This paper was read by Stephen Thomas to members of The Chicago Literary Club on February 8, 2021

Dedicated to SUZANNE AHLBERG (1940-2016) sister, friend, fellow traveler

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

What follows is mostly factual but part fantasy as I describe some personal travels, as well as how I imagine others traveled similar paths in the near or distant past. The order is not chronological. My purpose: to inform, to amuse, even to inspire.

1. THE JOURNEY STARTS

In ***Travels With Charley*** (1962) John Steinbeck planted a seed which for me did not sprout for nearly 50 years. Steinbeck describes his cross-country travels in what would today be called a *truck camper*, essentially a pick-up truck with living (sleeping, cooking, storage) facilities fitted onto a truck bed. Steinbeck and his poodle Charley happily travelled some 10,000 miles across 34 states and back to Long Island, New York starting in

September, 1960, just after Hurricane Donna had ripped up the East Coast.

Steinbeck's book was given to me in the 1990s by a neighbor who knew of my love for camping. I was soon parading through the annual outdoor shows around Chicago, carefully weighing the pros and cons of various RV (recreational vehicle) styles and configurations. After several years I decided that a modest-sized motorhome would be best for me. That is, a small truck chassis fitted with living quarters. It would be all-in-one piece with nothing to disconnect upon arrival at a destination.

My great opportunity (after eight years of retirement) came in early 2009 at the height of the great financial recession which started with the residential real estate collapse during the Presidential campaign of 2008. At that year's January Boat and Outdoor show at McCormick Place I stepped into a new 25-foot Coachmen Freelander priced at just under $50,000. Not a steal, but something I could afford, as many larger and fancier units were priced at well over $100,000.

Sold? Well, almost. First I had to convince my wife, Marcia, that this was a good idea. My sixteen-year-old daughter, Ellen, was an easy sell. It helped that the size of the unit looked manageable, and it contained many comforts of home – queen sized bed, shower and vanity, three-burner stove, microwave, gas oven, refrigerator, TV, gas furnace, air conditioner and a flush toilet. There were holding tanks for fresh water and what are termed *grey* (dish and sink water) and *dark* or toilet water. Also a 50 gallon gasoline tank - enough fuel for 400 miles on an open road, even more if going downhill or with the wind at your back. A sturdy cable provided a connection to external electrical power to run all these conveniences. If no external power was available, an on-board generator would provide needed electricity.

So at long last my Steinbeck-inspired dream had come true, and I have never looked back. For the past 10 years I have spent as much time as possible from April to November travelling in a motorhome, roughly some 600

days and nights across 150,000 miles while living on the South Side of Chicago.

These travels have taken me and my family and companions to most states east of the Mississippi and to all of the states which border this river on the west, but no farther west. I like to limit daily road time to about six hours or 300 miles; on the road by 10am and in camp by 4pm. No driving at night, and top speeds in the lower 60s. Other rules – never be in a hurry or do anything compulsively; prefer the unfamiliar (the *road less traveled*) to the familiar; and try to avoid retracing steps (as in: *we pass this way but once*). Often I travel alone or just with our dog Roxi. Dogs are great travel companions. No back talk. The destination is not important, often a function of whether I turn left (east), right (west) or continue south at the first traffic light on nearby Longwood Drive. I may let the color of the traffic light decide which way to go.

2. HOW DO YOU SPELL NACK-A-TISH?

Here are a few details of a trip south from Chicago to Louisiana via St. Louis and back through Mississippi. In 2013 I read somewhere that a small Louisiana town

noted for its meat pies was preparing for its 300th anniversary in 2014. I sent the clipping to my sister in Pennsylvania who promptly replied - *Let's go*. With a little more research and route planning we were on our way in mid-April, 2014. My sister also preferred less travelled country roads with an aversion to what she called *super slabs* (Interstates). And so we took two and one-half days to arrive at our destination in northwest Louisiana, having left from our rendezvous in St. Louis.

The spelling of the name of this town improbably pronounced *Nack-a-tish* is **N-A-T-C-H-I-T-O-C-H-E-S.** For an explanation of this – ask the Spanish traders who adapted the name of a local native American tribe. We found the town resplendent in welcoming banners, clean streets, flowers in profusion, and tidy shops, but no meat pies. The sun warmed us along a charming walkway by the downtown canal leading to the close-by Red River. The Spanish originally came here to establish a trading outpost convenient to the border with Mexico, then about forty miles to the west in what is now Texas.

Near to Natchitoches is Melrose plantation, still a dust-laden working farm with preserved remnants of former slave quarters and a small gallery exhibiting and celebrating the work of Clementine Hunter (1886-1988),

a self-taught Black folk artist who lived here for her entire life producing an estimated 5,000-10,000 paintings, some of which are now in major museums. It was here that we first heard of the Civil War referred to as the *War of Northern Aggression*. Where to next? My sister said: *Let's drive over to Natchez.* And so we did.

3. FLATBOATS AND THE NATCHEZ TRACE.

Next day we headed east across northern Louisiana for several hours, crossing the Mississippi River into Natchez, Mississippi in early afternoon. Natchez was a major cotton market and export center in the early to mid 1800s, arguably one of the wealthiest places in America with more millionaires *per capita* than New York City. This was mostly thanks to Eli Whitney, the cotton gin, expanded cotton acreage and an insatiable desire for slaves to tend the cotton. Planters built extravagant houses in Natchez, preferring not to live on their remote plantations where overseers managed those working from dawn to dusk. In the slave vernacular it was working from: *can see to can't see*. One of these great houses (still unfinished) was our first destination. *Longwood Mansion* is the largest (32,000 square feet) multi-storied octagonal house in the United States, with

an onion-shaped dome and 32 huge rooms of which just nine were completed.

Artisans from Philadelphia were hard at work on an upper floor in 1862 when Civil War canon were heard at a distance. At the first sound of gunfire these workers dropped their tools and left for home, never to return. Tools and working materials can be viewed today exactly as they left them. Longwood Mansion survived decades of neglect to become a popular site for visitors. It is now maintained by a local garden club as a historic house and museum.

Leaving Natchez my sister suggested (you can tell who was in charge): *Let's head up the Trace*. She was referring to the Natchez Trace Parkway, a roadway which runs some 400 miles northeast from Natchez to near Nashville. This Parkway was a major CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) project initiated in the 1930s. Before that it had been a primitive trail with origins as a pathway for larger animals and Native Americans.

I will divert here briefly to talk about flatboat history to help me put this part of our travels in context. Flatboats were built of wood and used to float lumber, cured meat, livestock and agricultural products from the north to

trading markets along the lower Mississippi. They were in extensive use from the late 1700s until well into the 1800s. Young Abraham Lincoln made two trips (1828 and 1831) down river to New Orleans on flatboats. Many were built and launched along the Ohio River. Upon arrival at a port such as Natchez or New Orleans the cargo was unloaded and sold, the flatboats dismantled to provide more lumber to sell, and the crew paid and discharged.

Imagine a young man from a farm in Ohio or Kentucky just off a flatboat after more than a month of boat building, loading, tending, navigating and unloading who now has $20 to $40 in his pocket. He must be home in time for a dreary winter and spring planting. But first . . . there is time for a few idle days and some diversion. Readily available in any landing port were the following: whiskey, card and dice games, and the charms of the *ladies of the River*. These could seriously erode the young man's financial ability to book passage on a north-bound paddle steamer or to purchase a horse or mule for the ride home. In a worst-case scenario he might even have to walk back home. This could take a month or more along the Natchez Trace before he might finally catch a ride northbound on the current of the

Cumberland River at Nashville and back to Kentucky or Ohio.

These were part of my reflections as we headed up on the beautiful Natchez Trace, now a limited-access two-lane parkway. I had no idea that such a spectacular roadway over level land even existed in our United States, let alone in Mississippi. Trucks and billboards are prohibited, with a 50 mph speed limit. We were warned: *50 mph means 50, not 52 or 53. If you speed you* ***will*** *be stopped*. We were in no hurry. A few miles along the Trace I spotted a state trooper slip in off a side passage and pull up behind our RV so that he could not be seen in our rearview mirrors. I kept our speed at exactly 50 mph. After about 15 miles the trooper, apparently tired of this encounter, pulled away and turned around. *Sorry to disappoint*. I beeped our *adios* to him and asked my sister to wave *goodbye* from her window.

We went as far as Tupelo on the Trace before electing to turn back westward to have a look at Oxford, Mississippi. There I purchased a collection of stories by local Nobel laureate William Faulkner at the famous bookstore on the square. I eventually read most of these difficult stories. Like James Joyce, not easy reading. Next morning the warnings of approaching local storms and

tornadoes were sufficiently insistent that we turned onto Interstate 55 and drove 340 miles past Memphis without stopping to make our way back to St. Louis and calmer weather.

4. RV TRAVEL IN A PANDEMIC (2020)

I keep busy and reasonably content staying up north from November to April. As each calendar year passes, the question of what may follow occurs. I still keep daily *to do* lists. But I now also have a list of things to tend to before my story ends. This COVID-19 business has not made it any easier.

The parks and campgrounds opened late in 2020 because of the pandemic. I called in April to ask why, and the response was simple: *We don't know how to keep the public toilets and shower facilities clean and safe from contamination*. *You may be safe in your motorhome with full self-contained facilities; but we need also to be ready for tent campers and those who must use our showers and toilets.* It was a perfectly sound point I had not thought of. In the Midwest the parks and campgrounds finally opened in early June after the Memorial Day weekend. I was on the road straight away.

Coming back from late spring travels I stopped at my RV dealer for some routine maintenance and noticed that the surrounding lot was essentially empty – with almost no RVs whether motorhomes or trailers, new or used, ready for sale. The answer: *we sold all we have and can't get more; this pandemic has made people anxious for travel and, fearing airlines and hotels, wanting to move about in their own bubble*. *The manufacturers are doing what they can, but many almost-finished units are parked waiting for components such as air conditioners or refrigerators which are in short supply, especially if they have to come from China.*

The dealer chided me. *You are one of the lucky ones. You already own your own bubble. Want to sell it back* to *us?* The answer: *no*. And so this summer went, with my third trip circumnavigating Lake Michigan, this time up the Wisconsin side, across the great bridge from the 1950s at the Straits of Mackinac and back along Michigan's scenic west coast. This can easily be done, even with frequent stops, in a week. For a second year lake levels were high, very high.

A trip around Lake Michigan is a personal favorite because it fulfills several travel priorities. One. As soon as you leave home you have reached your destination –

the Lake. Two. The scenery along the lakeshore is spectacular from bottom to top and back. Three. There are always places to stop or to shop or to camp which are new to you. Four The natives are friendly and there is little danger. Five. There are no steps to retrace. The path is a complete circle. Six. In case of trouble you can drive home in a day.

5. THE RITE OF SPRING WITH FARM FIELDS

An influential part of my youth was spent on a grain and livestock farm in McLean County in central Illinois. I now look with endless fascination at farm fields, growing crops and farmsteads. Good thing. If you travel much outside our Midwestern cities that's what you'll see; unless you are on an Interstate highway where you don't see much of anything except that a Taco Bell or Shell station can be found just two miles ahead.

Let's look at this landscape during my favorite time of year, in spring. Most of our dominant local crops, first corn and then soybeans, are planted in April and May. Weather plays a huge part because you can't plant anything in wet soils. Seventy years ago the planting took more effort and time because the farm equipment could manage at most to plant four rows at a time. Well

into the 1940s some farmers were still planting, cultivating and harvesting with horses, two rows at a time. Now, big planting gear can plant up to 16 rows at a time while the farmer, high above in the tractor cab, is guided by a computer program. The computer knows and monitors the field below using GPS technology and a detailed knowledge of past yields and fertilizer needs.

So I love to drive along in the RV watching the spring seedlings come to life. The modern equipment is so efficient that, if the weather is right, a single farmer can plant a thousand acres, more than a square mile, in three or four days, and still have time each evening for a shower, a warm dinner and a cool drink. That's why it is now rare to see farmers outside unless it is planting or harvesting season, and then only for a few days.

Spring is *born again* time. While the crops are peeping through the soil, spring flowers and foliage also emerge. They can be seen along the roadsides, sometimes in profuse beds - jonquils, bluebells, woodland phlox, and my favorite the striking purplish leaves of the redbud trees, followed by the showy white flowers of the dogwoods. These smaller trees must blossom early before the larger oaks and maples leaf out and grab most of the light.

Each year I marvel at this sea of emerging life, thankful that I am present for another gala opening and mindful that it is all one day, one season, one year at a time. Nothing guaranteed.

6. SANDY RULES

In 2012 my 50th Harvard Law School reunion was coming up, and I persuaded a good friend and neighbor, Guy Wolgamott, to join me on an RV trip out east and back. Our plan was to take a northern route out via Canada and a middle route back through New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Day one – we crossed Indiana and Michigan entering Canada without incident camping on the southeastern shore of Lake Huron. Days two and three – we arrived at Niagara Falls (our *honeymoon* stop) and had an exciting boat excursion on the lower river. Somehow our tour boat managed to slip in behind the falls and the adjacent vertical rock face. This was a bit scary with thundering falling water, a rock wall, the mist, and frothy turbulence at our base. It takes special water flow conditions to permit this maneuver. Day four – a longish drive across New York. Day five – across Massachusetts and the beautiful Berkshires into lower

Boston, specifically Foxboro (home of the New England Patriots). That is what accounted for the high-end private campground we found – a favorite spot for fans attending Patriot games (but not on this weekend). Meanwhile we were hearing reports of a major storm system threatening the East Coast. Guy was seriously concerned. I was skeptical. *Just weather reporting scare tactics* I said.

The next two weekend days were devoted to the law school reunion festivities in Cambridge and Boston. It's kind of a big deal, the 50th. I guess because they feel it is time we were making out our wills and thinking fondly of *alma mater*. I will say (because it is true) that during my law school days I found my classmates a rather dull and pretentious lot. On reflection, I could not see that they had improved much with age.

Sunday morning, as we were leaving the Foxboro campground there was a steady light rain. Our plan had been to proceed south, put the RV on a commercial ferry from Connecticut to the northern tip of Long Island, and from there to visit: my daughter Catherine in Brooklyn; Guy's daughter Sarah at school in New Jersey; and my sister Suzanne on her farm near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. From there it would be two days back to

Chicago. Guy said: *It's too risky to head south with this storm coming.*

Hoping to rescue our grand plan and remaining skeptical of dire weather warnings I said: *Let's head west on the Massachusetts Turnpike to the New York Thruway. If the coast is clear we can then head south from there.* This was the new plan. But the rain intensified as we drove west and was driven by a strong wind from the north which seemed strange for a storm system coming from the south. By the time we reached the New York Thruway it was clear that we dare not turn south. We continued westbound across New York hoping to outflank this storm, but with wind and rain still pounding us from the north. No chance. By late afternoon we were north of Buffalo, New York where we camped. It rained and stormed all night.

Next day we passed Cleveland with the rain and wind still coming from the north. Driving west we saw convoy after convoy of utility repair trucks headed east. Literally hundreds of such trucks. The rain and wind did not let up until we were near the Indiana border. We did not stop until we were back home on Monday early evening. We had come 980 miles in two days with gigantic Hurricane Sandy at our side and on our tail. *Best laid*

plans. We were glad to be safe. My weather report skepticism was considerably chastened.

7. IMPASSABLE ROADS TO CHARLESTON - IN 1844

In 2007 we went to the Carolinas for spring break. I had spent a delightful week in Asheville a year before, but that is near mountains. I wanted to see the Carolina coasts, and so we made our way east from Charlotte to Myrtle Beach and on south to Charlestown which is noted for the start of the Civil War at Fort Sumter, its historic slave market, and Southern charm and hospitality. We asked for help in selecting a nearby plantation to visit. The response: *Try Magnolia*. *It's not far and has beautiful gardens*.

So I ask you to imagine that we are now looking in at Magnolia Plantation, South Carolina, in April, 1844, not 2007 or 2021. A young lady of the plantation and her sister have been invited to a reception, dinner and ball to be held in downtown Charleston in early May. The distance is about 15 miles by road. The two decide they must attend this event, regretting they have only been back at Magnolia for a few weeks after spending the

entire winter enjoying the high social season in Charleston. The unpaved road to town is flooded in some places, deeply rutted and muddy throughout and will take 6-8 hours or more by carriage or on a sturdy wagon, even if it is passable. How to get there?

Fortunately the Ashley River is at the doorstep of the plantation. On the morning of the event the two young women, with a chaperone and attending servant (a slave girl of about their same age) board a flatboat tied up on the river bank. High tide is at 9am. The crew, holding long wooden poles for guidance, cut the boat loose from its mooring a few minutes after 9am, starting the journey propelled by the tide flowing east to town and Charleston Bay. The trip goes smoothly and is completed in less than three hours. Two days later they return to Magnolia Plantation by the same means, leaving downtown Charleston at midday on a rising tide and arriving back in the mid-afternoon. At peak these Ashley River tides generate a current of some 15 knots, a little over 17mph.

The tidal forces on the Ashley River estuary were one of the main underpinnings (along with slavery) of the prosperity of Charleston and environs. The main crop at Magnolia was Carolina rice, cultivated by slaves who

learned how to manage the labor and water-intensive rice plots in Africa, introducing this bounty to their new involuntary homeland and to their *owners* who knew nothing of rice cultivation. Ships bringing new slaves from Africa's west coast to the Charleston slave market could then return to England laden with Carolina rice much in demand there, before returning to collect more slaves in Africa, thus completing another profitable three-way voyage.

Magnolia plantation's owners in the 1800s were present on its grounds for only the spring and fall seasons. During the summer they retreated to lodgings in the cooler and less humid foothills (the piedmont) of the nearby southern Appalachian range also escaping hordes of summer insects. They would return to the plantation for only a couple of months in fall before returning for the winter to Charleston and its high social season. Meanwhile, rice, other agricultural products, and slaves were bought and sold on a daily basis in the nearby Charleston markets. The rice came down the river; the slaves went up.

8. WHAT'S IN THAT BAG?

Near the end of 1964 two of our United States Peace Corps colleagues in Malawi, Africa, David and Virginia Koehler, were preparing to return to the United States at the end of their tour of duty. Their plan was to travel generally northward through (what are now) Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda before returning via Europe by air. For this purpose they purchased a well-travelled ten-year-old Morris Minor automobile. They asked my wife and me to join them on the auto trip and to bring the car back to Malawi for resale after they left Africa from Nairobi. We still had a few months left on our teaching tour, but decided to join them *en route* as soon as our school holidays permitted.

Our rendezvous point was Mbeya, just inside Tanzania from the northern border of Malawi. To get there we took a local feeder air connection from Blantyre, Malawi. This was in a small five-passenger airplane piloted by an experienced British Airways (then B.O.A.C.) pilot on short-term assignment in Malawi. We were the only passengers on the last leg of the journey. A couple of earlier stops required landings on grass runways where we did fly-overs so the landing strip could be cleared of cattle. Somewhere in the far north of Malawi (or slightly into Tanzania) the pilot said: *I want to show you*

something. It's a bit off-route and I could get in trouble, so don't say anything.

We soon were flying over a series of inactive volcanic craters some with water at the bottom. The pilot proceeded to enter one of these by flying in circles lower and lower below the rim until we were perhaps no more than 100' above the water with towering crater walls on all sides. My wife was delighted. I was terrified. The pilot then corkscrewed the small plane up and out of the crater and on to our destination in Mbeya. As we left the flight he cautioned: Remember. *Don't say anything about the crater.* It was the first thing we mentioned as we met the Koehlers to continue our journey with them in the Morris Minor.

Four adults, their baggage for extended travel, cameras and camera bags, a small cooler and a case of beer, all inside a Morris Minor is a bit of a squeeze. We managed. Youthful good cheer helped. On unpaved washboard roads in Africa you have two choices: at around 25-30 mph each washboard provides a jolt to the back; at 50-60 mph the car achieves a kind of levitation such that the road almost feels smooth. But you must then pray that nothing gets in your way as the vehicle is not easy to control at the higher speed. Among the common

obstacles are people walking, bicycles, slow trucks, chickens, cattle. Cars or trucks coming from the opposite direction bring a dense layer of dust making it hard to see for the next quarter mile.

An elephant once crossed the road directly in our path. Chaos ensued inside the Morris Minor as windows were frantically lowered, camera cases opened, lenses adjusted, bodies leaned out to snap pictures, and soon just more open road. Weeks later when Kodak slides were returned we had several exposures of the rear end of an elephant slowly making its way across the open savannah.

Our solo return in the Morris Minor to Malawi was uneventful until we had crossed from the north into Malawi and met in the open road in a sparsely populated area a troop of border guards. *Young Pioneers* they were called; clad in red berets and khakis; little more than lightly trained and unsupervised local youth gangs. They spoke as we were motioned to exit the car:

Who are you? Where are you coming from? Why are you in Malawi. Who sent you here? Where have you been? Do you have weapons? Is this your car? Show us your papers.

I had one concern. Inside a canvas bag was a two-foot long Masai sword in a red leather sheath we had acquired along the way. Inspecting the car's contents a guard pointed to the bag: *Mchikwama chija*? *What's in there?* he asked.

I opened the bag slightly. *Two weeks' worth of dirty clothes from our travels in Tanzania and Kenya as tourists. Ndife aphunzitsi pasukulu. We are teachers in Malawi returning to our schools. Here are our American passports.*

We were waived on. All this took about 20 minutes and was complicated by the guards' poor English and our poor Chinyanja as we all stumbled through questions and responses. Back in Blantyre the Morris Minor was quickly resold. I forget the details but we had at least one major breakdown while the four of us were on the road. We were young and resilient. The beer helped. Particularly the Portuguese beer from Mozambique in large bottles in preference to the Castle Lager from Rhodesia which we called *moose pee*.

9. NO ROADS, NO PROBLEM – ANCIENT EGYPT

Flying back over the Nile River upon our return from Africa in 1965 I noticed boat traffic on the river below. During our short stay in Cairo we could see boats passing by on the Nile from our room in the Cairo Hilton on the river's Gezira Island. I was surprised to learn recently that ancient Egyptians were also avid travelers.

Egypt then and now is essentially a large desert with a river running through it. The Nile flows out of Africa through Egypt and into the Mediterranean Sea. The interior regions along either side of the Nile (after some areas of shoreline fertility) are essentially trackless desert. But art objects and depictions on monuments scattered along the Nile, from the earliest to the later ancient kingdoms show that travel by boat along the Nile was common, including with heavy loads of cargo.

How did they manage to do this so readily before the age of motorized travel? It is easy to imagine northbound travel along the Nile where the river current would do all the work. Using oars would make travel possible in the opposite direction against the direction of the current. Indeed oars are shown in the scenes of

ancient vessels – but to be used for hundreds of miles to destinations into the interior of Egypt? Hard, challenging, back-breaking work would be involved, especially on vessels fully laden.

I am indebted to author and Egyptologist Barbara Mertz whose *Red Land, Black Land, The World of the Ancient Egyptians* (1966) I recently read for answering this question. By a stroke of great good fortune for ancient travelers, the prevailing winds across the Mediterranean Sea and along the Nile into the interior of Egypt are from *north to south*. So a simple sail or two on the vessel to catch the wind could greatly facilitate travel against the northbound Nile current, especially at lower river levels when the opposing current would be weaker than at flood stage. Problem of locomotion both ways solved.

With one major exception. The modern city of Cairo is located near the southern end of the Nile Delta and not far from the ancient city of Memphis. Here the river fractures into streams flowing through the triangular delta areas into the sea. Many ancient voyages to the south started here where the river is still intact. The journey could then continue upstream supported by the tailing wind for more than 300 miles. Until it reached a

great bend in the river such that it turned sharply to the east for some 40 miles before returning eventually to its primary north/south direction around Thebes and Luxor.

Reaching the bend meant it was time to break out the oars as the crew below the main deck who could loaf their way to that point now faced some hard labor pulling oars against the current. None of this need bother the cruise passengers - members of the royal family or their attendants, engineers/technicians, artisans, or other travelers, traders and crew on the main deck above - who could relax throughout the journey. Perhaps the purpose of the travel was a mere outing for the royals. Or perhaps it was a commercial venture to the upstream mines and quarries where the best stone and precious metals were harvested for installation in pyramids and tombs far back to the north. Renewable energy was in charge in both directions.

So picture yourself situated along the banks of the Nile three or four thousand years ago in an easy chair. As you gaze across the river you observe vessels passing in

both directions, some loaded with cargo, others primarily carrying just casual travelers out seeing the sights. There is no roar of struggling engines; no discharge of noxious fumes. Just the quiet of the passing scene as one of the great civilizations of our past unfolds in its daily routine. Wave to the pharaoh's attendant, and he will wave back. Happy travels.

10. BACK TO MOTORHOME CAMPING - 101

Here are some basics of camping life in a motorhome. Public campgrounds are found in many state and county parks, and often around Army Corps of Engineers installations on lakes and rivers as well as in many National Parks. Fees are between $20 and $50 per night, sometimes less for seniors. Space is usually readily available Sunday night to Friday. Weekends are more problematic without advance reservations, and reservations are essential for the big three – Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day. For reservations check www.reserveamerica.com for state parks and for the Federal campgrounds: www.recreation.gov or www.ReserveUSA.com. Stays are typically limited to fourteen consecutive nights.

There are also many private or proprietary campgrounds throughout the nation. Prices are higher $40 -- $60 per night and up, but these locations often come with amenities such as swimming pools, assembly halls, refreshment canteens and laundry facilities. Some people will spend an entire season at a proprietary campground, making their site and camper essentially a permanent second home. Private campground reservations can be made by telephone or email to the particular location. A camping app on your cellphone can also be very helpful. The one I use is Park Advisor. It's free and has no ads. Info at www.parkadvisor.com.

Once inside the campground speeds are limited to 10-15mph. It is customary to make eye contact with and to wave a greeting to each person you encounter, whether you are walking or driving. This confirms that you are a neighbor to all in a relatively small, albeit transient community.

If the weather is decent you will want to build a fire in the fire ring or fireplace on your campsite, but never on open unsecure ground. Campfires and camping go together. They serve the practical purposes of providing warmth if it is chilly, discouraging flies, mosquitoes and

other critters, while also satisfying a deep psychological need to show that - this is your space, you are in charge, and the natural world is now subject to your control. Total fantasy.

Other camping observations are repeatedly confirmed. People are friendly to each other and to their children while camping. I cannot recall hearing a cross word, with the single exception of an incident near Macomb, Illinois a couple of summers ago when it took two sheriff's squad cars and five officers more than half an hour to separate a man and a woman who had agreed to go camping together in a last ditch effort to resolve their long-standing differences. Three bewildered children were left behind as each of the two parents was forcibly removed from camp and away from each other.

Another campground dynamic is how freely children wander about with no adult supervision. It is not a matter of neglect. Campgrounds are very safe places. Children can be seen to engage in games, often of their own invention in which teenagers, younger children, and toddlers participate happily and harmoniously together. I know of no other place where this amount of family harmony is so prevalent. And so-called *smartphones* are rarely in evidence.

There is little activity around a campground after dark, especially when the sunset is after 8pm. Often just a few persons gathered around a campfire here and there chatting amiably. The children will have worn themselves out in the fresh air and sun and are easy to put to bed. It is time to relax by the fire. I have seen virtually no excessive drinking or boisterous behavior around campgrounds. One exception: the fall of the year when a group of four to six fellows may head out without their families for a weekend of hunting, fishing and conviviality. When they get oiled up – watch out and give them a wide berth.

Here is something it took me several years to figure out. The situation. Two grandparents. Two parents. Two grandchildren. The grandfather and the grandkids love the outdoors; grandmother, not so much. Grandfather has long wished for a camping rig; grandmother not so much (*just something else to have to keep clean*). The parents like occasionally to get away from their children for a break. The children are not so keen on visiting grandma's house in the city – (*it's boring*; *nothing to do there*). The solution: grandfather gets a camping rig. The grandchildren love it. Grandma gets to see the grandkids often on weekends, but they require little

attention, are safe, and are mostly outside. The parents are free to enjoy some free time together, or whatever. Everybody is happy. Including the RV dealer who helped grandfather persuade grandmother that a motorhome requires little cleaning and maintenance. Not true. Just less than a large house in the city or suburbs.

11. CLOSING

This brings my "on the road" essay near to the end. Appended is a list of inspirations, sources and references which I will not read aloud. I will close with a personal reflection:

Looking back, I have but little concern
With the roads not taken
The roads taken have served well enough
For our simple purposes

And it is a gift undeserved
To be content
With whatever came
And still comes our way

'Hey, the motorhome is loaded and filled with gas. Let's hit the road!'

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

INSPIRATIONS, SOURCES, REFERENCES

Following are references to some of the writers who, over the years, have influenced my thinking about travel and writing. The list is highly selective and the opinions reflect my own perspective.

BILL BRYSON (1951 **-)** Bryson is best known for **A Walk in the Woods** (1998) a NYT best-selling account of his adventures with a companion on America's Appalachian Trail. Bryson has dual US/UK citizenship and spends most of his time in England. His **Lost Continent** (1989) describes his travels in small-town America, both East and West. He also traveled in **The Road to Little Dribbling** (2015) from points in the farthest south to the farthest north in the United Kingdom which can be traversed in a straight line without crossing any sea. It is impossible (for me) to read anything Bryson writes without smiling or laughing out loud.

JACK KEROUAC (1922 – 1969). Kerouac's **On the Road** (1957) is a much praised testament of the counterculture (the so-called *beat generation*) which arose in the US and elsewhere in the

wake of WWII. Some folks regard this as one of the most important literary works of the 20th century. I don't get it. I'd rather hear Willie Nelson sing *On the Road Again*.

BARBARA MERTZ (1927 – 2013) Her remarkable book **Red Land, Black Land** (1966) is mentioned in the narrative above. Barbara was a University of Chicago Egyptologist (PhD 1952) who also wrote extensively under the pseudonyms Elizabeth Peters and Barbara Michaels, the former for some 20 mysteries and the second for many gothic and supernatural thrillers as well as other works. As an aspiring graduate student at Chicago's famed and male-dominated Oriental Institute, one of Barbara's senior faculty advisors was overheard to remark: "At least we won't have to help her find a job."

Barbara was fluent in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics as well as Arabic and Greek. I found her frank commentary on the various and uneven levels scholarship in Egyptology to be refreshing and enlightening. She made it clear that we all have much in common with the ordinary people of ancient Egypt, including their love of travel.

JOHN STEINBECK (1902 – 1968). **Travels with Charley** (1962). This was the book I read in the 1990s that convinced me I needed eventually to own a camper. In the early 1970s we traveled by train to western Wyoming where we rented a motorhome (it was called a Ute Liner) from a local dentist. It served us well but was not something at the time I thought of

owning. We did not even own an automobile in Chicago until 1976.

PAUL THEROUX (1941 -) Paul has had a celebrated literary career. We knew him as a fellow teacher in the Peace Corps in Malawi in 1963-1964. He was the first professional writer (although none of us knew it at the time) I ever knew. We were amazed to learn, although he was still in his early 20s, that the *Christian Science Monitor* regularly sent books by air for Paul to read and review for the newspaper. His literary career skyrocketed with the publication in 1975 of a travelog: **The Great Railway Bazaar,** describing his travels across Europe by train and back through Siberia. This book sold 1.5 million copies upon publication. The image I have to this day is of Paul sitting, somewhat separate from others, at Peace Corps gatherings in Malawi glancing about and occasionally making notes in a small notebook he carried. It was as if he was both within and outside the gathering. While I did not focus on these thoughts at the time, the fact that they recur so vividly more than 50 years later is of some relevance.

MARK TWAIN (1835 – 1910). **ROUGHING IT** (1872) is an account of Twain's travels and adventures in the west from 1861 – 1864. His brother had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory and invited Mark to accompany him from St. Louis to Salt Lake City and environs. Twain's account, written and published some years later, is a hilarious account of his time and travels in the west. Curiously, in the entire 587 pages of the narrative, there is no reference to the United States Civil

War of 1860 – 1965 which was an entirely contemporaneous event. Twain later related that early in the Civil War he had joined a band of Confederate irregulars in Missouri who, after a brief and confused skirmish, disbanded ending Twain's military *service*.

Even at this early date, the Mormons were a major influence in the west, and Twain has nothing good to say about them. He tried silver and gold mining without much success, gravitating to newspaper work and in 1864 to San Francisco from which he traveled in 1866 on assignment to the *Sandwich Islands*, now named the Hawaiian Islands. I found this book in a discard bin at a local library and loved and laughed through every page of it.

EVELYN WAUGH (1903 – 1966). This highly regarded English writer, perhaps best known for **BRIDESHEAD REVISITED** (1945) was also a skilled travel writer. My sister, with whom I shared a love of exotic travel accounts, sent me Waugh's **WHEN THE GOING WAS GOOD** (1934) as a holiday present a few years back, much to my delight. This was partly because of Waugh's writing, but also because I had traversed in the 1960s several of the same paths in Africa which Waugh trod during his travels in East Africa from 1929 – 1935. Just to pull one example out of the air – he refers to a wearisome trek on foot with companions and porters in a remote African region when, at the end of a long dusty day and with little shelter, one of his companions reaches into his day bag and finds a split of

champagne and a tin of smoked oysters to lift their spirits. Very English. Rule Britannia !

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~