

Rick Campbell

The End of the Road: Portal, North Dakota, Part I

Before we began the trip, we decided that DL did not have enough holiday time to go home on the highway and that she would have to fly. Though we could have passed through Portal and into Canada, we decided to go camping first. We had some days to fill before her flight. We'd only camped once on our trip — in Wisconsin. We set up camp. Then it rained. Now here we were, finished with US 52, and we had not taken the camp boxes off the roof rack a second time. We headed to Lake Metigoshe State Park near the Canadian border to give camping a second try. The weather was better, but on a hike to the lake we were attacked by ticks; that dampened our enthusiasm, much as the rain had earlier, so we packed up and headed to a town with a laundromat. We decided to head for Regina and spend a couple of days in the city (knowing nothing about what sort of city it was.)

After we cleaned up, we started east toward Dunseith where we would catch US 281 and drive north to the International Peace Park and the Canadian border. In Dunseith we found one of the great kitsch wonders of the world — a giant turtle made of tire wheels — and then drove north past the Turtle Mountain Reservation and pulled into the Peace Garden. I expected it to be so full of patriotic clichés that we would not stay more than a few minutes, but it was beautiful. The gardens were far from being in full bloom, but one could see how exquisite they would later in the summer. The Peace Chapel was beautiful and, if I must say it, peaceful. It was mostly white on white and full of quotes about peace.

Had we gone south on 281 we would have been on Larry McMurtry's road. He grew up down in West Texas within listening distance of the highway and wrote that if anyone said "the road" they were talking about 281. McMurtry had been in Dunseith too. He must have seen the wheel turtle but did not mention it. To each his own.

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As we left the park we were at the border and in a short line to cross into Manitoba. I'd expected some trouble because I was traveling with my dog. I had a folder of dog papers to prove that he had all his shots and was in fact who he and I claimed him to be. I'd reread *Travels with Charley* in preparation for this road trip and noted that Steinbeck could not get Charley over the border because he had no dog documents. I was ready to prove that Mu Shu was vaccinated, certified, justified, and worthy of a trip to Canada.

As the border guard came to the window, I had my dog folder in hand when he asked to see our papers. This guard looked as official and stern as my car looked raggedy and suspect of something. It wasn't so much a drug smuggling look as maybe the Joads heading to California. There were two large camp boxes and a toolbox strapped to the roof, and the car was fully loaded with our stuff and dog stuff — dog bed, dog cooler, dog bowl, dog food. We had backpacks, food boxes, and sundry other travel things. This was, after all, a long highway.

The guard asked the usual questions — *What's your purpose for coming to Canada? How long will you be staying? Do you have any weapons?* DL said no, no weapons. I always wondered if people with weapons said yes. I said yes. No firearms, but I do have six knives, two hatchets, and a machete. He looked like he was about to ask why so I said we've been camping and fishing. DL looked at me like I had just done some TMI thing. He took our passports and drivers licenses and said to park over there. He never looked at my dog folder.

About 15 minutes passed, though it seemed longer, before he came back. "Have you ever been fingerprinted?" he asked. DL said yes, for work. I hesitated. I had not been fingerprinted just so I could teach English. I said no.

"Are you sure?"

"No, not sure. I don't know. I was arrested once. A misdemeanor. West Palm Beach, FL. More than 30 years ago."

He asked me to step out of the car and we walked behind it to talk.

“Yes,” he said. “that time.”

“Well, I spent the night in jail, so I guess I got printed, but it was a misdemeanor possession charge and I thought that didn’t count.”

“It counts,” he said. He told me to get back in the car.

1973 — Palm Beach County, FL

I had just met this beautiful young woman under the most strenuous of circumstances. My mother’s boss asked me to come to the Montgomery Ward’s company picnic softball game so I could play for his team and kick the other side’s butt. Around the sixth inning there was pop up into short left center. I went back from short-stop and at full speed caught the ball over my shoulder. Then I flattened the beautiful woman. I helped her up and made sure she was ok. I said I was sorry and that I get carried away playing this game. Then we started dating.

I was living in my VW Bus in some sand dunes near Juno Beach, Florida. The first time I went to M’s house to pick her up her mother was troubled by me, my long hair, my bus with the bed and all my clothes strewn about. Then she was more troubled when I crawled under the bus to jump the solenoid and drive away. This wasn’t much of a date. We drove out to some quarries west of town where folks like us went to get high and make out. On the way back a county sheriff pulled me over and decided my hair and bus gave him probable cause for a search and that turned up about a half an ounce of pot. Busted.

At the county jail I called my mother, but my friend answered. (Lots of people used to crash at my mom’s house.) He said it was too late to wake Rose and he’d come get me in the morning. He was more considerate of my mother than of my circumstances. I was printed and photographed and taken to a cell. It was probably 2 a.m. by then. I was given a lumpy mattress and told to find a bunk. The door slammed shut. I looked around. Four bunks and four guys in them, so I put my mattress on the floor and lay down.

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I'd taken the shirt off that the cop had brought me because it was satiny pink knit with a deep V plunge. He couldn't resist fucking with the hippie. I didn't think it was proper jail cell attire so going shirtless seemed like a safer option. In the morning my mother and C came, bailed me out, and we went back to her house. I explained that all of my friends smoked pot and since she couldn't tell it from our behavior, it must not be that bad.

A couple of weeks later I went to court. It was in a small suburb west of West Palm Beach; the country judge asked if the pot was mine. I said, it was in my van, under my seat, wrapped in my old sock, so it wouldn't do much good to say it wasn't mine, but that my girlfriend, M, didn't know it was there. He said I was a gentleman. I said tell that to her parents. He fined me and put me on an installment plan to pay it off. It was listed as a misdemeanor and I thought it was all over. And it was, for forty years, until this curious attempt to cross into Canada.

I wondered why we had to talk out of DL's hearing. Did he not want her to know that I had a record? Was he protecting my secret, my reputation? Trying not to scare her with my criminal past? And why was it ok to let her go to Canada with a guy who had six knives, a machete, and two hatchets? And what about my stinky, poop-eating dog?

Finally, he let us in.

O Canada

Regina, unfortunately, rhymes with vagina. I really wanted it to be Re-geena, to rhyme with Purina, or Noxema. But no. Vagina. I am not a prude, but I couldn't say it without a grimace. From the U.S. border we drove north across high plains and then west for some long miles on the Trans-Canada highway. I had this romantic notion that it would be more rustic, more Jack London like, than US interstates. It wasn't. It seemed narrow and rough, made the tires sing as loud as the wind blowing from wherever it blows

from in Saskatchewan. We ate a decent lunch in a small town on a green stretch along a river. Not much of the high plains are green. I should have been listening to Neil Percival Young when I was “in his prairie home,” but I forgot. Another opportunity unlikely to come again.

Finally, around dusk we rolled into Regina and, I as am also wont to do, checked into our 2.5 rated hotel. I could claim that was because we needed a place that allowed dogs, and while that’s true, it’s also because I am cheap. DL does not travel with me because of the great hotels I take her to.

Regina, despite its name, was a pleasant little cowboy city. It reminded me of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Larger and more sophisticated, but that’s not hard to do. It was also windy and dusty. There was a lot of light. It was late May, but that far north, light lingers long past dusk. There are not many trees or hills to get in the way either.

We had excellent meals, dogs were welcome, and we walked the streets without worry.

Then the trip was really over except for the part to come — going home solo.

Return on the Rivers

O Western Wind when wilt thou blow
That the small rain down can rain?
Christ! that my love were in my arms,
and I in my bed again!

(Anon)

Yes, and only if my own true love was waitin’
Yes, and if I could hear her heart a-softly poundin’
Only if she was lyin’ by me
Then I’d lie in my bed once again

Bob Dylan

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Regina, Saskatchewan to the U.S. border

6:20 AM, Regina airport. She walks away. There's a beautiful song playing on the radio. It's in French but it seems sad and familiar. Avec du something. I drive the airport loop. This place feels like a small, regional airport in the states, larger than Valdosta, smaller than Raleigh/Durham. I intend to head south, but I have had no coffee and I need gas. How many liters of more expensive Canadian gas do I need to get to the border, and do I factor the exchange rate? Hell no. The \$130 tent I bought in Regina seemed to cost \$130 — on my credit card statement will it be less? Too complicated this early in the morning, maybe all the time, and really I am just thinking of the woman I just waved goodbye to.

I turn on Albert St. and head back downtown looking for gas. There are stations everywhere, but in some strangely civilized way they don't open until 7 a.m. So I go looking for coffee and end up at a quick serve, Tim Horton's. I am not impressed; it seems like a Canadian Dunkin' Donuts except that everyone working the counter is Asian-Canadian. Do they say that here? Coffee and pastry in hand, in a crowded parking lot, I struggle to extricate my car from its narrow space. I find myself going the wrong way backwards toward a Canadian female pedestrian who is cutting through the parking lot; she curses me and says not politely that I should go back to the States. I should. I am trying.

I buy gas and figure that five gallons ought to get me to Montana, but I'm looking into the rising sun while trying to read the gas pump and can't make out a thing. I can't see the numbers rolling quicker than nickel slots and so I just pump by feel. When it seems enough seconds have gone by to pump five gallons I stop, replace the hose, and go into the glass house (so like the States) and pay the man. I say I have no idea how much I just bought, couldn't see in the sun, and he says \$23.40. I give him \$25 in Canadian bills that I had gotten from an ATM because I wanted to look sophisticated and pay for my meals, or beers, or something with Canadian money. I feel like I am wasting this romantic travel moment by spending this pretty paper on gas. So it goes. I get some equally cool coins back — silver coins with copper centers worth a dollar and sundry other things worth 25 or 10 cents. Sort of.

I follow a cattle truck out of the city and listen to more songs in French. The moment I leave Regina I'm on a high desert plateau and lonely. If I were at the border now and asked if I had anything to declare I'd say no, I left everything at the airport.

Canada Highway 6.

I pull off the road to walk Mu and read a roadside marker. *The Woods Trail / Qu' Appelle Trail. Here in 1881 Sitting Bull led his "Sioux" band this way to seek sanctuary at Fort Qu' Appelle.* I am amazed to find that Sitting Bull and his Lakota stragglers had come this far north trying to elude U.S. troops. In July 1877, almost a year after he and his warriors won the Battle of Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull came here and lived in the region for five years before he made his tired and hungry way back to the U.S.

I keep going south. The sky is large and the highway very empty. *Bluer than a pale blue angel.* For much of my trip towards the border there are no cars behind or in front of me. I roll past Milestone, Pangman, Minton and several unnamed intersections. I have the feeling that Sitting Bull is watching. Of course, he is not happy.

Border Crossing

At the Montana border I am ready to be hassled again. I figure if the friendly Canadians had given me such a hard time getting into Canada then surely the Americans, who I have long been convinced did not like me, would take this opportunity to punish me for something.

1975 — Somewhere in Vermont

Three of us in a suspect Econoline van were trying to get back in the States from a quick trip to Ontario and Montreal. It was early afternoon, and no one was crossing except us. The guards had too much time on their hands so they could use it to hassle pseudo-hippies. We and our van had Florida licenses and we looked quite casual. Our van looked like it could have been crammed with contraband, and I guess we looked like we could partake of

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it. The van had been refitted as a camper — we had cabinets and chests; we'd paneled the walls. We were traveling and living in the van and had lots of stuff. Daniel had two guitars. I had a bag of harmonicas. Marie was a hairdresser; she had dozens of little bottles that could hold and hide hash and coke. We had no drugs with us, but the guards would not take our word for it. They made us sit at tables while they took almost everything out of the van. As soon as they finished inspecting the guitars and harmonicas, Daniel and I got comfortable and began to play. Marie got her book and sat in the sun.

I think our utter lack of fear annoyed them, but they soldiered on. It was Marie's vials and bottles that finally got to them. After the first dozen or so offered nothing but noxious chemicals, they lost their zeal. They told us we could go, but we were in no hurry, so we took out time repacking the van.

With this experience in my head, and my overall distrust of the government minions, I expected the worse when I rolled into the border crossing.

The guard smiled and asked how long I'd been in Canada.

"Three days man, three days." He didn't appear to get my favorite Woodstock allusion.

Why were you there? he asked.

"I dropped my girlfriend off the Regina airport so she could fly home." I don't like saying girlfriend — I'm old. There ought to be a better word, but we are not in business together, so partner does not work either.

Do you have anything to declare?

"No." I didn't try my romantic lines on him.

Any Alcohol?

"Three beers," I said, "but they're Sam Adams."

He got that joke and waved me in. Welcome back he said.

I felt guilty that I expected to be punished.

In “Driving Montana” Richard Hugo wrote, “The day is woman who loves you.” He was in a good mood and that didn’t happen often in Hugo’s road poems. For me, love felt like it was in the past tense. But the road is good consolation; it’s there, open, all before you. Your music is strong; on your IPOD “whatever the next number, you want to hear it.”

Montana looked a lot like Canada. I was about forty miles north of the Missouri River, but I did not continue south to find it. I had not yet decided that following the river east and south would be my route home and a theme for this essay. It’s ironic, if not worse, that after months and months of planning and map reading, I did not have a plan for the second half (the return) of this journey. The outbound plan, exhaustively researched and somewhat well executed, was to follow US 52 to the Canadian border. Why I did not have a plan for returning I can’t say. If pragmatism were a greater part of my character, I would have returned on 52. I could have looked again at what I had seen and what I’d missed. And there’s that curiosity of the highway: it does not look the same when you change direction. 52 East (South) would not look or feel the same as 52 West (North).

But I am not pragmatic or well organized. McMurtry wrote that he liked to travel from worse to better; for him that meant driving from north to south, east to west, or from cold to warm. I had done the opposite. South to North. East to West. Temperature wasn’t much of a factor; summer took care of that. Would 52 have felt better, had a better tone and attitude if I had begun in Portal? My rationale was that I was following the origin story of the highway. It began in West Virginia; of course, it’s not a one-way highway. Originally it ran from West Virginia to Central Indiana. However, it was later extended; the first extension went to Portal. North and West. That’s a bit of an illusion too, I suppose. If one lived in Portal maybe that would seem to be the origin point and the road would carry you Southeast to Indiana. That’s the way it is with highways; they run from where we are to where we are not. So, since the Missouri River was not yet my goal, I turned east on Montana 5 at Plentywood and made my way to Crosby, North Dakota. I didn’t have to, but Sidney Crosby is my daughter’s favorite hockey player, and I wanted to send her a picture of the town sign. Every now and then, when little *themelets* pop up, one should pursue them.

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“The Good as It Gets Road”

McMurtry found his road driving U.S. 2 in Montana between Fort Peck and Fort Union. These roads, one could call them GAI-GR, but that seems unnecessarily stupid, are a stretch of highway that satisfies a driver so much that he or she says this is as good as it gets. McMurtry was heading east toward U.S. 281. He says it's the top of the world road because from there he would be heading south, and it would be all downhill until he made it home. Hugo said north is up on all of our maps.

I was heading into North Dakota only a few miles north of McMurtry's great road, but U.S. 5 was not the spiritual experience for me that he had. Even if I had been on the 2, I was too far east; Williston, ND, is not anyone's favorite place. I was making my way back to Lake Sakakawea because I was supposed to meet a friend who, in my proverbial heart of hearts, I didn't expect to show up. He didn't. After he stood me up, I thought it's a damn good thing I didn't drive here from the east coast. It's weird to say to yourself that I would have been in the area anyway (northern North Dakota) so it's ok to be stood up. We were going to meet and camp and that's what I did at Fort Stevenson State Park. Lake Sakakawea was not there when Lewis and Clark came up the river; it was made when the Missouri River was dammed at Garrison. Now the lake has drowned almost all of the evidence of the Corps' passing.

In this part of North Dakota, the Hidasta spelling “Sakakawea” is used on road signs and most historical markers. The Hidastas, also known to us as Mandans, were the most populous peoples on this section of the river. Lewis and Clark and their men wintered in one of the Hidasta/Mandan villages in 1804-05 on their slow way west and upriver.

Sacajawea is the spelling most often found in history books. Even today, this continues. The Lewis and Clark Trail Guide spells it “Sacagawea.” The National Geographic Trail Guide spells it “Sacajawea.” The Devoto edited editions of the Journals spell it “Sacajawea.” So too does Ambrose in his definitive account of the expedition. There's far more confusion surrounding Sacajawea than just how to spell her name. Most standard (white male) accounts label her a Shoshone-Hidasta woman, saying she was born

into the Shoshone tribe but later kidnapped and raised by the Hidatsa. The Hidatsa version, told by Bull's Eye, who also said he was her grandson, claimed she was born a Hidatsa and that her brother lived with the "Abuarkee," (Absarokee) or the Crows. The Shoshone, whom Lewis and Clark also called the Snake Indians, would have been enemies of the Crow tribe and, therefore, maybe the Hidatsa too.

Accounts of her death vary widely and wildly too. Perhaps it's naïve to think that as the only woman on the Expedition more attention would have been paid to her, but the only records of her life at this time are Lewis and Clark's reports. The first day that she comes into the Expedition's camp with her husband/owner, the French trapper Charbonneau (who Clark spells Chaubonie) she is referred to as only a "Squar" purchased by the Frenchman from Indians. Historians refer to Sacajawea as one of Charbonneau's wives, but as she is only 16 when she joins the Expedition and she's already pregnant, it's unclear how and where she was married. Lewis' first reference to her is as "the woman" and a page later as "the squaw." This is two months after Lewis assisted in birthing her first child; in the passage about the birth Lewis refers to her only as one of Charbonneau's wives. Later, June 10th of 1805, Clark notes that *Sahcahgagwea*, our Indian woman, was very sick and on June 14th her case is considered dangerous. Spelling was far from Clark's forte. Not only did he spell many words wrong; he seldom spelled them wrong the same way.

On July 28th the Party was nearing the Shoshone (or Snake, as Lewis calls them) lands where Sacajawea was supposed to have lived after being kidnapped by a Hidatsa raiding party five years earlier. Lewis spells her name out "Sah-cah-gar-we-ah" our Indian woman, as if she's just being introduced to the narrative and is curiously everyone's property. Who is she, how do we spell her name, when and where did she die? None of that is ever reconciled.

On August 17th, 1806, back at the Mandan village where he was hired, Charbonneau is paid for his (and Sacajawea's) services to the Expedition. Neither Lewis nor Clark mention Sacajawea in these final accounts.

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Sacajawea has more statues in her honor than any other American woman. Every image of her is imagined, since there's no recorded image of her. Every image I've seen renders her as radiantly beautiful. Maybe she was, but given her hardship — pregnant at 15, living off the land and probably rarely bathing while with the Corp, I doubt that she looked like a movie star.

Fort Stevenson State Park

For a couple of days on the lake I was camped next to a platoon of Afghan War vets; as the nights dragged on their damages, large and small, grew louder. Sometimes angry, more often sad. It was a reunion and an attempt at salvation. When they saw me walking around they called me Sir. One night I shared their beer. On the third morning as I was loading my car, their leader, I didn't catch his rank, said he was sorry if they had been disturbing me. Even though I had considered moving to a more isolated camp site, I said no. It's cool. You guys take care. I have a long way still to go.

On the Lewis & Clark Trail

From Fort Stevenson I picked up the "official" Lewis and Clark Trail on North Dakota 23. For much of this journey I'd been close to the Trail, the path of the Corp of Discovery; I'd crossed it, I'd been within a couple of miles of it, I'd seen exhibits at museums and roadside markers, but now I was on the Trail.

On the L&C Trail signs Lewis is wearing a triangular cap; it reminds me of Paul Revere. His arm is extended; he's pointing the way. Clark, in a coonskin cap, stands beside him, arms crossed on his rifle. The image is inaccurate. Paul Revere hats were outdated by 1803 and coon skin caps were sort of 20th century tourist scams. Lewis' hat would most likely have been a "cocked hat" that a captain in the U.S. Army would have worn and Clark might have worn a fur hat. Why this false image has come to be the "official" L&C trail icon and the one most often seen of L&C images is still another marketing mystery.

Since there was no Lake Sakakawea then, I am aware and disappointed that L&C never actually walked this land that I am on about 40 miles from what was the Missouri's course, far outside what they would have explored when traversing the terrain along the river. Even when I make it to where the river was, I won't see any sign of the sandbars, the "bluffs of the river . . . remarkable white sandstone." Lake Sakakawea has drowned the river. The National Geographic guidebook likes to use "inundated." It's sort of a collateral damage euphemism that sounds less permanent than drowned and might be reversed and returned to the way they were. I suppose they could. The dam at Garrison could be blown apart and the river allowed to rush out and maybe it would eventually return to its original bed. Not only will it not happen (at least not on purpose) but the land that's been drowned for long years would not look like it did in 1804, and I doubt that it would ever regain its original topography, flora and fauna. Rivers can't go home again.

Lake Sakakawea is not going away. The Garrison Dam produces a lot of electrical energy; this lake and dozens of smaller Missouri River lakes have been integrated into North Dakota's recreation culture. Boating, camping, fishing, and birding are all firmly established in the lives and bank accounts of North Dakota and its people. Lake Sakakawea is huge, the third largest manmade lake in the United States and its waters are, in places, over 200 feet deep. I drove more than 200 miles when I circled it. Access to it is, for its size and popularity, rather limited. Much of its western shore lies within the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation, and cliffs and canyons that border the lake deter tourists and vehicles. That's good. If it were more accessible, I am sure it would be more exploited, more developed, and uglier.

Proof of this conjecture can be seen on the north shore, bordered by ND 23, that has been taken over by the oil and gas industry. As the highway rises and falls over grassy hills and buttes, it curves around small blue ponds. As I try to look at geese and ducks on the blue water and follow the flight of eagles, I've got tanker trucks, oil crew vans, and pump rigs on my bumper. These guys are not out here sightseeing. The wind is blowing hard across the highway and I've got my hands at 10&2, holding on for dear life, trying to keep my Rav 4 from rolling into a pretty pond.

Every few miles I'm assaulted by the oil or gas complexes — a few khaki-green tanks, pumps that look a little like dinosaurs, and ugly, bulldozed, muddy parking lots. Sometimes a crappy work trailer too. These complexes, far too many of them, reminded me of scenes from some Third World movie set, something that's supposed to be Afghanistan, or Chechnya — where a military camp has been hastily set up and some U.S. SEAL team is going to blow it and rescue hostages. These things look like they were built last week and are only supposed to last for a few months. Like all booms, this one will end, but when it does these compounds, their scavenged remains, the scars on the land they've trashed will remain. Each time I come around a curve, or over a rise, I'm stunned and saddened by the next compound looming ahead. All of them seem abandoned already; I never saw any workers. They were probably all on the highway, roaring up on my ass and passing me at 70 mph on a two-lane highway in 30-mile wind gusts.

I wanted to write an open letter to the people of North Dakota and say pay attention; it's getting really ugly out here. Are you sure it's worth it? How much oil money do you need, how much will you get after the corporations take theirs and don't pay enough taxes? How bad was it before oil money moved into your lives and began to ravage your beautiful land?

Some of the signs at the compounds said they were owned by Indians. Maybe Chief Seattle's claim that "every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove . . ." has been traded for oil and gas revenue too.

I find myself assuming that Lewis & Clark would not like what Capitalism's driving engines, profit and industry, have done to "their" river and its land. I first thought about this while driving down the Ohio and thinking that Lewis would be appalled by the electrical power plants, mills, and nuclear reactors lining its banks. But would he? Was Lewis (or Clark) an environmentalist? Did they think that the beauty of the land they were exploring should be preserved? Both of them knew that their mission was to map, survey, and describe these new lands so that waves of settlers could follow them and "make use" of the Missouri River valley and the lands opened by its tributaries. The lands included in Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase were defined as all the land drained by the Missouri River basin, and Jefferson had his eyes

set on expanding that range even further to include lands west of the Continental Divide as well. Lewis and Clark wrote often about how beautiful the river and the land they traveled were; they seemed to be in awe of the Missouri. But would they think that the mills, factories, cities, sewage plants, oil pumps, refineries, fracking and whatever else is being done out there is wrong and dangerous? I don't know. Did they think that nature should be preserved and protected? I don't really think so, but I also don't think they or anyone in 1805 could imagine the magnitude of the destruction and despoiling to come.

After my forty-mile sojourn in the oil-fracked wilderness, I came to New Town. It's really a new town. It replaced towns that had been destroyed when the Garrison Dam "inundated" the land. Some folks wanted to name the town Vanish; it would have been a portmanteau made from the names of two destroyed villages — Van Hook and Sanish. Whoever made the decision to go with New Town must have been frightened by irony. New Town was a post-apocalyptic scene from *Mad Max*. Beat-up cars, old pickups, and oil company trucks lined stores' and social services' parking lots and crowded three or four-deep in a parking chaos I had never witnessed before. It was like thousands of poor people were trying to leave a shitty music festival at the same time and no one was moving. Hundreds of women and children, some Latino, some Indians, most in flannel, milled and huddled among the stranded cars. Everyone wanted something but I didn't know what it was. The highway was jammed too, bumper to bumper, as far ahead and behind me as I could see. There couldn't be more than a few hundred people who lived out here, and all of them and more were desperately waiting in New Town's few parking lots. Tankers, flatbed trailers, and other big rigs lumbered into town and out, throwing clouds of dust into the air. Oil workers' pickups jammed the highway too. Trapped in these squadrons of industrial vehicles were campers and RVs. Maybe some of them were tourists just trying to make it into western North Dakota or Montana. Maybe some of them were oil field workers heading back to Williston and points west. At least one of the cars carried a simple-minded tourist, me, who was sickened by what he was seeing and was desperately trying to get the hell out of New Town.

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Down the Missouri

Seven years, I've been a rover
Away, you rolling river
Seven years I've been a rover
Away, bound away,
Cross the wide Missouri

Fort Stevenson to Mobridge

My Lewis and Clark Trail Guide follows the Corps' westward course, so on this journey I am reading it backwards. It seems fitting. After my excursion around Lake Sakakawea, I headed south on US 83 and stopped at the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center; though it was a good museum, this area had been rather despoiled for me by New Town, the lake's flooding, the fracking and oil and gas trucks. The Center seemed less of a celebration of L&C's amazing achievement as some sort of apology, a quaint nostalgic commercial. Cynicism had gripped me hard. I did get a chance to stand on the bank of the Missouri, and it was perhaps as close as I had come to standing in the river. My little dog got his feet wet there.

By far, what redeemed this stop was the six-foot tall statue of Seaman, Lewis' Newfoundland dog. Seaman, like Sacagawea and York — Clark's slave — was one of the less heralded heroes of the Corps' journey. Seaman did noble duty; he brought ducks back to the boats, he frightened bear and marauding buffalo and kept the whole party's spirits high. No one agrees on what happened to him once Lewis returned to St. Louis.

A few miles later I picked up ND 1804. A Blue highway. I had been on far too few of them on this journey. Since the first couple of thousand miles had been traversed on 52, Blue highways were not part of my theme. I have driven my share of them in my travel lifetime, though not this time. I love the idea of Blue Highways and when I first head out on one, I love that too. But I lack the patience to travel like Heat Moon. Eventually, I start looking at my dash clock and doing math in my head about how many miles I have yet to go, or worse, how many I have recently gone. McMurtry wrote of Heat Moon, and the even more intrepid An-

nie Proulx, that their travels were real achievements, but he had no desire to emulate them. He was sticking to the Interstates.

Since leaving WV weeks ago on 52, I had only spent a few miles on an Interstate. I used the 74 to get through downtown Cincinnati and into Indiana. We spent a few minutes on the 494 to navigate Minneapolis/St. Paul when 52 took us there with night falling. And farther on in Minnesota, when 52 was swallowed by the 94, we gave in and drove it to Fargo.

In *Roads*, McMurtry chose to stick to Interstates. He called them the Great Roads and likened them to the Great Rivers of America. Both were used to move commerce and people as quickly as could then be done. A typical McMurtry travel day could cover seven or eight hundred miles on the 35, the 75, the 90. His mission was to drive and look around. He seemed most often to drive alone and to rarely stop. On a drive from Duluth to Wichita he says he spoke about 20 words — a thank you at a Quik Stop, ordering at a lunch stop in Missouri, and renting a room in a Wichita motel. I have often found myself doing the same kind of travel when I drive from my North Florida home to West Virginia. I have two routes that I most often use. I call one West and the other East. Hardly original and not very descriptive or accurate either. West goes through Atlanta on the 285, 75 (which I hate doing) to connect to the 81, the 77, and the 79. East goes through Augusta, GA, and Columbia, SC on the 77. The 77 connects with the 79 in Wytheville and climbs and curves through the Virginia and West Virginia mountains. This is a two-day trip for me.

I make this high-speed trip, stopping only to pee, walk the dog, and buy gas because I am not traveling, I'm driving to get to DL's house in WV. I have no theme. I am not out to drive the Great Roads; I'm not even looking around much until I get into West Virginia where the mountain landscape and its attendant horizon is so beautiful that I look, no matter how many times I've driven it. Luckily there are relatively few cars on the 77/79, so staring off into the distance isn't too dangerous.

Rick Campbell

A Rant

I don't like trucks and truck drivers. They know that they own the highway; they're like coal barges on the Ohio, plough straight ahead, throw your wake over the pleasure craft. But since I am never on the river in a pleasure craft, I don't hate barges. Trucks, yes. I hate two of their habits in particular: how they pull into the left lane when there's a vehicle entering the highway regardless of the traffic already in the that lane. Let those entering the highway slow down, pause or wait rather than getting in front of me and staying there until you can get back to the right. They slow five or ten cars down to let one car on. It's the merging car's task to get on the highway when and as it can; it shouldn't always get such a large invitation. I hate even more when on a two-lane interstate one truck pulls out to pass another on a hill and then both of them run side by side for a half mile or more while helpless cars jam up behind them. Two trucks should never run side by side. Truck drivers think they should never have to slow down; they think that if they give you a turn signal they can cut in from of you even if there's no room; they make you slow down so they can get in front of you and go slower than you were going. Yes, it's their job but it's not their highway.

After reading McMurtry, I have softened my attitude toward interstate travel and also decided that I am not such a cop out and a failed traveler for using them. McMurtry is smarter than I am. The very thing that I hold against interstates, he finds interesting. He says they are our great rivers in that they roll through long stretches of countryside without affecting it. The river/interstate and the land they run through constitute different realities. People miles inland from these conveyors of commerce and people know little about the river/highway. Drivers know little about the country they drive through and rivermen knew little about the land beyond the river's banks.

Is this good? No, neither good nor bad. It just is, but it was also revelatory for me. I wanted too much from interstate travel. I wanted it to be what it was not. Long hours alone on the Great Roads offer me time to think, meditate, plot essays, and best

of all listen to music. There's little I like more than listening to eight hours of music. I break it up with a little NPR news so I have some sense of what's happening in the world, but as good as NPR is, I have only a bare bones knowledge of politics and events and that's usually enough. I prefer my music.

McMurtry says he's going to write about what he sees, and since we know he won't see a lot of details, and he admits he does not stop very often, that he passes up museums, parks, and most roadside attractions, quite often he's writing about himself, what he thinks, what he's read, what happened on a previous visit to St. Paul or Chattanooga. This is a dangerous precedent for a travel writer who doesn't know what McMurtry knows and write as well as does. It is, therefore, a dangerous precedent for me too. It turns this type of travel writing into a memoir rather than a travel essay. More accurately, on the continuum of memoir to travel essay, since both are part of the other, it moves the focus toward the memoir pole.

There are no extreme conditions in this Great Roads travel, no into the vast unknown, no crossing the desert in a jeep or camel caravan, no scaling peaks or shooting rapids. No swimming with crocodiles. There are few elements of adventure. And, when traveling alone, there's no stimulating dialogue either, unless the writer talks to himself, which I do all the time but seldom admit or record. There's just driving and looking.

On 52, and on my return from its terminus, I was not JUST driving and looking. I had theme and purpose. I had itineraries. I had a reason to study my maps. This is both a blessing and a curse. If one does not explore the chosen highway, or river, well, then the narrative suffers. What's missed might be vital. If one chooses as his subject what turns out to be a boring highway, like 52 turned out to be, then it's quite a burden to make that highway narrative exciting. One better be a good writer.

I had hoped that 52 would prove to be interesting if not exciting, but I'd done such extensive research on it that I was pretty sure it would be neither. I'd convinced myself that trying to find out why 52 existed, why it went where it did, would be revealing and revelatory. It wasn't. When I finished the journey and rolled into Portal, I still had no good answer to either question. 52

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didn't go through major cities, didn't pass near National Parks, and once past WV, didn't cross great mountain ranges. I could find no reason to connect Portal, North Dakota to Charlestown, SC, or anything else along the highway's route. The only truly scenic part of 52 west of WV was its run along the Ohio River.

What to do? How to solve the writerly dilemma I made for myself. Scott Russel Sanders said that good memoirs were not about lives well lived but lives well written about. That's the answer. 52 is not a highway well lived; I have to make it a highway well written about.