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Cross Country Relatives Road Trip (R24A-1)

To Iowa and Back

I took my annual road trip out to the Midwest and back to visit family, and as usual I did some sightseeing along the way. I once again planned to visit Yellowstone National Park on the way home as part of my itinerary. Of course, I've made such plans on four past trips only to have a winter storm show up, killing those plans. So, this year I pulled my trip forward into September.

My plan for heading east was mostly a direct drive out to St. Louis for some sightseeing there, and then heading north to Iowa. I had only a few stops planned along the way, and only one of any significance.

My first stop was in Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni – Ancestral Footprints of the Grand Canyon National Monument. You probably haven't heard of it. It was created just a year ago from public lands near the Grand Canyon in northern Arizona. I've actually been to these lands a number of times before they were included in Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni.



Along the way there are views of the stair-stepped cliffs that make up part of Utah's "Grand Staircase". Here you can see the Pink Cliffs at the top (home to Bryce Canyon National Park), the White Cliffs (Zion National Park), the Vermilion Cliffs and the Chocolate Cliffs. This is photoshopped quite a bit to bring out the colors of the cliffs, but it's probably the best photo I've gotten of the Grand Staircase from this location. I'll need a better camera to get better photos than this one.



The House Rock Valley Overlook features this view of the Vermilion Cliffs. A road through the valley separates Vermilion Cliffs National Monument to the north from Baaj Nwaavjo I'tah Kukveni.



Comb Ridge is a monocline that runs south from southeast Utah onto Navajo Nation lands in northeast Arizona. I've hiked to a number of archaeological sites along the ridge in Utah. I assume there are more archaeological sites here in Arizona, but there are restrictions on visitor movements on numerous reservations, including the Navajo Nation.



Church Rock on Navajo Nation land in northeast Arizona



Baby Rocks on Navajo Nation land in northeast Arizona

My primary sightseeing target for the drive towards St. Louis was Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve in Colorado. Just before I got to that park, I made a brief photo stop near Hooper, Colorado at the rather kitschy UFO Watch Tower.



The mountains and prevailing winds in south central Colorado have produced the large expanse of sand dunes at the heart of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. The dunefield includes the tallest sand dunes in North America, some up to 750 feet tall. Park visitors can hike the dunes, which I did on two past late-day visits. This time, I checked out the Visitor Center and hiked a couple other non-dune trails, things I had missed during those past visits.



View of the dunefield from an interpretive trail near the visitor center



View of the dunefield from a hiking trail



The Montville Nature Trail at Great Sand Dunes



I hiked up some of the taller dunes during my 2005 visit...



... and during my 1994 visit.

As I continued east, I made a short stop at Amache National Historic Site near Granada, Colorado. This site preserves the Granada War Relocation Center site, one of ten concentration camps where West Coast Japanese-Americans – many of whom were American citizens – were forcibly relocated during World War II. I first visited the site in 2016; it was made into an official National Park Service unit in 2022.



Most of the buildings at the concentration camp are gone, although some foundations and concrete slabs remain. Unfortunately, it was too soon for its NPS status to have led to better signage or the construction of a visitor center.

I didn't make any more sightseeing stops until I reached some Daniel Boone-related sites in eastern Missouri. Daniel Boone was an early American frontiersman who served during the Revolutionary War, he served in the Virginia Assembly, and he helped promote the settlement of Kentucky. Needing a fresh start, he left the United States, settling in what is now Missouri but then was part of Spanish Louisiana. He served the Spanish government until the area became part of the United States after the Louisiana Purchase.



The home of his son, Nathan Boone, was where Daniel Boone lived the final years of his life.



Daniel Boone and his wife Rebecca were originally buried in Missouri near the farm of her family.



In 1845, the Boones were disinterred and reburied in a new cemetery in Frankfort, Kentucky, which I visited in 2007. However, there are some reports that the wrong remains were moved. In 1983, a forensic anthropologist who examined a plaster cast of Boone's skull made before the reburial suggested that it might actually have been the skull of an African American (slaves had been buried in the same Missouri cemetery where the Boones were originally buried). So, for now both graveyards claim to have the Boones' remains.

As a young military officer, Ulysses S. Grant was stationed in the St. Louis area, where he met and eventually married Julia Dent. They used the Dent family farm – White Haven – as their own family home for decades after that. Today, the White Haven farmstead is at the heart of Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site. The site includes the house, some surviving outbuildings and an excellent museum focused on the Grants.



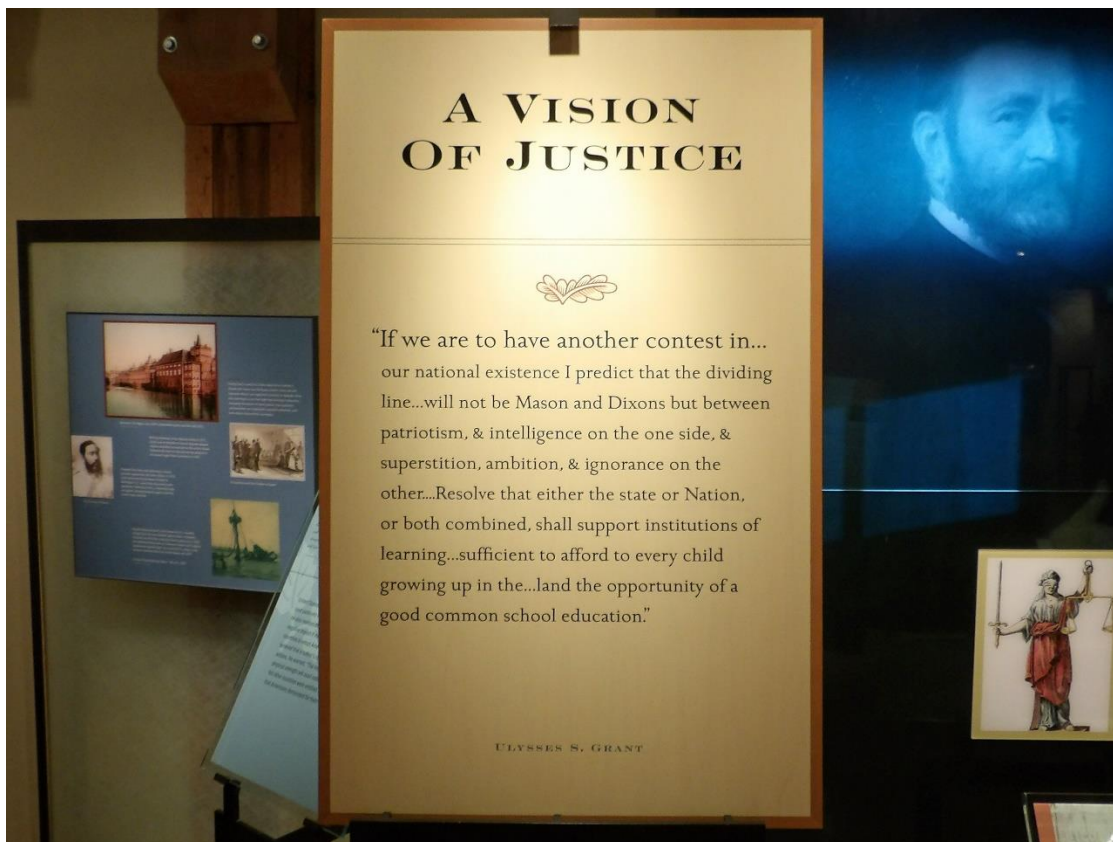
Investigations have determined that White Haven was actually painted these shades of green during the Grants' time there.



White Haven and some of its outbuildings



As a post-Civil War president, Grant was an advocate for improved rights for Blacks including newly freed slaves. Among his actions was his signing the Ku Klux Klan Act into law in 1871.



However, the country experienced a lot of backsliding on Black rights during and after the Grant Administration, prompting Grant to say the above.



The dominant feature of downtown St. Louis is the 630-foot-tall Gateway Arch, originally part of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, which was redesignated as the Gateway Arch National Park in 2018 (for reasons that make no sense to me, as it doesn't seem to meet any of the basic criteria of a national park).

Visitors can ride a tram inside the arch to the top, but because it also includes more than 90 steps, I decided to skip that and instead walked the grounds of the park. I also toured the park's underground museum, which covered both St. Louis history and the design and construction of the arch.



The park also includes the Old St. Louis County Courthouse, which was built as a combination federal and state courthouse. In 1846, slave Dred Scot sued for his and his wife's freedom because they had been held as slaves in free states. The original case and appeals up through the Missouri Supreme Court were held in the Old Courthouse. However, the case was ultimately decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled against the Scotts, saying that they didn't have grounds as citizens to sue.



There's a nice view of the Gateway Arch, the Old Courthouse and the downtown St. Louis skyline from the Malcolm W. Martin Memorial Park across the Mississippi River in East St. Louis, Illinois.



Unzip the Earth is one of a number of sculptures in Citygarden, a downtown St. Louis sculpture park. I heard that the artist originally wanted to call it *Earth, Your Fly Is Open!*



This St. Louis tourism marketing slogan probably looks better on paper than it sounds.



Heading north from St. Louis, I stopped in Alton, Illinois, where a small plaza marks the site of the seventh Lincoln-Douglas Debate, memorialized with these statues.



Alton is also home to Troy Taylor's American Oddities Museum, which features a collection of exhibits focused on strange people, and odd, unusual and macabre bits of American history, such as this exhibit on the Jim Jones/People's Temple-Jonestown, Guyana massacre.



Nauvoo, Illinois was the primary home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints – the Mormons – for seven years after they had been pushed out of other places where they had settled. In 1844, church leader Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob in the nearby Carthage, Illinois jail. They were buried here at the Joseph Smith homestead in Nauvoo.



As problems with the locals continued, the church made plans to head west, leaving the United States. In March 1846 they crossed the Mississippi River into Iowa and made their way west, eventually arriving in what is now Salt Lake City (which due to the Mexican-American War was part of the U.S. by the time the Mormons arrived). Nauvoo marks the eastern terminus of the Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail.



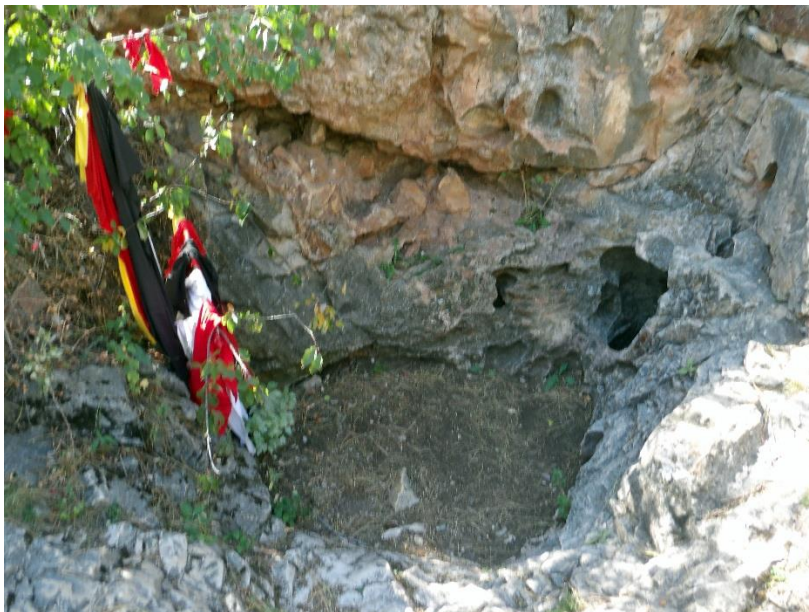
My next sightseeing was several days later at Badlands National Park in southwest South Dakota. I've been to the park a handful of times over the years, generally taking the main sightseeing road through the park from near Minuteman Missile National Historic Site to the town of Wall, home of the famous Wall Drug. This photo is from the Big Badlands Overlook.



This time, I headed southwest to the park's Stronghold Unit, much of which is also on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Among the highlights there were the Sheep Mountain Overlook and Red Shirt Table Overlook. Both of these were well worth seeing, but if you're making your first visit to the park, I'd stick with the main sightseeing road, as there's more to see with a lot less driving.



I had time for a couple days in the Black Hills area of South Dakota, but I made up my agenda here a bit as I went along after finding out about The Mammoth Site near Hot Springs, South Dakota from a brochure rack at my Murdo, South Dakota hotel the night before. An ancient sinkhole became a wildlife trap that eventually filled in, preserving the skeletal remains of (to-date) 61 mammoths. The site remains a working mammoth fossil quarry, but it has been preserved with museum built over it.



I then headed north to Wind Cave National Park, famous for Wind Cave below ground and a large preserved prairie ecosystem above ground. This natural opening helps explain how the cave got its name. Due to differences in air pressure, there may be strong winds either entering or leaving the cave through this hole. Wind Cave is the 7th longest cave in the world, but it is only the second longest here in Custer County, South Dakota (nearby Jewel Cave is longer). The Lakota Sioux banners near the cave honor this as a sacred site where they believe their people first emerged from the underworld.



The park normally offers cave tours, but those were on hold due to some maintenance. I actually visited the park once before, taking a cave tour back in 1994. Here's a photo of the cave ceiling in its Garden of Eden area.



I didn't visit Jewel Cave on this trip, but here's a picture of its Strip of Bacon formation that I took during my 1991 visit here.



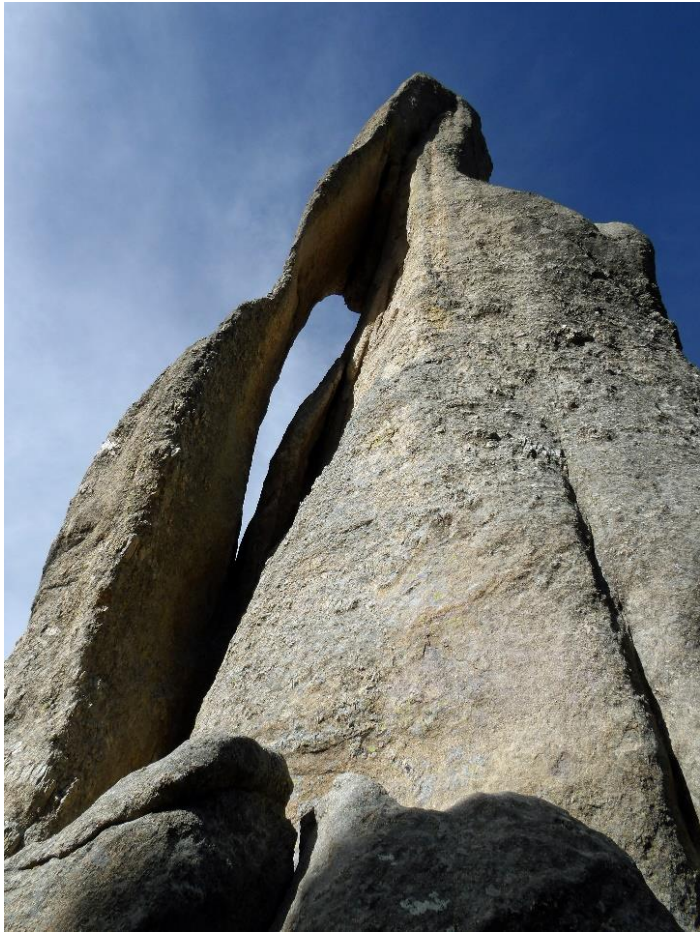
I did explore nearby Custer State Park in more detail. Along its Wildlife Loop drive, I saw deer, wild turkeys, and a herd of bison that apparently didn't get the memo that bison encounters can be dangerous, so tourists should keep their distance.



The park's Needles Highway scenic drive provided several views of the Cathedral Spires granite formations.



The Needles Highway passes through a couple small tunnels, including this, the Needles Eye Tunnel.



The tunnel got its name from this nearby formation, the Needles Eye.



The Homestake Mine in Lead, South Dakota was once a gold mine, but it closed down in 2002. Since then, its underground tunnels, some of which are thousands of feet deep, have been put to use for research into neutrinos and particle physics. What is now Sanford Lab provides a nice visitor center with information about both the mine and the current research operations.



Nearby Deadwood, South Dakota was a classic Old West town, full of gambling, prostitution, murder, miners, and gunfights, and where characters like Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane and others could be found. In fact, the Wild Bill bar towards the left in this picture marks the location of the No. 10 Bar where Wild Bill Hickok was assassinated. The main street retains a lot of the old-time look of early Deadwood, but most of these places are now bars, restaurants and souvenir shops that cater to tourists.



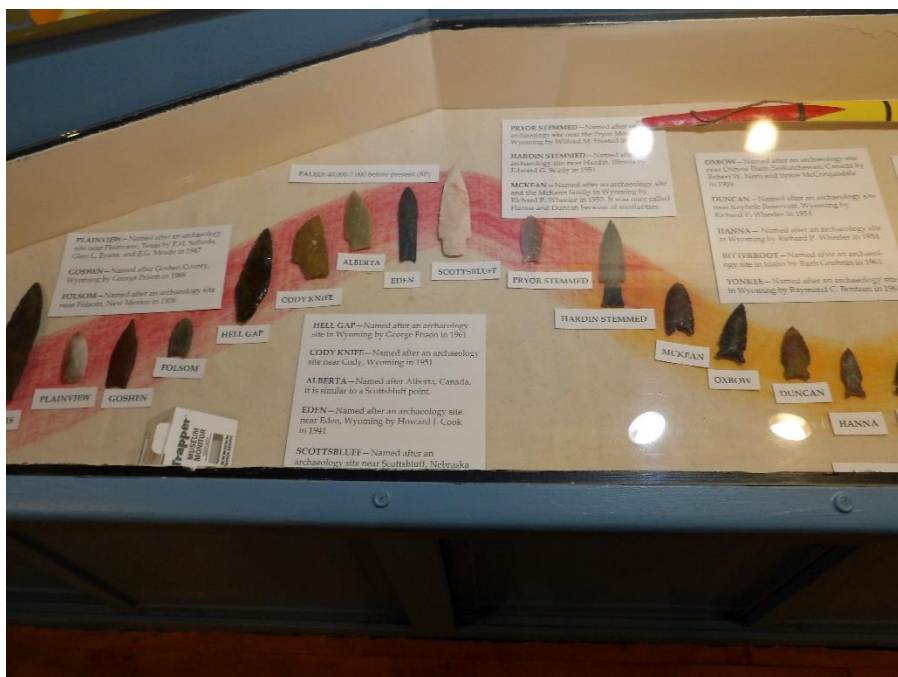
Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane are buried in adjacent plots in Deadwood's Mt. Moriah Cemetery. Although Jane pined after Hickok, he reportedly couldn't stand her. Burying her next to Hickok was a bit of a posthumous joke played on Hickok.



I continued west towards Livingston, Montana, which would be my base for exploring Yellowstone. Cutting across northeast Wyoming, I took a back highway from Gillette to Sheridan just to see what was there. Not a lot, it turned out. The town of Spotted Horse has just two people and one business.



I got to Livingston shortly after noon, giving me time to tour its pretty decent Yellowstone Gateway Museum. In addition to displays on local life, it had nice exhibits on the history of nearby Yellowstone National Park as well as on regional Native American archaeology.



Part of an exhibit of different styles of arrowheads found in the region, identified by culture and organized in roughly chronological order. These date back thousands of years.



I've stopped in Livingston on a couple past trips, and wanted to take a walking tour of its downtown. It very much looks like a place from a different time, but it is still well used. I came across very few empty storefronts.



I love the look of the Empire movie theatre.



More downtown businesses



Established in 1954, Mark's In & Out Beefburgers is a classic drive-in fast-food burger joint. And given its name, of course I had to get dinner there one of the nights that I was in town.



If Livingston looks familiar to you, you may have been a fan of that classic Hollywood movie *Cowboys vs. Dinosaurs*.



In this scene filmed on a downtown Livingston street, a T. rex spies its next snack.



It's about an hour's drive south along US 89 from Livingston to Gardiner, Montana at the north entrance of Yellowstone National Park, but there was a huge savings in hotel costs, and it was a pretty drive.



Gardiner, Montana

The trip continues in Yellowstone National Park in part 2.