

Rick Campbell

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

Near the Missouri

ND 1804 paralleled the east bank of the Missouri. Sometimes it was even close enough that I could see the great river. I traveled down river, wound through Bismarck and continued south. Here I made a bit of a tactical mistake. Had I crossed the river and traveled south on the west bank, there were more historical sites to see. I think I was getting tired and maybe I unconsciously chose not to explore more history. The day wore on and I was content on my side of the river, content to just drive. I crossed into South Dakota and continued south on to Mobridge. The town sits on the bank of what was the Missouri, but now is Lake Oahe. I got a room in a motel that catered to fisherman, though today it was cold and blustery and no one seemed too interested in being out on the lake. The motel office was full of guide pamphlets and pictures of fisherman holding trophy walleye. After I checked in and was wondering around the room, small as it was, I noticed that the cell phone kept changing time. The bathroom said 7 pm and near the bed it was 6. After puzzling this over and walking around the room watching my phone play with the hour, I checked my atlas and realized that the line between Mountain time and Central ran more or less through the middle of the lake. My phone was too sensitive to handle such proximity. I had to ask the motel maid what time it was to know which of the time options I should claim as true.

About this area, my guidebook gives me the usual message. The Arikara villages where Lewis and Clark met with local chiefs to try to win their allegiance away from the Teton Sioux are now under the waters of Lake Oahe.

When I left Mobridge, I saw a road heading off into the rolling hills and decided to take it. I still don't know its number, whether it was blue or not, but it went from paved to gravel and there was a conspicuous absence of signage; for a while I didn't care because I had filled my tank in Mobridge. What could go wrong? I drove for what seemed quite a while and was starting to despair of not knowing where I was going. I could have turned around, gone back, and chosen a bigger highway, but I hate turning

around and going back. I figure all roads go someplace, intersect something, and if you're on a skinny gravel road anything you come across is going to be bigger if not better.

It should be clear by now that I didn't use any GPS device. Then and still, I am more of a map man. This road I was on was not on the map, but I had faith. On I went. After few more miles I saw some silos and a couple of buildings gleaming on the horizon. Soon my gravel road crossed US 83 and I took the divided highway south toward Pierre. Other than the adventure of not knowing exactly where I was and hearing the crunch of gravel, there was little to say about this road. It cut through what would probably soon become tall fields of corn.

83 was just a highway on the high plains, empty and dusty, but I knew where it was taking me. Near Pierre I took SD 14 into the city and back to the river, looking for SD 1806. Had I not been alone, had DL (my muse?) been with me, I would have stopped and walked around the city. I would have explored the riverbank and gotten a good cup of coffee. Found some lunch.

Alone, I hooked up with 1804 and headed east. The Missouri was a river again here. The damming effects seen in Oahe did not extend this far downstream. This was one of my good-as-it-gets roads. Rolling hills, sometimes a wash, a small coulee, sometimes a glimpse of the river. The hills were beginning to turn a deep green and the road was recently blacktopped, so it was a black ribbon furling away from me, beautiful, peaceful, and I was enjoying the curves.

I entered the Lower Brule Indian Reservation. I want to like being on an Indian Reservation, but I know enough to know that I am just interloper. I have, since childhood, taken the Indians' side in each battle. Little Big Horn is my favorite. I've read dozens of Native American books, hundreds of poems. Big shit, I know. Just like 30 years of teaching on a Black college campus didn't make me Black or erase my white privilege, my fondness Sherman Alexie's work, my sadness after reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the fact that I'd read poetry with Sherwin Bitsui and hung out with Joy Harjo wasn't going to win me any kudos or respect on this reservation. I was respectfully passing through, just as I had a few days earlier on the Fort Berthold Reservation where I admired the beauty of the land and regretted the poverty of the ragged shacks, skinny sheep, and rusted pickup trucks down each dirt road I passed.

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I was swooping through the curves, marveling at how well banked they were. I hardly had to brake. There were no other cars on the road. Around a bend I came upon a stunningly beautiful small herd of horses. The leader, the biggest one, was white with brown markings. I supposed that it was a stallion. It seemed to look me right in the eye and say keep going. Again, I wished DL was here. She knows horses. She could have told me what I was admiring, but I could not have admired them more even if I knew. Stallion, gelding, Bay, Pinto — Indian ponies — it didn't really matter.

A few miles and a couple of flocks of sheep later, it began to seep in that *really* there's no one else out here. It was mid-afternoon. The sky was beginning to darken. Every now and then I consider this prospect: I have 165,000 miles on my car, virtually no tools with me, and virtually no knowledge of how to work on a car. The fatalist in me (which comes to the forefront of my thoughts when I am least expecting him) figures this car, a 2007 Toyota Rav 4, has to break down some time and somewhere. But so far (I'd knock on wood but there's none within reach) everything was going swimmingly.

I was on the Lewis and Clark Trail and the Native American Scenic Byway. Though the Indians were certainly here first, they were sharing the billing with the Corps of Discovery. Many of the Indian accounts I'd been reading in preparation for this project said that Lewis and Clark were not really "a big deal" to most of the Indian people who encountered them. The biggest deal, certainly, was that L&C and their men did not kill any Indians during their exploration. That's remarkable. However, L&C were not the first white men that these Indians had seen, and their numbers were small — they were not an army. Talk was exchanged, goods bartered. All in all, a pretty good time was had by all parties, but the Indians were not in awe of the coming of white men and the talk of the powers of the Great White Father back in Washington.

Time went by and I left and I left again
Jesus loves a sinner but the highway loves a sin

Jason Isbell

I was on this shared trail and I was of little consequence too. If I were more adventurous, more gregarious, more garrulous, maybe I would have stopped and talked. I'm not. I didn't. I turned south on another gravel road and headed for the interstate. About 10 miles down the road it started raining and the temperature dropped quickly; rain was threatening to become hail and I had to pee. Standing behind my car, peeing in the cold rain sort of marked an end to this part of the journey. Soaked and cold, I drove on. At the interstate exchange, after I gassed up, I texted DL that I was heading home. I was already heading home, but now I was going to put some speed into it. Kennebec, South Dakota, cold rain, the 90, heading east.

The wind was blowing hard from the north, but the 90 is flat and wide and pretty empty. I drove and I drove. Drove right past the Corn Palace. Its signs reminded me of Pedro's South of the Border. Lots of signs. Don't miss it. 50 miles. 40 miles. Exit 332. Mitchell, SD. I almost stopped. I would have stopped if DL was with me. She's a better traveler if being a traveler is being part tourist. The Corn Palace retreated in my rearview mirror.

We had seen the 30-foot buffalo in Jamestown, the Turtle made of wheels in Dunseith, the International Peace Park, but I drove right past the Corn Palace. What can I say? It was raining. It was late afternoon. I had hours of daylight left and I decided to use them. I drove east toward Sioux Falls and took the 29 south toward the river that had slid away from me when I was on the 90. I joined it again at Sioux City and drove another hour south. It was after dark now and I had driven a bit longer than I should have, but I like to get past cities before I stop. I don't want morning city traffic waiting for me when I rise.

I found a cheap motel around Onowa, Iowa, that was close to a small Indian casino. I figured I'd get a good rate. It was nothing special and the desk clerk paid no attention as I snuck my dog out into the grass to do his business. I'd loaded up on beer and snacks at the local gas station, so being dead tired wasn't a big problem. This could have been a low point, but there was a Pirates game on the TV and that's about as good as a night alone gets.

The next morning I realized that my one star motel was smack in the middle of a corn field. The grass outside my room was

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lush, wet from rain and probably being in a floodplain. The corn edging the motel parking lot was so high that I could not see the casino.

I loaded the pockets of my cargo shorts with “fresh” muffins that would no doubt last far past any reasonable time stamp on the package. It was time to hit the road. The sky was low, wet and dense, but soon the sun burned off the miasma. A few miles south of Onowa a beautiful little river flowed under the 29, the Little Sioux. I got off the highway because I liked the river’s name and a sign claiming that this was the gateway to the Loess Hills. My good friend and fine poet Keith Ratzlaff’s first book had Loess Hills in the title, and that was enough to make me feel I should explore.

The Loess Hills are Ice Age dunes made by drifting glacial flour. They range for over 200 miles along the east bank of the Missouri and are between 60 and 200 feet high. I entered the hills near the southern end of the Loess Scenic Byway.

A blacktop road wound through an old and nearly abandoned town called River Sioux, then it climbed into a “peak and saddle” topography, with narrow ridges, which fell off at near ninety-degree angles on either side of the road. Switch backs carried me up and up above the river valley. This land would have been a Run in Western Pennsylvania, a Holler in West Virginia. As I started to drive the ridge line the Dead played *Know You Rider* and then the Stones’ *Sympathy for the Devil* came on. All of this echoed across a topography I’d seen before in a land I’d never seen before.

Five buzzards fed on a rabbit and Jagger sang “if you meet me show some courtesy ... or I’ll lay your soul to waste.” Past Pisgah, The Dead sang “many worlds I’ve come since I first left home,” and I came to a fork in the road and a detour. One county road detoured into another and I didn’t know where either one would go, but it felt like the river was waiting to the west. I saw a sign for US 30 and knew if I took it east, I could roll all the way back through Ohio and into Pennsylvania on the Lincoln Highway; it was tempting. But I turned west, back to where I figured I would find the Missouri because that was my mission today. Lewis and Clark waited on the river. I drove through Missouri Valley, a town

named for the larger region it was in. A superfluous name. Like living in Florida, Florida. Costello sang “radio, radio, you better listen to the radio” and Gurf Morlix followed with “she’s a river flowing away from me.”

Back on the 29 I headed south again. Then more detour signs. Road construction. Road construction. Traffic being shunted up the off ramp and onto another road, so many cars that no one’s moving. A hundred yards before I get to the ramp turned parking lot, a cop pulls the traffic cones away and my lane seems to open up. He doesn’t wave me on or stop me, so I go. I’m the only car heading down the 29. Is this good luck or a mistake? What were we being detoured for? Will the road disappear up ahead? Will there be a bridge to nowhere? A tanker truck overturned spilling poisonous chemicals across Iowa? I go on. “I’ve got no expectations to pass this way again.”

Percival exit. What if every grail quest is just about going home? “Won’t you please read my signs, be a gypsy. Tell me what I hope to find deep within me.” The 29, nearly empty, took me into Missouri and I wondered why all those other drivers had to detour off the highway.

Tarkio Road. “One toke over the line, Sweet Jesus.” I need gas. I need to pee. My dog needs to pee. In the multi-purpose Stuckey’s parking lot, a cop asks a young guy sprawled in a red Cavalier with zebra seat covers if he’s having a bad day. The kid’s wasted. What’s he going to say? Fuck yes, officer, especially now. A young woman in the back seat holds her head in her hands. “If you’re looking for some trouble you can find it on the Tarkio Road.”

This is a sad place, despite the cheerful efforts of Stuckey’s racks of peanut candy, coon skin caps, and schlock cowboy stuff announcing the Gateway to the West. Having a bad day? Fuck yes. We’re “one toke over the line, waitin’ for the train that goes home sweet Mary.” Swallows are nesting in the eaves of the billboard. Cheap smokes. Trail’s end. Muddy River Fudge. In the Stuckey’s peanut sandwich shop trinket market, the men’s room was marked Lewis and the women’s Clark. What would Clark say? Meriwether seemed to be the womanly one, if one was. One toke over the line. I said no to the coon skin caps.

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Out back a line of derelict washing machines clanked and tumbled as they washed the Super 8 sheets. Soapy water flowed out of hoses and rolled down the parking lot to a brown dirt ravine. Having a bad day? Tarkio Road is a mother.

In the rest area where I walk Mu Shu, a sign says that this land was deeded to Indians in perpetuity in 1830 and repurchased for \$7600 in 1836. The Indians were removed to Nebraska. Everybody's crying perpetuity when they don't know the meaning of the word.

The 29 ran south along the river dividing Nebraska from Missouri. Today was going to be a driving day, and I was willing to give up a lot of Lewis and Clark to cover some miles. The day before I'd rather roared past Niobrara State Park in Nebraska where L&C began their study of the Plains in earnest and later the Sergeant Floyd Monument in Sioux City. Floyd was the only person in the Corps of Discovery, despite the great hazards and dangers encountered, to die on the journey. He died of a burst appendix, not an Indian arrow, a grizzly bear, drowning or freezing.

I stopped here and there to look at the river. I ate something at Independence Park near Fort Leavenworth, now more famous as a prison than a Corps of Discovery site. I kept rolling. In Kansas City I picked up the 70 and kept my car heading east. Somehow, I lucked out and missed rush hour traffic and in St. Louis caught the 55 toward Cape Girardeau.

Where the Missouri merged with the Mississippi, I understood why some river people thought that the Missouri was the greater river and that it should have swallowed the Mississippi and kept its name on its southward journey.

Travels on the Missouri were over. I was filled with a low grade regret the whole time I was near the Missouri River. I'd arrived too late. So little of the river was still river; not only was it no longer wild and untamed, it was not even there. The riverbed was underwater; the riverbanks were under water. The museums and visitor centers tried to maintain and convey river's message, but without the real river there as well, it was like asking Cooperstown and the Baseball Hall of Fame to be the whole story of baseball.

In two days, I had covered as much of the Missouri as The Corps' keelboats and pirogues did in five weeks of downriver travel. And for them going downriver was a breeze compared to their out-bound, upriver travail. It took about six months for them to labor upriver to their Mandan camp. Even though I had reached what many consider the jumping off point of the Corps of Discovery, there was still a lot of river travel to follow. I planned to travel down the Mississippi and up the Ohio to Pittsburgh. Following the Corps' path in reverse was still my master plan.

Cape Girardeau, Missouri, had some sort of significance for me. I'd read of it in Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. I was excited about it and prepared to slow down and explore. About 40 miles north I dropped off the interstate and headed toward the river.

I was unprepared for the heavy tourist element. Billboards and more billboards. Riverboat history. Riverboat gambling. By early evening the setting sun was a gauzy spot over low hills, and the air was thick. The light seemed tinged with rose, but it wasn't beauty rose, it was soggy and smoggy. When I finally drove into town I was disoriented and soon disappointed. Everything looked like the typical interstate exit culture and architecture. Fast food. Gas stations. Outlet malls. Everything was jammed together in overlapping parking lots. I searched for my motel in a maze. It probably looked better if one came here by river.

The sky grew more dismal, but not as dismal as my motel. I'd been tricked by the blue and white pastoral web site photo. It wasn't even the same brand that I'd seen on the web but some cheap southern chain. Ugly, full of browns and greens, stained carpets. Lots of not well-to-do people roaming the corridors, a parking lot filled with work trucks. I was too tired to complain, too tired to ask for my money back and find something else. I bought some fast food and hunkered down.

The next morning, I looked for historic Cape Girardeau. As befits the narrative of much of my journey, the Cape that Cape Girardeau is named for was destroyed during a railroad construction project. Only a rock remains. One thing that I have long known was often reinforced on this journey: we didn't really give a shit for our history before it was old history. Progress, economic growth, real estate development destroyed much of the evidence,

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the actual land and river, that Lewis and Clark traversed. Destroying the cape the Cape was named for was just another incident in this gruesome travel tale.

Historic Cape Girardeau was there, but not compelling enough to keep me around for a long time. I saw the old buildings and the river front park and then decided it was time to leave. It's fair to say that at this point of my journey, it would have been hard for any place to compel me to linger, but certainly I did not care to further explore this town. The bridge across the Mississippi dropped me in Illinois where I drove through Mounds on the way to Cairo.

Provenance — Driving the Ohio Backwards

Cairo. Not only is the water from two mighty rivers funneled into this vortex, but so is stinky, mucky, mosquito-ridden air. This is not the fertile vortex. Not what Egypt gleans from the Nile, despite the presence of the faux Cairo and Thebes. It's a shabby illusion. Fertile soil, plantations, cotton, all gone to ruin. I drove through Future City and it was far from it. The people are poor, the towns run down, the soil exhausted. You feel like snakes and spiders and haints will come down and crawl into your car. I was worried. I was oppressed. More than any other place I had been on this journey I wanted to be somewhere else. I wasn't stopping to pee or buy a drink. I wasn't going to look at some curious dilapidated fake western saloon. No, get me out of here. I knew Cairo was in Illinois, but everything else was nebulous and shifting. In Missouri, in Illinois, in Kentucky, out again. Swamp water puddled in the swale of every road. Only the bridges were interesting. They were old metal bridges, two lane, metal grills in the roadbed, metal girders overhead. They weren't wide enough for a semi and another car. Even two cars side by side was pushing it. Luckily there were not many other cars on the roads or the bridges.

I was heading for Kentucky on U.S. 51 when I saw a sign for Fort Defiance State Park. I parked and walked a trail to the bluff at the confluence of the rivers. When Lewis and Clark were here they began their serious study of river's ecosystem. Clark calculated that the Ohio was 1274 yards wide and the width of Mississippi

1435 yards. From my observation point only a few feet above river level, the rivers were hard to distinguish.

From Fort Defiance I got back on the highway, made a wrong turn, and ended up crossing the Mississippi on U.S. 60 back into Missouri. This was an even smaller, funkier bridge, with an immediate left turn as the bridge hit land. I turned around in an abandoned gas station, crossed the river again and couple of miles north found the bridge across the Ohio and into Kentucky.

If one looks at the confluence of these great rivers, it's unclear why the Ohio became the Mississippi. The Ohio is flowing south when the Mississippi joins it from the west and they both, almost twice as wide now, continue south on their journey to New Orleans. To go up the Mississippi, there's an oxbow at the confluence, a veritable U-turn if one's on the Ohio. It also jams a lot of bridges and three states into a small area of land. Fort Defiance is in Illinois on a thin spit of land between the two rivers and between Kentucky and Missouri. Because of my bad navigation I was in all three states in a matter of ten minutes. Luckily, I love bridges.

Near the intersection of US 51 and 60 I saw a giant cross on a hillside and went to investigate. From the hill I could finally see the two rivers merge. Historical markers mentioned Lewis and Clark's encampment at the confluence below. The cross bothered me. Ninety-five feet tall, made of steel and meant to dominate the horizon and be seen from three states. It was a Christian Manifest Destiny, as if the conquistadors were bringing their God to the heathens. To me it was violation, a confusion of history and geography and evangelical symbolism. Fort Jefferson Hill Park played upon history by loosely referencing Fort Jefferson, which George Rogers Clark had established in 1789, but on a site closer to the rivers. The fort was abandoned, as was the town of Fort Jefferson; much later in the 20th century the good people of the region established this park and erected their giant cross. They brought the history of the old fort and Lewis and Clark up the hill and installed them at the base of the cross. I was bothered by this co-opting of Lewis and Clark for religious propaganda. The Corps of Discovery's mission, and Lewis and Clark's beliefs, were refreshingly secular; this cross infringed on that, rubbing me wrong. I wanted to argue with someone but fortunately there was no one around. This was my cross to bear. I sat and studied

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the rivers until my low-grade anger went away.

Now I was on a rather long home stretch. Over 900 miles. Lewis began his journey on the Ohio River in Pittsburgh, and I began my life about 20 miles downriver in the Beaver Valley. So now I was going home. I crossed into Kentucky on US 60 and soon took a blue highway to get closer to the Ohio's bank. This excursion had me traveling through flatland farm fields and brought me a view of Monkey's Eyebrow. Hardly a town, but a memorable name. Legend has it that if you look down on the town from the hill above, it looks like a monkey's eyebrow. I can't verify that as I never climbed a hill, and as someone wrote, who really knows what a monkey's eyebrow looks like. I slowly, very slowly at times, since each little monkey town has a 25 mph speed limit, wound my way toward Paducah.

It was hot and hazy, getting near Memorial Day, and soon the full weight of a southern river summer would descend upon this valley. *Many years ago, in the early 70s, I'd been around here before when I'd come to find my friends who lived on a farm. All I remember now was that it was near Paducah. I had an old Ford wagon that a biker near Lake Erie had welded the frame together on and then I'd set out southward. I was going back to Florida via Western Kentucky. I often traveled like that. I didn't know where these friends lived, but in those days highway hope was high so I stopped at a gas station on the edge of Paducah and asked the guy with the longest hair if he knew Jimmy. Yea, man he said.*

Where's he live, I asked?

You won't find him on your own, he replied. Wait a few minutes and then follow me out there.

Nowadays, the days of meth and opioids, following a long-haired stranger into the back roads of rural Kentucky isn't a great idea; maybe it wasn't then either, but it was the way I and many like me traveled. We trusted the kindness of strangers who looked like us. I followed this guy out of town, off the paved road and down some red clay roads to a farmhouse that was engulfed in green. Beans on a fence. Marigolds. Morning glories. Some marijuana and corn in the side yard. Kudzu rose on the hill behind it. We pulled off and I followed my guide to the screened porch. Jimmy was out

there picking his guitar. That's what he was doing every other time I'd found him. I spent a few days wherever we were, took on two day's work hanging tobacco, and then drove that Ford wagon on south to Florida. The exhaust system was crap. So I wired some beer cans on it. They fell off in Alabama, and when I got to West Palm Beach I was driving down a sand road behind the factory my brother worked in when the frame fell out. It speared the sand, the car bucked up and slammed back down. I took the plate off and left it there. My brother gave me an even worse car that was, for the moment, still running.

I crossed the Ohio for the third time that day figuring to work my way up the Illinois bank of the river. On the map it looked more promising, but it was sort of a road-less-traveled illusion. Both sides of the river looked about the same on paper and I decided I liked Illinois better than Kentucky. No good reason. I had done little or no research on this region. For the trip out west on the 52 I'd read everything I could find. My armchair travel was very thorough.

But for this return journey I'd done little. No one says go east young man. No one goes east looking for a new life, for gold, for destiny. That's why my guidebooks had to be read backwards. Lewis and Clark spent twice as much time and twice as many pages in their journal going west as east. Neither of them made this journey up the Ohio. Keep heading up the river was the only plan I had. Each night I'd study my map to see what might show up the next day.

My decision to cross into Illinois was immediately rewarded when I entered Metropolis on the other side of the bridge. Superman rose to a giant height over the gas station complex I needed to visit. This area had long been important to many Native American cultures and was the site of a French fort before the Revolutionary war. Lewis and Clark stopped here when it was Fort Massac. It's only fitting that Superman would live here. Billboards informed me that were I to linger another couple of weeks in this pastoral land I could take part in the annual Superman celebration that drew fans from all over the world. Alas, I had miles to go before I could sleep and I drove off, watching Superman become a distant hero.

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It's often true that one bank of the Ohio is more beautiful than the other. Or one side is more developed, more commercial, wealthier than the other. One side's escarpment is higher and more abrupt than the other. In Ohio, the west bank of the river is higher, more forested than the east bank in West Virginia and Kentucky. However, that more level bank has more factories and energy plants and therefore jobs and larger towns.

Here, in Shawnee Forest, both sides of the river were undeveloped, but the west side offered a highway that ran closer to the riverbank. That's why it was my road.

I took a blue highway north along the river. It was easily the most scenic land I'd driven since leaving South Dakota. I dawdled. I liked the names. Rosiclare, Cave Rock, Saline Mines. At Golconda I drove down to a marina on the river. There was a club van parked on the levee and a number of young men in matching t-shirts stood there watching the river flow. I thought it was church group out on an excursion until the armed guards yelled for everyone to get back in the van and they drove off.

“Road I ride gonna set me free.”

A few miles north I found Old Shawneetown. The Shawnee were an important tribe along the river and this was one of their centers in the mid-18th century. It became a US government hub when this area was part of the Northwest Territory. Lewis and Clark stopped here too on their way to the Missouri. It was a financial center in the 1830s and a couple of the old banks are still standing. The people had, for the most part, been moved inland to New Shawneetown because the river often flooded these streets. Today it was a pleasant place to stop and walk around, to let the dog have his walk too. We ate lunch and felt both historical and forgotten. In the park it seemed like time had not only stopped, but it and everything it once carried had moved away. It was eerily quiet, too empty to be peaceful. Less than 200 people still lived here, down from 1900 in 1840. You could feel their absence even though most of them had only moved five miles inland.

From Old Shawneetown I drove north and crossed the Ohio into

Indiana. I had a purpose here. A plan. A destination. For nearly 40 years I had wanted to see New Harmony, Indiana, where my Rappite people (I thought of them as my ancestors) settled when they left their first American home in Harmony, PA. New Harmony is near the banks of Wabash, just a few miles north of its confluence with the Ohio. I headed up Indiana 69 toward the historic village.

When I was in grade school, we took a field trip to Old Economy, where the Harmony Society made its final home after leaving New Harmony. As a kid I paid it little attention. It wasn't as good as trips to the amusement park or even the Baden donut shop. I often walked past the old houses occupied by mill families without giving them much thought. It wasn't until I quit hitchhiking and went to college that I studied these folks. Their group had many names. Rappites, because their leader was George Rapp. Harmonists, because they built an intentional community in Harmony, PA, and then later Economites after they moved to Economy in the 1820s. They were a commune much like the more famous Shakers and the Oneida Perfectionists. Millennialists, they believed God would come and take his faithful to heaven in their time. The world would end too, but that was a minor concern if you were among the blessed.

New Harmony was the second of their earthly homes. The first Harmony settlement was in the hills around what's now Butler, PA, and it was deemed too far off the commercial path for the Society to be fiscally successful. Even though the world was to end in their time, and they communally shared wealth and property, they wanted to amass a considerable amount of wealth while they still lived. So they moved to Indiana and created a life on the Wabash. Ten years later they decided to leave. They said the land was too wet, malarial, and too far from the wealth of the East. They sold New Harmony to the English industrialist Robert Owen, a social experimenter in utopian thought, and moved back to a fine spot of land on the Ohio where I was many years later to grow up. They succeeded in becoming rich even if they were wrong about the world ending.

Owen believed in a more secular utopia — a worker's world. He and his supporters tried to make this intentional community in New Harmony. I'd read about this town, written papers on

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it, and fancied myself as the vagabond driver in an old car who knew more about this experiment than most who came here. For the first time on this journey home, I knew where I wanted to go and knew I'd stay a couple of days.

I spent the first night in Harmonie State Park since it was too late to tour the New Harmony grounds. As I rolled up to the gatehouse I saw a sign saying that pets were not allowed in the Park's cabins, so I hid Mu Shu under blankets and figured he would not bark if there were no annoying traffic cones in sight. I parked and walked up to the office and got my cabin. Mu stayed quiet.

The cabins were great. Log structures, a big fireplace, front porch with rockers. I felt bad staying in such a wonderful place after making DL sleep in two-star motels and that tick campground in North Dakota. She would have loved this place. Mu liked it and he would gladly have shared.

The park was on the bank of the Wabash and as we walked the trail I sang *Wabash Cannonball* to Mu Shu. It had been a long day, so I gathered firewood and cooked dinner in the outdoor grill. Later I called DL and told her I was sorry. There was no TV so we fell asleep early.

The next morning we drove the few miles in to New Harmony and explored the Village; the houses and commercial establishments were built when New Harmony was a working commune. Now they some were museum exhibits, but others were stores and restaurants. Some were houses for current townfolk. Rules were strict about what could not be done to alter these early 19th century structures. My favorite place was the Working Men's Institute's library.

Owen and his supporters were intent on making a worker's utopia and believed in free education. They believed in bridging the gap between the wealthy and the working poor by establishing free libraries; 144 were built in Indiana and Illinois. The one in New Harmony was the first and now the only one remaining. It's a grand building. I stood in the grass and stared. It was sort of the fulfillment of a dream, two dreams, to see this place and to see workers honored, respected, treated fairly. When I walked in, I was feeling righteous. It was as if I was participating in some great

victory that I'd had little or no hand in bringing about. I was a working-class kid turned PhD professor; I was seeing in the flesh what I'd studied in books. I never felt so good entering a library, even the Carnegie.

A woman who worked at the Institute greeted me, and I told her my story as if I was a prodigal son returning. She sat with me for a long time, talking, listening, answering questions. I joined the Working Men's Institute; I browsed the holdings. I even did a spot of research. I would have stayed all day, but Mu was out in the car sitting in the shade of huge sycamores.

I ate lunch in a sandwich shop built in the 1830s. I had pie. It was no holds barred today. I was making up for the sparsity of life since Regina. After lunch we walked the grounds, looked at exhibits and historic buildings. Mu was reserved in his praise but glad to be out of the car.

Then we found the Labyrinth. It was made of tall hedges in concentric circles. The goal was to make it to the stone Rappite Temple at the center. There was no minotaur. Nothing threatening. It was more like driving a NASCAR track than walking in a labyrinth. One just kept going. There was shortcut at the front gate that led straight to the center, but I figured that was for the elderly and infirm. I intended to walk the whole maze. One couldn't get stuck or lost in this one. There were no choices, once you began walking you just kept on until you reached the center. It was like going through airport security but there were no guards waiting to search you. The spaces between the hedges were very narrow, good for one person at a time. A wide person would certainly brush the hedges. Mu Shu was frustrated. Since he was only ten inches off the ground he could tell that there was a faster way to do this by just ducking under the hedge, but he was a good dog and put up with my quest.

Swallowtails and monarchs, or maybe the ones that look like monarchs, flitted between the hedges. Soon enough we were out of the maze and maybe marginally enlightened and uplifted, but I was already uplifted by the Working Men's Institute. It would stay with me.

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Back to the River

From New Harmony, essentially a detour from the river journey, I headed south to Evansville. I have driven through every state in the continental United States, so it's odd when I find myself in a place that I have never seen before. Evansville was one of those places. It's possible that I was not even sure where it was until I was there following a road along the Ohio's northern bank. Along what the French settlers called *La Belle Rivière*, I found a park, picnic tables and a great view of the river. We were on a bluff that offered a view of the waterfront and I needed a discovery like this, but as was the case in Pierre, without DL I did not stay long enough to explore the city.

In a very definite way, my failure to slow down and explore where I am when I am alone is a problem. Was I better at exploring when I was younger? I don't think so. When I traveled alone during my 20s, and I traveled for about seven of those ten years, I was usually broke. If I was hitchhiking, I probably had less than 50 dollars in my pocket. I didn't own a credit card. I could afford these travels mostly because I did not stop. Many nights I slept on the road, literally. I slept near the top of interstate overpasses. At the top of the steep incline there's a shelf about three feet wide and two feet under the roadbed. This shelf is dry and relatively clean. It's relatively safe too, since no one can see you up there. It's hard and cold and the highway is loud when traffic rumbles two feet above your head. Since it's the interstate there's almost always something rumbling. I slept remarkably well on those concrete beds; I can't say that rumbling became a lullaby, but it didn't often keep me awake.

This makes my writing about travel decidedly noncommercial. Travel mags are not looking for cheapo cheapo travel articles. I write essays and memoirs, and they are not intended to be guidebooks or how to see the High Plains. Sometimes, as in this essay, when ten or twelve hours of a day are spent driving, there's not much "travel" to write about. The miles go by. Fields, plains, swamps, hills, mountains, rivers, buildings, town and cities go by. When I stop it's usually at a gas station. It's quite possible that I am writing philosophy, cultural critiques, music reviews, and above all, a memoir. I am writing about me. No one should want to travel like I do unless they already do. I'm not going to sell articles to Conde Nast, and there's little I can tell people about what they ought to do or see on the road. This road. Any road.

On the river in Evansville, while I'm eating something that includes bread, Mu Shu is near my feet, eating or waiting for scraps. Mu Shu is about 14, he's still pretty lively. It turns out that he likes rivers and lakes, or else he does not understand what they are. He walks down to the shore like he's walking in the yard and steps into the water and keeps walking. He does not swim. If the water is calm and shallow I let him get belly deep, which is only about five inches, and then I pick him up. I don't know how far out he would walk. I don't know if he'd start swimming when the water got near his head. On the outbound journey he walked into the Ohio and started floating down stream. Luckily I had a grip on his leash and pulled him out. He repeated this trick in the Missouri and the Mississippi. I don't know what he's thinking.

After leaving Evansville, I stopped at Angel Mounds, a Mississippian culture settlement. Maybe I was feeling guilty for not exploring the city, but I wasn't on a mission to explore cities. I was driving the river and the Mounds were in the river's floodplain. Someone had the idea, good or bad, to make the Visitor's Center look like faux mounds. Probably all the Indians who lived here back in the Mississippian day could come and park now. The lot holds well over 200 cars and has 30 or 40 spaces big enough for buses. It's an educational center in an extensive corn field. Sometimes what one chooses to get off the road and explore isn't really worth the stop.

Back on Indiana 66 we meander up the river. This is perhaps the best river driving yet. The road winds, climbs and falls, and follows the riverbank closely. I am drifting into a bit of trance watching the splashes of black tar flash in front of me. This two-lane highway feels familiar, like the hills above and along the Ohio where I grew up. I convince myself that I am home. That all of the Ohio River is home. This is what I know. This is where I grew up. I know it like the back of my hand, it's in my blood. During this reverie I go through a bridge construction zone. I drop down a steep hill, go through a sharp curve too quickly and miss, or misread, a road sign. I was staring at the old bridge and I didn't notice that I'd slid off 66 onto 166. I'm heading down this even smaller and more tar splashed road, still in deep thought about how I feel this road deep in my blood and bone, when I have to jam on the breaks to keep from driving into the Ohio. 166 ran right into the river. There used to be a ferry here but now

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the pavement just disappears. I laugh and chide myself. Maybe I am not home. Maybe I don't know this road all that well. Maybe I don't really know where I am. After meditating on the river and looking at Kentucky on the far shore, I turn around and make my way back toward that construction site where I figure I lost my way. There it is. 66, right where I lost it. I turn right and, paying more attention, as befits someone driving a road he's never seen before in a land he's never been in before, I head east again. Upriver, figuring home is up there somewhere, but still hundreds of miles away.

What I knew of the river was not learned, or experienced, as a life on the river. We did not boat. As I kid, I did fish for carp and catfish in the oily waters. Actually, no one fishes for oil slicked carp and catfish, we just wanted to get away from home and fish. Usually we played baseball, but some days, maybe for a change of pace or scenery we'd go down to the river. It wasn't easy to get to. We walked through a large field of weeds, cut through an old and abandoned cemetery, crossed a wide set of railroad tracks, and slid down the riverbank to a spit of land that jutted into the river. Then we threw our doughballs out and waited for polluted fish to bite. It was fun and none of us had yet to see a trout or a bass or any fish a person would want to eat.

My Ohio River was mostly seen from a car going down Route 65, from the hill I lived on, or when I sat with my Grandpa and watched barges haul coal to the mills.

As I more mindfully continued upriver, I contemplated this strangeness. I was only a few hundred miles from home and yet I had never been here before. I was on my native river and I had never seen it before. Heraclitus' famous maxim that you can never step in the same river twice grew to though I grew up on this river I had never been here before. This was either a New Physics thought experiment, or it was true that there are thousands of Ohio Rivers. I knew one of them well; I knew others in some varied and marginal measure. This one I did not know at all, and yet I did. There is the one Ohio River and the many. I was heading up one of the many and there were many more to come.

North of Tell City, in the Hoosier National Forest, I stopped at a creek to pee. Restrooms are hard to find on backroads. I had

a sudden urge to fish. I had no license, but I figured just a couple of casts. I rarely catch fish these days anyway. First cast, my spoon hit the water and something big took it. I fought it for a few runs and finally pulled a fish of about 25 inches long out onto the bank. I wasn't sure what it was, but I looked it up later and found it to be a blue, or black carp. It's an invasive species that's currently a problem in the Ohio River basin. The only fish I catch in a long time and it's a criminal.

I wove my way on up the river as the sun started to fall and in the interest of finding a place to sleep before dark, I got on the 64 to drive toward Louisville. Technically, or geographically accurately, since I was on the north side of the river, I drove through Clarksville, Indiana, not Louisville, KY. Clarksville was founded by George Rogers Clark, Revolutionary War hero and older brother of William Clark. George Rogers Clark was given a tract of 150,000 acres in payment for his services during the war. There was no shortage of land to requisition from the Indians and give away.

Clarksville is next to Jeffersonville. I wondered as I drove into town is this "The Last Train to Clarksville," though I guessed there was a Clarksville for every ten Clarks and there are a lot of Clarks. What I should have stopped to see and didn't because of the falling darkness was the Falls of the Ohio. I told myself I could go back in the morning, but since way leads on to way, I didn't go back I went on.

I should have gone back. The Falls are, or were, extensive rapids that when Lewis came down river were impassable and required portage. They were a speed trap. River travelers had to unload goods, portage around the falls, and then reload and get back in the river. This created all manner of work for the good people of Louisville, Jeffersonville, and Clarksville. When Lewis came down the river the roar of the falls could be heard from ten miles away. I didn't hear it. The dam and lock system has essentially done away with the Falls. And I had my windows rolled up and my music playing.

Around Clarksville I got another cheap motel room. I can't remember a thing about it. I am sure that Mu Shu and I slept there. In the morning we were off again. Very quickly we passed an Amazon.com shipping center. It looked like a top-secret military base.

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Fences were high. Security was tight. The gates were manned with guards. It was spooky. I've spent much of the last twenty years shipping books to Amazon sites and this was the first time I had ever seen one. I wanted to stop and explore but I did not want to get shot or arrested.

Another day on the river. The highway went inland for a few miles but returned to the river in Madison, KY. If I were a travel writer, I'd say this was a town to visit. It was as close to the river as one could get without being on a dock. It's on the Ohio River Scenic Byway and its small downtown has been remade for tourists. Kitschy shops. Restaurants. Bakeries. Besides Evansville, it was the first town I'd gone through on the Ohio that was investing much in inviting tourism. I'm not a B&B guy because I don't want to talk to someone as if we are friends when I am paying to sleep in their bed and use their bathroom. In a B&B I feel like I can't make a mess. I have to clean up after myself and not use too much toilet paper. But there was one that had DL been with me would have been tempting. We could have strolled the streets; I could have watched her shop. The house offered a beautiful view of the river. Since it was just Mu and me, I dawdled. I bought a scone and then we went on.

Later, doing post drive research, trying to figure out where I'd been and what I'd seen and didn't see, I visited the city of Madison website. It's dominated by a You Tube video of the bridge across the Ohio being blown up in a construction project. One two three and boom. The middle of bridge explodes and falls into the river. The catfish below must have been shocked. This was a couple years before I drove through and the new, wider bridge had just been completed months before I was there.

I didn't cross the new bridge but continued upriver and stopped at the Markland Lock and Dam to see if I could watch the lock operate. There weren't any boats in sight, and I was too impatient to wait around. I crossed the river there and was back in Kentucky. The next towns were Ghent and Warsaw. I wonder often at Americans' predilection for naming their new world towns and cities after Old World places. Some cases make sense to me. My hometown was called Baden; it was settled and named by Germans, many of whom came from Baden-Baden. They had the good sense to figure one Baden, in this New World, was enough.

Places like New Berlin, New Amsterdam, New London also make sense. A second case I can understand is calling your newly christened town Athens, Rome, Jupiter, Sparta—name your town after Gods or the great cities of antiquity. It's instant credibility. Like naming your kid LeBron or Bruce. But Ghent and Warsaw I was puzzling over.

Again, historical markers (and Wikipedia later) came through. Story has it that Patrick Clay suggested that Ghent would a good name for this little river town. It was originally called McCool's Creek Settlement. Ghent (then in Belgium) is the city where England and the United States signed the treaty ending the War of 1812. Obscure? Now yes, quite. But to Patrick Henry and other patriots a few years after the end of that war, the name seemed appropriate and honorable. It's not as poetic as McCool's Creek though.

Warsaw raised its own question. How many Poles could have settled this part of the river? I stopped at the Courthouse to read the historical marker. Not only did I find out that this was the oldest operating courthouse in Kentucky, but the curious story of how Warsaw got its name. The rich guy who owned the land the town was built on named his town Fredericksburg after his hometown in Virginia, but later the Postal Service wanted it renamed so that there would not be two towns of the same name. (This policy obviously didn't catch on or we'd have far fewer Athens, Decatur, Jeffersons and Washingtons.)

Warsaw's naming is a weird example of what literature can make happen. A riverboat captain was reading *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, by Jane Porter (a book that we have probably forgotten by now, but was quite the best seller in its time. It had 84 editions) and for some reason this suggested name won the day.

US 42 as it enters Ghent was in bad shape. Frost heaves, potholes, and a generally tough slant made me feel like I was going to get far too close to the river. Ghent was another town in disrepair. Sometimes this narrative has taken on a dystopian tone, but I'd argue against that reading. The salt-of-the-earth towns I'd been driving through from Cairo to Ghent had no utopian element at all. There's no opposite to the hardscrabble existence, no fall from grace. These places, most of them, never saw the high life, never

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had a big shot at the American dream. These towns and people scraped and scrapped by. If ever they flourished it was a least a hundred years ago when commerce and people used the river to get where they had to go. To call this barebones reality dystopian is to invest it with a sense of loss that doesn't work because there was never much to lose.

Near Warsaw I left the river and drove across Kentucky on what certainly should have been a four-number blue highway, but the ones I were on had only two, KY 32 and 22. The hills, not mountains, ran mostly north to south and the highways cut across them. We climbed and we fell. We switchbacked as if we were deep in the mountains. These highways would give the Blue Ridge Parkway a slow run for its money. Driving these roads also requires faith because signs are scarce. Everyone driving from Sparta to Jonesville knows where they are and where they are going and don't need highway signs. These roads were not meant for the crosscountry driver. I was that driver. I rarely got to 45 mph. It was beautiful country but there turned out to be too much of it. The views started to meld into each other. I drove through a lot of farmland and no shortage of small cemeteries. It seemed like more people had died around here than still lived here. I missed the river. Eventually I missed rest areas and truck stop bathrooms too.

I was more than ready to get back to DL and West Virginia. The hundreds of switchbacks and sharp curves were like obstacles between me and a straight, fast highway. I started to regret my decision not to grab the Interstate in Cincinnati and zoom off toward West Virginia. Those are the kinds of regrets you can't really make up for, so I was oh so slowly winding my way southeast back toward the 64.

I was starting to feel like I was driving Zeno's Paradox. I kept going further and 64 was not getting closer. Half-way remained too far for too long. It was hot too. When I saw what I hoped was an interstate exchange on the horizon I tempered my joy until I could confirm that it was not a mirage. There's comes a point in my travels, on a trip, where I am more than ready to get there, to shut the car off, to walk across some grass and enter whatever house I've been heading for. When this happens it's as if the air leaks out of the journey and there's little left to see, little to talk

or write about. This was one of those moments.

64 was real and I got on; I floored it, more or less, got up to 78 and set the cruise control. Kentucky gave way to West Virginia four exits later. I crossed the Big Sandy River and had come full circle back to Huntington.

I was no longer following the Ohio home to where I was born and raised. I was going to Fairmont, WV, to DL. I thought of her waiting for me there, though she was probably working or out riding her horse. That was close enough, close to “six days on the road and I’m going to make it home tonight.”

I felt I could ditch the Ohio because I’d driven the stretch between Pittsburgh and Huntington once this year and twice last year. I’d driven through Martins Ferry thinking about James Wright. Driven through Steubenville and remembered sneaking into a Canned Heat concert. Driven through East Liverpool and imagined my grandfather there, though my family is largely dysfunctional and I don’t know what my grandfather did there.

I’d driven through the bend at the Pennsylvania line and driven up and down the river through the Beaver Valley and Allegheny Valley, past my hometown, the mills now dead, past Neville Island, past the West End Bridge to where the Ohio meets its confluence. I decided not to do it this time, though I knew I’d do it again. I had plans to go to Sistersville, WV, and ride the ferry across the Ohio. I had no intention of looking for the house I’d crashed in back in the 70s when I was hitching up the Ohio. That time, I was walking through Sistersville and it did not look or feel like a place a long-haired hitchhiker should be with night coming. Then a woman on her porch told me to come in. She said it was not good to be out there on the street. I agreed and went in, but not without caution. What if she was a serial killer? What if this was a post-modern Hansel and Gretel? I entered anyway. There were a lot of street kids there, all of them younger than I. She said she ran a sort of an unofficial runaway shelter. Times were hard in the mill towns along the river and a lot of kids were in trouble with their parents, or with someone. She fed them and gave them a place to sleep. She fed me and I rolled my bag out in the corner of a room. I was uneasy and sleep didn’t come quickly but it came. Early in the morning I thanked her and got back on

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Highway 2 to head upriver.

64 went through Cross Lanes where up in the hills above the Kanawa River my mother is buried with her parents. It passes Saint Albans where my uncle and cousins lived and we'd go a couple times a year when I was young. It seemed to me to be the heart of West Virginia. They lived high in the hills on a clay road; my aunt's vegetable garden was terraced into their steep backyard. One of my cousins had a scar from where a shell that had somehow gotten into the burning trash had ripped into his side. I remembered going to the movie theater to see Elvis in Blue Hawaii, walking over the river on a bridge with metal gridwork, and being scared looking at the river beneath my feet. Mu and I passed Nitro, the home of Lew Burdette, who I was supposed to be very distantly related to, and Dunbar where my mother went to high school.

Once through the confusion of Charleston, where 64, 77, and 79 joined in a fast jumble, I headed north up 79, rolling, swooping and diving like a hawk through the mountains. A couple of hours later I was crossing the Monongahela River and driving up the steep hill to DL's old bungalow.

The road trip was over. What would I call it? Outbound on 52:
Home on the Rivers. Not a catchy title.
Maybe --

Going home, going home
By the waterside I will rest my bones
Listen to the river sing sweet songs
To rock my soul