns home to sculpt or otherwise create a very small version of it, and then photographs her version with her photos of the "world's largest" thing. Or she may even head back to the original to photograph her version with the original. Alas, it was closed when I got to town. Nelson was probably on the road looking for some more "world's largest" things to add to her collection. I just hope she didn't go to South Dakota in search of the world's largest pheasant.

Lucas is actually home to a great deal of art. On a walk around town, you're bound to encounter a lot of great American Fork Art.



Fork Art Park



I was hoping to find a public restroom along this path, so this just seemed like a cruel joke.



Lucas, Kansas is located in the heart of an area of a Post Rock Limestone deposit, limestone that pioneers could easily break and shape into pieces that could be used as fence posts, especially useful in a region with few trees. Post Rock Scenic Byway passes through the area.



After the Civil War, many Americans headed west to stake their claims on the abundant western lands. These included newly freed slaves, although Blacks soon found that they were not wanted in many of these new communities. Some companies were then established to create communities that specifically catered to Black pioneers. One of those communities was Nicodemus, Kansas, now home to the Nicodemus National Historic Site, a National Park System unit. The town at first grew rapidly, but like many towns of the day it went into decline when it was bypassed by the railroad. Today, only a handful of people remain. The NPS unit preserves a handful of buildings that date back to the town's more prosperous days, including the old school, above. I actually stopped here once before, back in 1997 shortly after the NPS unit was created, but the visitor center hadn't opened yet, so that trip was little more than a photo stop. The ranger who presented the overview program at the visitor center was a granddaughter of a former Nicodemus resident, and thus supplemented her talk with old family photos.



We're once again back to Buffalo Bill. After the Civil War, William Cody served as a military scout for the U.S. Army and sometimes as a scout for railroad construction workers in western Kansas. His duties included hunting buffalo to secure meat for the people he worked for. This earned him the nickname Buffalo Bill. Except there was a William Comstock who also worked in the area securing buffalo meat for his employers and who also was nicknamed Buffalo Bill. So, the two Bills had an eight-hour competition west of Oakley, Kansas to see who could kill the most buffalo, with the winner being crowned the real Buffalo Bill. Cody ended up killing 68 buffalo compared to Comstock's 48. A sculpture that stands outside of Oakley's Buffalo Bill Cultural Center commemorates William Cody's victory in this competition.



Oakley's Fick Fossil and History Museum provides a nice overview of Oakley history. It is also home to a collection of fossils collected in the region. Western Kansas is home to a number of chalk hill outcroppings that were once at the bottom of a vast inland sea, so most of the fossils were shells and shark teeth. So many shells were collected here that the wife of the collector created a number of pictures using the shells. It is also home to the world's oldest known mosasaur fossil as well as a mosasaur fossil with its eye socket intact. The fish-like sea-dwelling reptile Mosasaurs lived during the Late Cretaceous Period.



The museum also features a sod house and the tools used to cut the sod into brick-like pieces. With wood rather limited, sod was the construction material of choice for early western Kansas pioneers. Pioneers also collected dry cattle and buffalo dung to burn in their fireplaces and cook stoves. Makes you wonder how Kansas became famous for its smoked meats.

During the Cretaceous Period, western Kansas was covered by the Western Interior Seaway, an inland sea that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. Carbonate deposits at the bottom of the seaway were eventually buried. Then the whole region was uplifted and areas of the carbonate deposits were eventually exposed and carved through erosion processes, resulting in a number of chalk hill formations. Monument Rocks and Castle Rock are two of the best-known formations that resulted, but I visited those some years ago.



Instead, I visited Little Jerusalem Badlands State Park and the nearby Little Pyramids site. At Little Jerusalem I hiked the Overlook Trail to get several views of the badlands formations.



The Little Pyramids site



From the end of the Overlook Trail, we get a nice view of the Smoky Valley Ranch area. In 1895, scientists working at a site on the ranch found a spear point embedded in the bone of an ancient bison species. The scientists were able to determine that the bison had been hunted more than 10,000 years ago. This find was the first physical evidence that humans inhabited North America so soon after the end of the last Ice Age. I found out that there's a trail on the ranch that leads out to the site where the spear point was found, but I didn't hike it this time.



"You can trust your car to the man who wears the star, the big bright Texaco star!" With Fire Chief selling for 25 9/10 cents/gallon and Sky Chief selling for 37 9/10 cents/gallon, you'll probably figure out quickly that this Texaco station is a restoration in progress, a hobby project of local man Mark Burnett. It's actually quite the restoration as this apparently never was a Texaco station, but rather a former Philips 66 gas station. Burnett reportedly decided to restore it as a Texaco station because his wife was from Texas.



It may not look like much today, but the Marsh-Felch Dinosaur Quarry in Cañon City, Colorado's Garden Park Fossil Area is one of the most famous dinosaur quarry sites in the world. Starting in 1877, a wide variety of dinosaur, plant, fish, turtle, crocodile, lizard, mammal, frog, clam and crayfish fossils dating back to around 155 million years ago (Late Jurassic Period) have been discovered within a couple miles of this quarry.

Paleontologist Othniel Marsh and landowner Marshall Felch excavated a number of complete skeletons, some their first of their species to be discovered. Dinosaur species found here include the allosaurus, ceratosaurus, diplodocus, haplocanthosaurus, labrosaurus, morosaurus and the stegosaurus. The first Jurassic Period mammals discovered in North America also came from this quarry.

Edward Cope, Marsh's primary competitor in dinosaur bone discoveries, also quarried in the area, and made many of his own discoveries. Their competition was nicknamed "the Bone Wars". Cope and Marsh are long gone, but significant dinosaur finds are still made in the area.

(To bring up Buffalo Bill one last time... he worked for Othniel Marsh for a time in western Nebraska, and at times collected and sold fossils himself.)



Cañon City's Skyline Drive traverses the top of a narrow hogback ridge not unlike Dinosaur Ridge, which I visited early in this trip. Here there's only one dinosaur site. Recall my explanation about dinosaur bulges, tracks and track casts. Although at a casual glance the lumps on this wall may remind you of the dinosaur bulges, rock layers that may have contained any bulges and the actual tracks have eroded away, leaving us with a trackway site of about 70 dinosaur track casts. If you look closely, you'll see features of the feet, such as toes, that were missing from the dinosaur bulges. Evidence suggests that it may have been a small herd of nodosaurs walking through some mud in a westerly direction about 107 million years ago that made the tracks that these are casts of.



Given the region's rich fossil history, I had high hopes for the Royal Gorge Regional Museum and History Center in Cañon City. Unfortunately, most of the cool fossils excavated in this region have been taken to other more famous museums, although this stegosaurus fossil on display there was pretty cool.

I had been keeping an eye on the weather for a few days by this point, as a winter storm was developing out west. High winds and rain or snow in the mountains were expected to move into western Colorado from Utah today, just as I was planning to cross the Rocky Mountains as I headed toward some sites I was targeting in western Colorado. I certainly didn't want to be traveling through some high elevation mountain passes when the storm hit, and I didn't have the tire chains that state law requires when driving in such conditions.

With my western Colorado plans shot, I took a low elevation route to Utah with a handful of minor photo stops along the way, and then capped off the trip with a bit of hiking at a favorite spot before heading home.



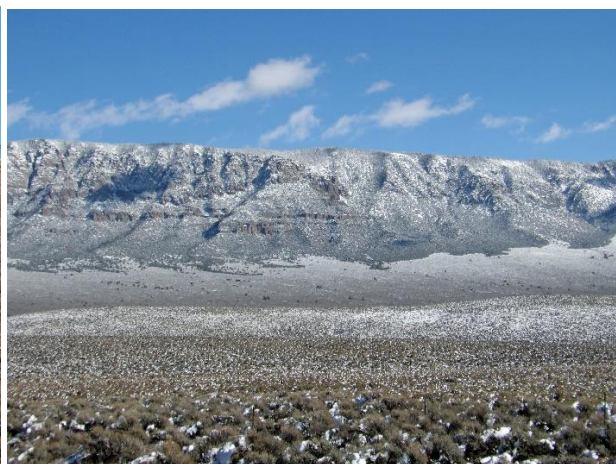
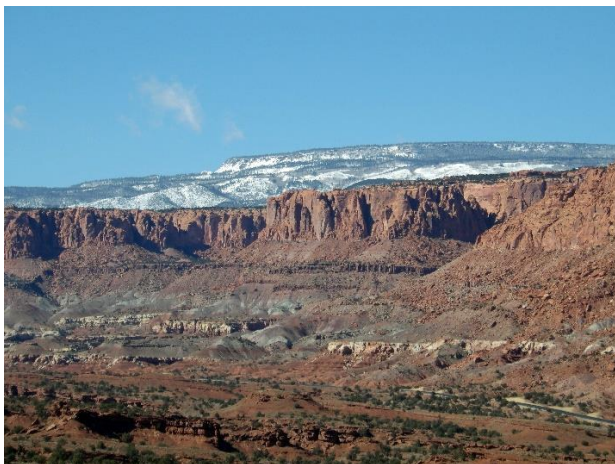
Highway 550, New Mexico (left); the southern sun leaves the north-facing cliffs in the shadows, but illuminates cottonwood trees along Utah's San Juan River (right)



The fading sun shines on a sandstone outcropping in the eastern end of Bears Ears National Monument as snow flurries move in (left); the previous evening's snow was only flurries in town, but left some nice coverage atop Utah's Blue Mountains (right)



Looking north towards the Green River valley, the Book Cliffs, and snow coverage on the mountains in the distance (left); the usually dry Horsebench Reservoir was overflowing with water from recent rains and the storm I drove through early in this trip, getting its pinkish color from the surrounding Morrison Formation clay hills (right)



The view from Capitol Reef National Park's Panorama Point west towards the Aquarius Plateau, the top "step" in the Grand Staircase series of plateaus that stairstep south through Utah towards the Grand Canyon (left); Parker Mountain, south of Koosharem, Utah, picked up some snow when the winter storm passed through the area a couple days earlier (right)



I turned down a back road that I never had noticed before, and came upon some interesting construction work in progress. Thanks to funding from the new infrastructure bill, workers were able to complete the digging of a new canyon in southern Utah; they showed up to take some of the digging equipment away soon after I took this picture.

Landscapers had already finished at this spot, but you can see that the detail crew and painters are still working their way down the side of the canyon. Utah's newest colorful red rock canyon will eventually be capped off with the addition of "recently discovered" ruins, petroglyphs and dinosaur tracks. The new canyon should be ready for visitors next summer.