

Fort Worth Road Trip (T24A)

I had started making tentative plans to head out to Texas to see my brother and his family twice in the last year, only to have them put off due to medical appointment reasons. I finally was able to make the trip. For the most direct route, it's about a 1200-mile drive from Las Vegas to Fort Worth. I expanded on that route a bit so that I could have a more museum-packed itinerary. As I don't include family details in these summaries, most of the trip highlights included here were from museum visits and other sightseeing.

There were a pair of museums in the El Paso, Texas area and another museum and a related site near Portales, New Mexico that I've wanted to see for some years now, but fitting them in on past trips when I've been in the area AND they've been open has been a challenge. So, I arranged my itinerary to be at these sites when they were scheduled to be open, along with a weekend at the heart of my visit with working relatives.

It was a two-day drive just to get to Las Cruces, New Mexico, which positioned me for a Wednesday morning trip through the El Paso area, where I targeted a pair of museums.



My first stop was at the El Paso Museum of Archaeology, which had displays and artifacts focused on regional prehistoric Native American cultures. This pottery was found in the Jornada Mogollon culture region, centered on present-day El Paso, which lasted from about 1AD to 1450AD.



Mogollon culture extended into northern Mexico, including Casas Grandes, where this pottery was from. Casas Grandes was settled after 1350AD. Casas Grandes ruins are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



The museum also had a small display on human footprints found in 2019 at nearby White Sands that dated back to 21,000 to 23,000 years ago, dramatically altering what we know about the timeline of human settlement of the Americas. This display features photos and casts of some of the footprints from the White Sands trackways. The cast to the upper right features a human footprint on a giant sloth footprint. On the right is a cast of a toddler's footprint.



It's been a hot, dry spring in El Paso. Desert plants outside the museum will take water any way they can get it.



Next door is the National Border Patrol Museum, established by the Fraternal Order of Retired Border Patrol Officers in 1979. The current building dates to the mid-1990s. Unfortunately, it felt like the displays were mostly dated to the mid-1990s, with events this century getting very little space. As a result, the museum albeit informative was a bit disappointing.

From there I headed to Marfa, Texas. I was there in 2017, but a new National Park Service site was designated there a couple years ago, so I thought I'd check that out.



I took US 90 to Marfa. Marfa has a quirky arts community. Along the way, I stopped at this sculpture several miles outside of town. *Prada Marfa* has the look of a small Prada (luxury brand) shop in the middle of nowhere.



Even the shelves inside the “store” were stocked with Prada merchandise in the minimalistic manner such shops are known for.



The Elizabeth Taylor-Rock Hudson-James Dean movie *Giant* was filmed in the Marfa area. Painted plywood cutouts of the actors and one of the sets can be found along the road into Marfa.



Separate but (decidedly not) equal schools were not required in Texas, but they were once common, not just between Blacks and whites but also Latinos. Marfa's Blackwell School was where the local Latino students attended school for several decades. Marfa's schools were not integrated until 1965. The two-room adobe school is now a museum, and it was recently designated as Blackwell School National Historic Site, a unit of the National Park Service, although NPS-related work has not started here yet.



Heading east the next day, I stopped at Fort Lancaster State Historic State, one of a number of Texas frontier forts, this one built in 1855 to protect travelers along the San Antonio-El Paso Road. The site includes a small museum and a signed trail that leads to the ruins of a number of the fort's old buildings, including this one, an enlisted men's barracks.



Downtown Crawford, Texas. One of my distant cousins and his wife – George W. and Laura Bush – live on a ranch outside of town. I tried stopping by to see Cuz, but the Secret Service can be a little protective.



My last stop en route to Fort Worth was Clifton, Texas – the Norwegian Capital of Texas. Cleng Peerson, generally regarded as the “father of Norwegian immigration” to the United States, first came to the U.S. in 1821. He returned to Norway in 1824 to organize a group of emigrants that traveled to the U.S. aboard the Norwegian sloop *Restauration* the following year. Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American museum in Decorah, Iowa, has a tribute to the *Restauration* and those it carried to this country that I saw in 2023. The immigrants first settled in upstate New York. Peerson then led a group of settlers to what is now Norway, Illinois, site of the Norwegian Settler’s Memorial, which I visited in 2013. Peerson later settled in southeast Iowa before he headed to Texas in 1854, where he spent the rest of his life living in what is now the Norse Historic District just west of Clifton.



Peerson was buried in the Our Savior's Lutheran Church cemetery. His grave is marked by the tall obelisk.



The Bosque (County) Museum in Clifton is a good small-town museum that has nice displays on the area's Norwegian heritage and pioneer history.



Of special interest to me was the museum's display about the Horn Shelter, a local archaeological site that included the grave of a man and young girl who were buried together about 11,700 years ago. The bodies were carefully arranged, and the grave included a number of offerings, about 100 artifacts in all. The grave was then covered with limestone slabs arranged in the pattern of a turtle shell. Paleo-Indian burial sites are rare, and the Horn Shelter site is the only known Paleo-Indian double burial site in North America. As part of its Horn Shelter display, the museum commissioned a bust of the man based on cranial analysis and facial reconstruction.



The museum's small fossil collection includes this display of mastodon and mammoth teeth found in Bosque County.

After four days in Fort Worth, I started my way back home, first heading north to Oklahoma City.



On my way to Oklahoma City, I stopped in Norman, Oklahoma to check out the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. Among its major exhibits is a timeline-organized presentation of life from the Paleozoic Era to the most recent Ice Age glacial period, which I enjoyed seeing.

But I targeted this museum because of the Cooper Bison Skull, a significant archaeological find. There have been a couple archaeological finds I've read about where "they" seem to go to great lengths to keep the specific location of the site secret. On my last trip, I found one of these – the ruins at Alkali Point Site 13 near Blanding, Utah. A couple years ago it was the Cooper Bison Kill Site in the Oklahoma Panhandle.



The Cooper Bison Kill Site in 2022

At the Cooper Bison Kill Site, archaeologists found evidence of three major bison kills using artifacts – mainly projectile points – from the Folsom culture dating back to about 10,800BC to 10,200BC. But in addition to the projectile points, they found a deteriorating bison skull painted with a red hematite zigzag. This skull, the Cooper Bison Skull, is the oldest known painted object in North America.



The painted skull is in bad shape, but it is displayed inside an intact bison skull in order to give viewers some sense of how the painted skull originally looked.

Analysis suggests that the skull was painted just before the second of the bison kills at the Cooper site. It is believed that it was painted as part of a ritual to ensure a successful hunt.

The Folsom Culture came after the Clovis Culture, and its projectile points were smaller due to differences in what was being hunted. The Clovis Culture peoples were hunting mammoths and other large game of the era that were extinct by the time the Folsom Culture arose. The bison that the Folsom Culture peoples hunted were larger than the bison of today, but smaller than the mammoths et al. that the Clovis Culture peoples hunted.

In Oklahoma City, I visited the Oklahoma History Center, the state's official history museum. Rather than try to present a complete chronological history of Oklahoma, its major exhibits focused on various excerpts of the state's history.



A surrey with fringe on top, used by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II at the Oklahoma premiere of their musical *Oklahoma!*. The musical was based on the play *Green Grow the Lilacs* by native Oklahoman Lynn Riggs, and its song *Oklahoma!* has been adopted as the official state song.

The museum's exhibit on the state's connection to space travel put extra emphasis on the Skylab 4 mission.



The Skylab 4 Apollo Command Module



Gear from the Skylab 4 crew, including the uniform of mission pilot Bill Pogue, a native Oklahoman.



I actually met Bill Pogue at a somber “astronaut encounter” at the Kennedy Space Center on February 1, 2003, the day that the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon reentry into the atmosphere while en route to a Kennedy Space Center landing.



From Oklahoma City, I headed west on a route that mostly stuck with I-40. In Amarillo, I encountered a new version of the VW Slug Bug Ranch – I had seen the old version in Conroy, Texas back in 2022. I suppose that this is to serve as a counterpoint to the much more famous Cadillac Ranch on the west edge of Amarillo. Both feature graffiti-covered cars with their noses buried in the ground.



Also in Amarillo is the *Giant Legs of Amarillo*, a sculpture inspired by a Rameses II statue in Egypt where only parts of his legs survive. In addition to the sculpture, the site includes a fake historical marker where poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife, *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley, describe encountering these “ruins” during a trek across New Spain.



I thought this mural claiming that Friona is the *Cheesburger Capital of Texas* was just a gimmick for Joe’s Restaurant, on whose wall it was painted. But Friona is in the heart of an agriculture area with significant beef (hamburger), dairy (cheese) and wheat (buns) production. The city saw the connection and made the proclamation.

In Blackwater Draw, an intermittent stream channel located near Clovis and Portales, New Mexico, an excavation for Ice Age mammoth fossils was underway in 1932 when researchers found a pair of fluted spearpoints among the bones of a partial mammoth skeleton. This provided the first evidence that humans hunted mammoths in North America, this about 13,000 years ago. The design of the spearpoints, the age of these finds, and the ages of other subsequent archaeological finds that included similarly designed spearpoints led to the definition of the Clovis archaeological culture. The Clovis Culture was long believed to represent the earliest inhabitants of North America, but evidence of even earlier cultures has since been discovered (not the least of which are the White Sands human footprints I mentioned earlier in this summary).

Further excavation at the Blackwater Draw site showed several well-defined layers of soil built up over the millennia, some containing artifacts from other cultures. Among them is the Folsom Culture, which used the site for bison kills.

I've tried to visit the site and a related museum in the area on two past trips only to encounter changes in seasonal hours or temporary closures. Fortunately, both the site and the related museum were open this time.



The smallish Blackwater Draw Museum on the campus of Eastern New Mexico University included introductory information about the Blackwater Draw site, the excavations there, and the Clovis and Folsom Cultures. However, only a limited number of artifacts found at the site were on display in the museum.



The Clovis peoples were nomadic, but they returned to the Blackwater site often enough that they left caches of tools behind. These Clovis scrapers were left behind in one cache unearthed at the site.



The museum also inherited a private collection of prehistoric Casas Grandes pottery, which was included in their displays.



A mile-long trail loops through part of Blackwater Draw. It is common practice to rebury archaeological dig sites as that is one of the best ways to preserve a site for future research when techniques get better, so there wasn't a lot to see, and several of the signposts along the way were missing their signs.



But not this one. This was the site of the 1932 mammoth excavation where the first two Clovis spearpoints were discovered.



An interpretive center along the trail, however, does preserve an impressive dig site. Here it is possible to see several of the layers of soil deposits and the different kinds of bones and artifacts buried in the different layers.



The sign at the bottom marks a layer where Clovis artifacts and evidence of their mammoth hunts were found. The sign at the top marks a layer where Folsom artifacts and evidence of their bison kills were found.



A small locked building near the interpretive center protects this hole in the ground. This is no ordinary hole in the ground, though. It is the oldest known hand-dug well in North America, dating to about 11,000 years ago. (Dirty windows reflected the surrounding landscape and my colorful plaid shirt. I was able to clean up the photo a bit thanks to Photoshop.)

While staying in Las Cruces, New Mexico in 2023, I visited Prehistoric Trackways National Monument, one of the world's richest sites for Paleozoic (pre-dinosaur) animal trackways. The national monument doesn't have a visitor center or its own museum, but some of its track-bearing slabs were on display in a Las Cruces museum.



Dimetrodon tracks on display in a Las Cruces museum in 2023

More track slabs were turned over to the New Mexico Museum of Natural History and Science in Albuquerque, which is why I targeted it as my next destination.

Like the Sam Noble museum I visited in Norman, this museum had its exhibits on life on earth arranged in chronological order. Unfortunately, that meant that I found out early on that its exhibits featuring life before the dinosaurs were in the process of being revamped and thus were temporarily closed, so I missed what I was primarily hoping to see.



From its dinosaur collection, here you can see the preserved impression that the skin of a hadrosaur left on some mud that eventually hardened into rock.

It is now generally believed that a giant asteroid hit Earth about 66 million years ago, bringing the Age of Dinosaurs to an abrupt end. The initial evidence of this was a thin layer of iridium-rich deposits found at various places around the world that separates dinosaur fossil-laden layers from dinosaur fossil-barren layers of rock. Iridium is rare on Earth but common in asteroids.

This boundary has been known as the K-T Boundary, but is now more commonly referred to as the K-Pg (Cretaceous-Paleogene) Boundary.

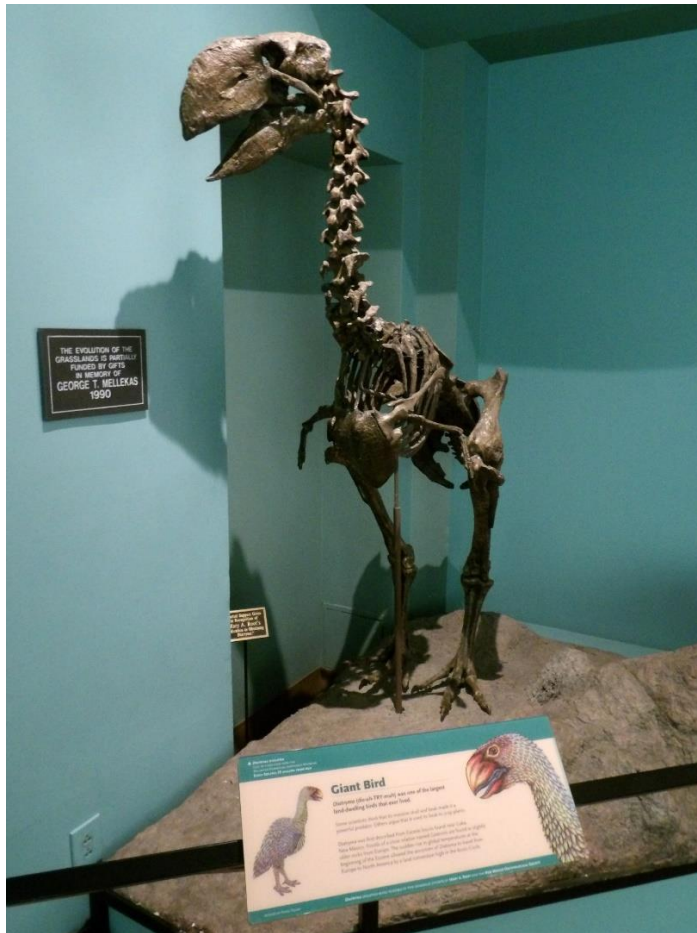


Evidence of the K-Pg Boundary can be seen (albeit with difficulty) in this chunk of rock on display in the museum from near Raton, New Mexico, in the northeast part of the state.



The K-Pg Boundary is more easily seen in this picture from my 2022 visit to Makoshika State Park in eastern Montana.

Dinosaurs were distinct from lizards, so today's lizards are not descendants of dinosaurs. However, it is increasingly accepted that dinosaurs live on as today's birds. Birds belong to the theropod (three-toed) group of dinosaurs that included the T. Rex. Bone structure, feathering, walking on two legs, and warm bloodedness (this was a transition dinosaurs underwent over time) are among their shared features. But it's got to be quite a come down to go from being able to bite victims in half with their powerful jaws to leaving droppings on their freshly washed cars.



Is it Big Bird? Nope. But it was a flightless big bird, a *Gastornis Gigantea*, looking rather dinosaur-like.



The museum did have a number of other small displays, from cave life to New Mexico's extensive volcanic features, to minerals and gemstones, to space travel.

Acoma Pueblo is one of 19 Native American pueblos in New Mexico. Think of these pueblos as kind of a cross between a community and a reservation, where the reservation was created around long-established communities (unlike reservations for some tribes that were far removed from their traditional lands).

The Acoma people have been in this area for about 2000 years, making Acoma one of oldest continuously inhabited communities now in the United States.



A view of the central part of Acoma Pueblo, with Kadzima Mesa (the Enchanted Mesa, technically a butte rather than a mesa) in the distant left, and Acoma Mesa, home to Sky City, in the distant right.



Tradition holds that the Acoma people originally lived on and farmed the valley floor. But for security reasons, they moved to the top of Kadzima, accessed by a natural “ramp” up the side of the mesa.

One afternoon while most of the people were working in the farm fields on the valley floor, a severe thunderstorm destroyed access to the top of Kadzima, stranding three old women and a young boy who had remained atop the mesa. A giant thunderbird swooped down and scooped up these four, and safely carried them to the valley floor.

The Acoma abandoned Kadzima and built their new community, Sky City, on top of nearby Acoma Mesa. This was about 1000 years ago, and the community is still occupied today. This makes Sky City the oldest continuously inhabited community in the United States (St. Augustine, Florida loosely claims this, but in St. Augustine's case, they're referring to the first permanent city established by Europeans.)



View of Sky City atop Acoma Mesa from a highway lookout at the entrance to Acoma Pueblo.

A member of a Spanish expedition first reached Acoma around 1539, but it wasn't until 1599 when the Spanish conquered Acoma, massacring about 20% of the population, amputating the right feet of men over 25 years old, and putting those men into slavery for 20 years. The Acoma repaired Sky City. They were forced to adopt Catholicism. The San Estévan del Rey Mission Church was built in Sky City in the 1600s, and stands to this day.

I toured Acoma in 1991 (it was my first stop on my first cross-country western road trip) and again in 2005. I couldn't remember if the museum there displayed ancient artifacts (no photos were allowed in the museum), so I wanted to check that out. When I got to town, I paid my admission and also purchased a camera license so that I could take pictures elsewhere on the pueblo. (Such a license is not unusual on reservations. Some reservations ban photos entirely. Some tourists learn the hard way that such rules should be taken seriously when their cameras or phones are permanently confiscated.)

Alas, the museum didn't display any older Native artifacts, just a mix of items from the mission church and some modern art. I finished here with a short photo walk and a short photo drive.



I toured the Sky City mesa top community in both 1991 and 2005, but I skipped it this time. Some Sky City housing is on the left, and San Estévan del Rey Mission Church, built between 1629 and 1641, is on the right, from my 2005 visit.

Williams, Arizona is the gateway to the south rim of the Grand Canyon. It also celebrates its heritage as a stop along historic Route 66. But I visited Williams to see the Poozeum, a museum dedicated to poop. But not just any poop. Rather, fossilized dinosaur poop. In fact, they have the world's largest collection of coprolite (fossilized poop), making them #1 in fossilized #2. With more than 1000 pieces of coprolite featured in a number of informative displays, visitors enjoy quite the immersive experience in dinosaur dung.



The Poozeum in Williams, Arizona

Coprolites can be identified from their shape or chemical makeup. They're worthy of study because these trace fossils can provide evidence of the diets of long-extinct creatures.



As part of its collection, the Poozeum features “Barnum”, certified by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest known piece of dinosaur coprolite, at more than 26 inches long and 6 inches wide. I routinely eat a high fiber diet, and yet even I’m impressed. Scans show that it contains a number of bone pieces, so it came from a carnivore, and obviously a rather large one at that. Because it was found in the Hell Creek Formation deposited about 70 million years ago, Barnum likely came from a Tyrannosaurus Rex, the large apex predator found in that formation.

But there’s more than just coprolite from dinosaurs on display.



You should always wipe when you’re done, in case your time is up. This ammonite died with a bit of poop at its butt (red arrow), which is still there millions of years later. Of course, it’s hard to wipe when you don’t have arms. Or toilet paper. The brown coprolite at the bottom includes evidence of plants in the diet. The white coprolite to the right includes fish bones.



The magnifying glass gives you a closer look at some fish pieces that were making their way through the digestive system of this fossilized crocodylian when it died.



Who farted? The three specimens are pretty hard to see in my photo, but the museum's photos help. Tree resin fossilizes into amber. Sometimes, insects that got caught in the resin are preserved for millions of years in amber. In the case of these three, one of the last things they did before dying was fart. No coprolite here, but their final farts have been trapped as gas bubbles at their butts in the amber.

The *Jurassic Park* movies were premised on the idea that dinosaur DNA could be extracted from blood in Dinosaur Age mosquitos trapped in amber. Given what's in these bubbles, they might consider making another movie – *Jurassic Fart*.



The Poozeum should give you something to stink, er, think about.

Science is great!

And because the Poozeum is hard to top, I headed straight home after I finished up there.