

To Iowa and Back Road Trip (R23A)

I made my annual pilgrimage out to Iowa and back to see family. Although I once again had plans to head back home through Yellowstone National Park, those plans were once again shelved due to a winter storm hitting the area. In fact, several park roads were closed due to weather during what would have been my stay. Instead, I headed south, staying about a day ahead of fast-falling temperatures, and checking out some new-to-me sites in Utah's Dinosaur National Monument as well as making a return visit to Kodachrome Basin State Park, my first time back there since 2007.

Because I was squeezing this trip between a doctor's appointment and Halloween, I didn't make a lot of stops on the drive east, with many of them little more than photo stops. My first stop, in fact, was in the afternoon of the second day, at the community college-operated Mesalands Dinosaur Museum in Tucumcari, New Mexico. The small but pretty decent museum highlighted New Mexican, and especially regional, fossil finds.



On the left is a cast of one of the biggest dinosaur tracks I've seen, made by a brontosaurus-like sauropod in deep mud. On the right is a display of different kinds of dinosaur eggs.

From there I left the interstate and headed northeast through the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles to southwest Kansas before making any more stops.



The Dalton Gang of Old West outlaws was active from 1890 to 1892 when four of the gang's members were killed. This house was owned by the sister of four Dalton brothers in the gang and her husband. Although the brothers are known to have been in Meade before their crimewave, there is no actual documentation that they actually used this house as a hideout.

And it probably wouldn't have made for a very effective hideout, anyway, what with the sign out front.



Greensburg, Kansas is home to the world's largest hand-dug well, at 109 feet deep and 32 feet in diameter. The photo on the left looks down into the well. Greensburg was hit by a massive tornado in 2005. When the town rebuilt, a small but nice museum was built over the well, and sturdy stairs were built leading to the bottom of the well.

I was actually here once before, back in 1997. The photo on the right is one I took on that trip from the bottom of the well looking up at somewhat more concerning stairs that were in place at that time. The well has been named one of the Eight Wonders of Kansas.



Fort Larned National Historic Site, an official National Park Service unit, is home to a frontier fort that once protected travelers along the Santa Fe Trail, a trade and migration corridor that connected Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico starting in 1822. The fort itself was established in 1859, and was abandoned in 1878. The site includes several of the fort's buildings, a museum, a national recreation trail, and a segment of the original Santa Fe Trail.



Not far from Fort Larned is Pawnee Rock, a distinctive sandstone outcropping that marked the halfway point along the Santa Fe Trail. Some pioneers carved their names into the sandstone rock. There are decent views of the region from the top, although Pawnee Rock is much shorter than it was in pioneer days after sandstone was quarried from the top for a number of years.



Mushroom Rock State Park features some large sandstone concretions, large balls of sandstone that form underground, similar to those I saw last year at Rock City Park near Minneapolis, Kansas. But here, the erosion that exposed some concretions continued further down, resulting in a few mushroom-shaped concretion-on-a-pedestal formations, including Mushroom Rock and Pulpit Rock (pictured). These are regarded as one of the Eight Geological Wonders of Kansas.

I did stop for gas in Minneapolis, Kansas on this trip, but skipped Rock City Park this time. However, I did get one photo while I was in town.



Try this with a Tesla!

In Concordia, Kansas, I stopped at the National Orphan Train Complex. The Orphan Train Movement was an organized effort to transport orphaned and abandoned children from crowded eastern cities – primarily New York City – to the Midwest, and to place them with foster families with an eye toward

eventual adoption. An estimated 200,000 children headed west via the orphan trains before the Orphan Train Movement ended in 1929. Although a number of these children were treated as full-fledged members of their new families, a number of others were treated as little more than slave labor. And some of the children conditioned to the harsh conditions of life on the street did not adapt well to rural family life. So, the movement produced a real mixed bag of results.



The complex features a small but informative museum about the Orphan Train Movement, as well as sculptures of some of the children who found new life in the Midwest.



Camp Concordia was established just north of Concordia during WWII to hold German POWs, mostly from the German Army. It was the largest such camp in Kansas, holding over 4,000 (and possibly as many as 8,000) prisoners. Only a handful of the original 300 buildings have survived, including this restored guard tower.

Enacted in 1862, and taking effect on January 1, 1863, the Homestead Act offered 160-acre plots of land to those who would reside on them and establish working farms and ranches on them. It applied to federal lands outside of the first 16 states and Texas. A plot of land in southeast Nebraska is regarded as the very first homestead assigned under this act. Today, it is home to Homestead National Historic Park, an official National Park Service unit. I had made a brief stop here in 1997. Since then, they built a nice museum and relocated an old homestead cabin from the era.



The Palmer-Epard Cabin was built about 14 miles away, but its construction style was typical of homesteader cabins built at the time.



On the left is a tractor that was used on the last homestead created before the Homestead Act expired. On the right is a goat-powered treadmill used to create some degree of machine automation in the days before electricity was available. In this case, it is hooked up to a washing machine. Such museum displays give insight into life on the homesteads created through the Homestead Act.



Weighing about 9,370 pounds, including sugar, corn syrup and about 2,300 pounds of popcorn, the World's Largest Popcorn Ball is housed in this building in Sac City, Iowa, the Popcorn Capital of the World. This is the city's fourth successive World's Largest Popcorn Ball, after other cities dethroned the first three champions. It's probably just a matter of time before some ambitious corn poppers elsewhere dethrone this one, too.



This statue of Pocahontas stands near the east end of Pocahontas, Iowa.

The Shrine of the Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa features nine grottos depicting scenes in the life of Jesus Christ, and is believed to be the largest grotto in the world. The minerals, fossils, shells and petrifications used to construct the grotto are regarded as the world's most complete such collection, the value of which tops \$4.3 million.



The grotto was constructed by Father Paul Dobberstein, who promised to build a shrine to the Virgin Mary if she interceded in his bout of severe pneumonia. He began stockpiling the rocks et al. after his recovery, and he began building the grotto in 1912. Dobberstein continued to work on and expand the grotto until his death in 1954.

After a February 2, 1959 show at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa, musician Buddy Holly had a charter plane lined up to take him and bandmates Waylon Jennings, Tommy Allsup and Carl Bunch to their next stop in Moorhead, Minnesota. But Bunch had ended up in the hospital, Allsup agreed to flip a coin for a seat with another musician, Ritchie Valens, and Jennings gave up his seat to musician J.P. “Big Bopper” Richardson, who had complained about conditions on the bus.

Bad winter weather had set in, but they took off anyway. The plane crashed into a cornfield a few miles north of Clear Lake shortly after 1AM on February 3rd, killing Holly, Valens, Richardson and pilot Roger Peterson.

A small memorial has been established at the crash site. Park in the Don McLean “American Pie” parking lot. McLean’s song “American Pie” commemorates the “day the music died”. Across the road is a large pair of glasses frame that resembles Holly’s signature look. That marks the start of a quarter mile trail along a farm fencerow that leads into the cornfield to the memorial.



The memorial for the three musicians – Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper. Nearby is a memorial to pilot Roger Peterson.



South of Ft. Atkinson, Iowa near Festina is the St. Anthony of Padua Chapel, billed as the world's smallest church, although I've come across smaller chapels in my travels.

As I was passing through the town of Ft. Atkinson, I saw a sign directing people to a historic site that turned out to be Fort Atkinson State Preserve. The park preserves the ruins and partial reconstructions of Fort Atkinson. The 1830 Treaty of Prairie du Chien that included various tribes established a Neutral Ground forty miles wide running from the Mississippi River to the Des Moines River as a buffer between the Sac and Fox Nation and the Sioux Nation. When the Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) tribe was removed from Wisconsin, they were settled on this Neutral Ground.



Fort Atkinson was built in the early 1840s to keep the Ho-Chunk on the Neutral Ground and to protect them from the other tribes. The fort was abandoned after the Ho-Chunk were moved to Minnesota.



While staying in Decorah, Iowa with my dad, I toured the Vesterheim: The National Norwegian-American Museum and Folk Art School, which focuses on the Norwegian immigrant experience, immigrant life, and Norwegian arts and crafts. These included rosemaling, a Norwegian decorative flower painting. Among the items on display were several pieces of rosemaling donated by gold medal winners including this tilt-top table by Trudy Søndrol Wasson – which for those readers who don't know is my mom.

(Unfortunately, there was a bit of ceiling light reflected on my camera lens.)

One odd little coincidence. Vesterheim had a temporary exhibit of photos of the Sami people of the northern reaches of Scandinavia and the Kola Peninsula. Earlier this year, I saw this same exhibit at the Arizona State Museum when I visited it in Tucson.

I had a little more time allocated for the drive west back home, but with few stops planned so that I'd have a few days for exploring Yellowstone National Park in northwest Wyoming. But the weather forecast called for snowstorm at Yellowstone, which indeed hit the park and closed some park roads. I made it as far as Gillette, Wyoming before I gave up completely on Yellowstone for this trip. Although I came up with some alternative stops in Utah, I'd still finish the trip a couple days early as a result.



I finally toured the SPAM Museum in Austin, Minnesota, which tells you more than you ever wanted to know about SPAM, the canned lunch meat, through a number of displays, while the SPAM Train featuring 15 varieties of SPAM circles the museum overhead.

FYI Email "spam" got its name from SPAM indirectly through a sketch on the old *Monty Python Flying Circus* television program.



For the record, I'm 23 SPAM cans tall.



I had planned to stretch my legs with a walk around the Porter Sculpture Park along I-90 near Montrose, South Dakota, but it was closed for the season.



If you drive west across Minnesota and South Dakota, you'll spot endless signs for Wall Drug in Wall, South Dakota. Wall Drug started on its path to becoming a tourist trap in the 1930s when it advertised free ice water to travelers heading to the newly opened Mount Rushmore, and expanded from there, although the ice water is still free.

I actually stopped in Wall to see the National Grasslands Visitor Center and Museum, but I found it had been moved to a temp trailer while the building was being remodeled, and even there it was closed in spite of the hours posted on the internet. But my visit to Wall wasn't a complete waste because in 2022 the town added the world's largest jackalope, which stands at 40 feet tall on the grounds of Dahl's Chainsaw Art.

Asks a T-shirt seen for sale in Wall, South Dakota: “How can a man hit a deer at 250 yards but keep missing the toilet?” Well, duh! Guns have sights on them.

Billboards along I-90 advertised a Rapid City, South Dakota restaurant: “Mexican food so good President Trump would build a wall around it!”

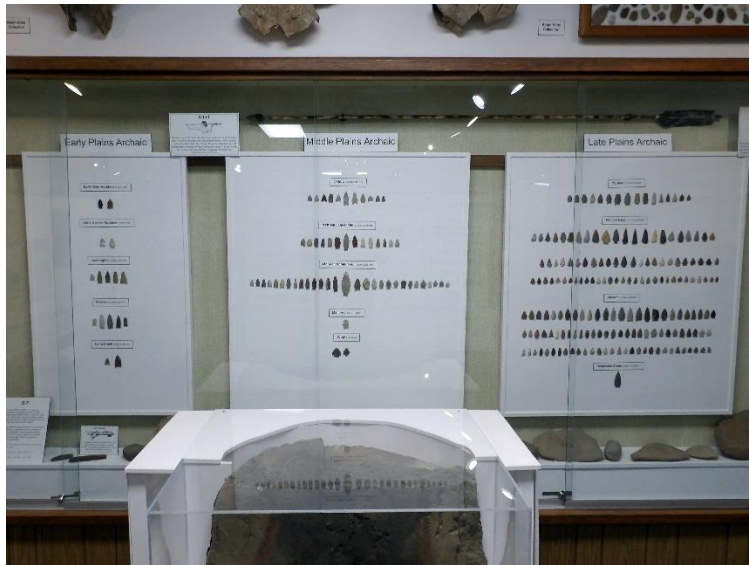


On the campus of the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology campus in Rapid City, South Dakota, I visited the Museum of Geology, which features South Dakota rocks and gemstones as well as regional fossil finds from both the Age of Dinosaurs and the Age of Mammals.



In Spearfish, South Dakota, I checked out the High Plains Western Heritage Center, which featured more of a set of collections of memorabilia than a true museum focused on western and pioneer life in the area, including these from “Custer’s Last Stand” in the Battle of Little Bighorn.

My target for the day's drive was Gillette, Wyoming. I got there early enough to tour its Rockpile Museum, which did a decent job highlighting local history as well as its small but significant collections of dinosaur fossils and early Native American artifacts.



This was part of a display of Native American arrowheads representing various cultures over time.



On the left is the interior of a sheep wagon, complete with a bed, wood-burning stove, table and storage, that shepherds used while tending the flock in the high country. On the right is a natural sandstone cast of a tree trunk, something I hadn't seen before, but apparently a handful of these have been discovered in the area.

That evening, I made my final decision to cancel Yellowstone plans and instead plotted a route to take me back to Dinosaur National Monument near Vernal, Utah to visit some places I ran out of time for

when I was there in August, and to add a couple more sites, including a hike I've long wanted to take. I made only a few more minor stops in Wyoming on my way to Utah.



The most interesting of these was the Point of Rocks Stage Station State Historic Site, featuring the preserved ruins of an old stagecoach station that once served the Overland Stage Line back in the 1860s until the Union Pacific railroad reached the area. It then became a freight depot for the railroad serving area mines including those at Atlantic City and South Pass, Wyoming.

When I was in Rock Springs, Wyoming in August, I had plans to visit the Natural History Museum on the campus of Western Wyoming Community College to check out its reported dinosaur-related collections. But I ran out of time on that trip. I spent the night in Rock Springs on this trip, and figured I'd check out the museum the next morning before leaving town to head south to Vernal.



I was a bit underwhelmed by the very small museum's displays.



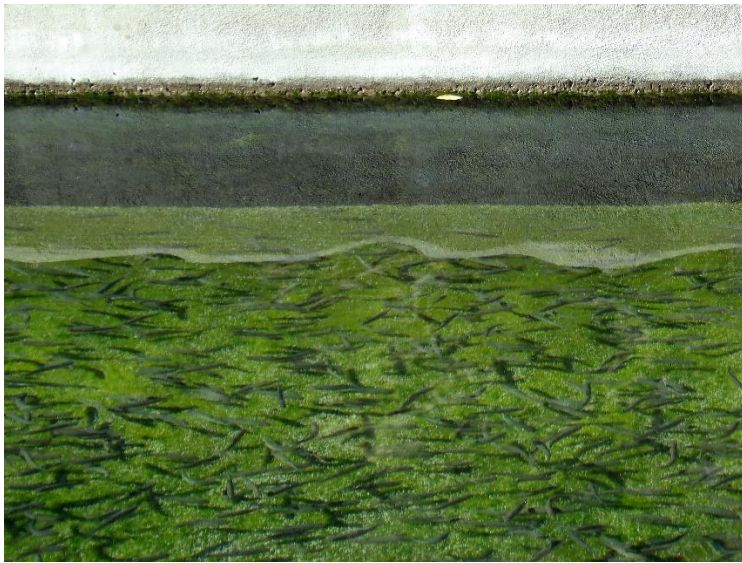
Fall has come to Dinosaur National Monument, as these photos towards Chew Ranch suggest (October on the left, August on the right).



Fall scene that shows the rock layers along the south-facing side of Split Mountain



The full loop Sound of Silence Trail was too long for the amount of time I had, so instead I took an out-and-back hike, turning around at this point.



The next morning, I headed for Jones Hole, a canyon along Jones Hole Creek on the park's remote north side (about 40 miles from the highway). A national fishery there specializes in a couple varieties of trout. It also marks the start of a trailhead that follows the creek to the Green River. I didn't go all the way to the river, just to the Deluge Shelter Rock Art site.



Hiking along Jones Hole Creek



This rock art been pecked into the rock (petroglyphs), but it has also been painted (pictographs).

With a few hours left, I went to explore the Island Park area of the park.



Back around 1870, this was the site of one of paleontologist O.C. Marsh's dinosaur quarries. It was at this quarry that Marsh found the first known evidence of an Allosaurus.



One of the rock art panels at McKee Spring Petroglyph Site

McKee Spring was my target the first time I came back to this part of the park. A few years back, I went a bit further to Rainbow Park. This time, I took the road to its end at Island Park and the old Ruple Ranch site.



Green River at Rainbow Park



The view from the Island Park Overlook



The old ranch house and nearby corral survive from Ruple Ranch



I spotted this snake a few feet away from me when I parked my car at Ruple Ranch. Its marking and even some of its behavior (e.g., a strike pose) are similar to those of a rattlesnake. But a quick check of its rattle-free tail and the shape of its head will tell you that this is a harmless gopher snake.

From Vernal, I headed to Green River, Utah for a night. When I got to town, I checked out the Elgin Ghost Town, which had been incorporated into Green River, as well as now-abandoned buildings from the Green River Launch Complex. The launch complex was once part of New Mexico's White Sands Missile Range, and was used to test launch Athena and Pershing Missiles.



Elgin ghost town



Some of the abandoned buildings at the Green River Launch Complex

For my last sightseeing of the trip, I headed for Utah's Kodachrome Basin State Park, located to the east of Bryce Canyon National Park. Although it is neither as colorful or as interesting as its more famous neighbor, it is home to several miles of hiking trails and a unique geological feature. Sixty-seven sandstone "pipes", or column-towers have been found in this area and nowhere else in the world. At this point, there is some speculation as to how they were formed, but no one knows for sure.



A sandstone pipe stands above the park's Nature Trail.



At 170 feet tall, Chimney Rock is the tallest of the sandstone pipes in the park.

After finishing up at the park, I headed for Kanab, Utah for the night and then headed home the next morning.