Rick Campbell

Note: This essay, and two that were in previous issues of the *ALR*, comprise an in-progress effort to write about traveling the length of US 52 from Charlestown, SC to Portal, ND and coming back east by following the Missouri and Ohio Rivers to Pittsburgh.

Highway 52 — The Drive

This is the story of how we begin to remember. – Paul Simon

I am in West Virginia. Since I can't start at one end of 52 and go to the other, logic and expediency dictate that I begin in the middle — Huntington, WV. This situation seems to be highly synchronistic since the middle is how 52 began as well. The first iteration of U.S. 52, created in 1926, began in Huntington, WV and ran to Fowler, IN. By 1956 it had been extended NW to Portal, ND and SE to Charleston, SC. The fundamental question I have tried to answer is why.

We drove a couple hundred miles from Fairmont, WV, south to Huntington to pick up 52. Fairmont is where the Monongahela begins its journey to make the Ohio. It too is born in a confluence: the Tygart and West Fork join in downtown Fairmont, and the river heads north 130 miles to Pittsburgh.

Much like Edward Abbey carried Major Powell's journals with him as he floated the Grand Canyon, there are texts I have used as Ohio River companions. I had some notes on Meriwether Lewis' passage down the Ohio from Pittsburgh in 1803 when he was preparing for and setting out on his famous expedition. WPA Guides were my companions for this whole journey, out and back.

And there's William Least Heat Moon's *River-Horse: Across America by Boat*. He begins in NYC, motors up the Hudson, across Lake Erie, down the Allegheny and joins the Ohio in Pittsburgh. Heat Moon and River Horse passed under the Three Sisters Bridges, also known as the 8th Street, 7th Street and 6th Street Bridges, also known as the Rachel Carson Bridge, The Andy Warhol Bridge, and the Roberto Clemente Bridge. Pittsburgh claims to have more vehicular bridges than any city in the world,

and given this passion for multiple naming, it certainly could lead the world in bridge names as well.

The Ohio

Much of Meriwether Lewis' story takes place on the Ohio River above where we join it in Huntington. Lewis had his keel boat built in Pittsburgh; he loaded his guns and ammunition there and started downriver on August 31, 1803. He had waited and fretted, cursed and fought with the drunk who was building his boat and was more than a month late. The best thing that happened in Pittsburgh is that Lewis got his dog, a giant black New Foundland he named Seaman.

The Ohio was so low that Lewis and his men often had to get out and walk the boats downstream. The first week was the slowest and hardest. They pushed and pulled the crafts through shallow water sometimes only inches deep and crossed a number of riffles. One was at the old Indian village of Logs Town where, 160 years later, I had Little League baseball practice.

At Logs Town, Lewis had to hire oxen and a teamster to pull his boats through the riffles. He was not happy about the nascent capitalism he found: "the inhabitants who live near these riffles live much by the distresed situation of the traveller, are generally lazy [and] charge extravegantly when they are called on for assistance and have no filantrophy or continence. Perhaps he meant conscience? [I am not correcting spelling found in Lewis and Clark's journals.]

This was before the Ohio had been dredged, deepened, locked and dammed and turned into the river of barges it is today that we join in Huntington. It took Lewis and his boats about a month to get from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati. It will take us two days.

Driving through Charleston on 79 is like being swept down a narrow drain by fast water. Just get in a lane and hold on. It was an inauspicious beginning for this long, long trip. In Huntington, after less than three hours on the road, DL texted her friend that the dog has been barking since we left home. This was an

exaggeration; he was quiet for at least 20 minutes. Her friend texted back: "do you want me to come get you?" DL said she would stick it out. The dog in question was Mu Shu, a little white mutt. Not quite as noble or large as Seaman, but a good guy anyway.

In Huntington we got off at the 52 exit and the crossed the river into Ohio. We were at the beginning of our search. For what? Casual discovery? The opening sortie along 52 was through an industrial wasteland. It was a four-lane highway through towns that had seen better days. Coaltown and Irontown were shadows of their former selves. In their heyday this was an important steel production region. Iron ore was found here and over fifty furnaces produced steel. Eventually, Pittsburgh and Youngstown came to dominate steel manufacturing and Irontown lost its source of wealth. These towns sat on one of the river's many oxbows, so we were heading north as we started downriver. We passed Ohio Furnace and Franklin Furnace. A pattern quickly emerged: a few big houses with river views and green, well-tended yards sat above random and ramshackle houses and trailers along the highway.

We were on the Ohio River Scenic Byway, but the scenic hadn't kicked in yet. There are many ways to look at this part of the Ohio Valley that 52 threads its way through. The writers of the WPA Guide offered: "US 52 runs for 185 miles down the Ohio River Valley. Part of the countryside is attractive; other sections are sorry and poverty-stricken, but every mile is interesting." This might be first blast of poverty tourism — like our recent fascination with hungry dogs and quaint poor people in dusty Mexican towns. The Guide notes that the highway shows us "boats and barges chugging against the current and little river towns asleep or dying." Today's promotional prose, from the Ohio River Scenic Byway brochure puts it this way: "exceptional river views, breathtaking hills and lush forest valleys connected by curvy routes dotted with charming river towns — ideal road stops with fabulous local food and interesting things to do [and] views of the mighty Ohio River." We drove through many towns; some were sleepy, some had sections one might suspect were dying.

Heat Moon on his River-Horse, on its downriver course, rolled (what verb should one use for a cabin cruiser, a boat without sails?) through the same cities we did, but with a far different view. He and his companion, Pilotis, were looking at the riverbanks from the river. We were looking at the river, usually from a short distance above the banks. The difference is notable and not always pleasant. Of Wheeling, WV, Heat Moon writes that it was formerly a river town, but today it's turned its back on the Ohio and shows the "bum ends of old brick office buildings and warehouses and a wretched four-story auto garage." Heat Moon demands a loyalty that only a river man can muster.

Of Portsmouth, Ohio he wrote that it seemed bent on hiding the river behind a high, long and forbidding concrete floodwall. It had become a place where land voyagers cruised up in SUVs, parked and went shopping. That was us in the SUV, though I think our purpose was noble and I swear we did not shop. Heat Moon does not mention that the floodwall, all 2000 feet of it, was covered with murals with a blend of Soviet Realism and Thomas Hart Benton Regionalism that depicted the river's history.

The floodwall was crucial to the survival of Portsmouth's riverfront area. For almost 200 years the town battled the Ohio's floods and lost. In 1937, the river overwhelmed its current wall when it crested at 71 feet. This is the primary reason that most of Portsmouth's population lives in the steep hills above the river. Flood control was not of much interest to Heat Moon; he was not found of dams either. Portsmouth wasn't packed with tourists, but it wasn't very sleepy, and it wasn't dying.

Whether one reads descriptions of the river valley from the WPA's curmudgeonly writers or the hyper praise of the Byway prose, it's true that river was always interesting and often beautiful. The valley was pastoral, the full green of summer was coming on strong. I grew up watching barges and tugs on the river, and it's still a sight I count as good, though Heat Moon in his little craft had a differing opinion of barges too.

A few miles past Portsmouth, the Shawnee Forest rose along our right side; Appalachian hollers and runs came down to the highway on their way to the river. For the most part the Ohio is not a recreational river. There are few boat ramps, few parks

along its banks. On the highway between the small river towns there was almost no river access. It was scenic, but that was it. The river was something to look at. The Ohio is a commercial and industrial water way; boating and fishing are secondary pursuits. For these reasons perhaps, there does not seem to be much expensive riverfront real estate. Where anything is built on the river it's a factory, a power plant, maybe warehouses and docks. The railroad is the most prominent feature. Every few miles one sees a cluster of old mobile homes hugging the riverbank. Having spent my last fifty years in Florida, where "waterfront" means any place one can see the water, and actual waterfront might cost a few million dollars, this lack of moneyed land and big houses was perplexing. Why don't these people live on the river; why haven't rich people bought river front land and built McMansions? The answer is that railroads own the riverbanks. The tracks are usually only a few feet from the river. There might be some tilled bottom land between the tracks and the highway, and where that land widens, one sees farms. But even these farms and homes are not on the river. This is a working river; it's not for play and not a means for speculators to make money.

Why were we driving on the Ohio side? I don't think I ever gave it any thought. I grew up on the Pennsylvania section of the river, but Ohio was just a few miles away. We used to go there to buy 3.2 beer. My grandfather was born around Salinesville, Ohio, and talked to me about East Liverpool. I think it seemed natural to me to drive down the Ohio side. Kentucky was, in my mind, far away, even a bit foreign. In my imagination Kentucky was southern, exotic, and, I'm sorry to admit, backwoods. Harlan County. Hillbillies. So, we were driving down the Ohio bank and looking over at Kentucky.

What I did not know is that according to Federal law in these parts, Kentucky owns the Ohio River. I still don't believe it. It's almost as strange as the fact that the Queen owns all of the swans in Great Britain. The law, passed in 1792, states that Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois begin at the low point of the river's northern bank. Ohio challenged this law in the Supreme Court in 1966 and lost. I, and I'm sure most people, thought the boundary between these states ran down the middle of the river. It gets stranger. Along the northern Ohio, West Virginia owns the river between

it and Ohio; the court denied Ohio's claim, ruling that Virginia had originally owned the river (there was no Ohio then) and it became part of West Virginia like an inheritance. The headwaters of the Ohio belong to Pennsylvania because it begins there, as all sports fans know, at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers. However, even this could be a matter of dispute. "Ohio" is based on a Seneca word that means "good river," and the Seneca consider the Allegheny and the Ohio to be the same river. The Seneca never fought or won any court battles about this naming. If I were making an argument, I'd say that the Ohio and Monongahela were one river, given that there's no change of direction when they merge, but the addition of the Allegheny in this confluence just makes it a cleaner decision to start a new river.

We were driving down the Ohio side with no consciousness of any of these bizarre river legalities; we were there because I like Ohio better than Kentucky. Earlier in the year when I'd driven down the Ohio from where it flowed through Pennsylvania, I paid little attention to the sliver of West Virginia stuck up there giving WV its claim to the river. That sliver, that finger, whatever the appendage most looks like, extends north between Ohio and Pennsylvania as it follows the Ohio's western shore. The river flows westward when it crosses the PA line. WV is to the south there. The river flows west a few more miles until in East Liverpool (or Chester, WV, if we are being legal) it makes its big curve and starts to flow south. Then it runs southwest until it gets to Huntington, WV, and starts its western flow. From here, though its meanders often turn it north and south, it flows west until it merges with the Mississippi.

Heat Moon calls this "westering" — that course and behavior that characterize American history and American travel. We were westering too; past Portsmouth, 52 runs along the river and there are few towns; all of them quite small. The road banks and swoops, rises and falls, and the valley is wide. We went through Sugar Grove, Friendship, Rome and Manchester without incident or pause. Manchester was the most down and out and dilapidated of the river towns so far. It lives up, or down, to the WPA's description of sorry, but it's one of Ohio's oldest towns and once was a rich river town with excursions and showboats docked at its wharf. There's none of that now.

When we drove into Aberdeen it was time to rest; the sun was setting. Aberdeen did not offer any lodging that even by my low standards looked acceptable, so we crossed the river into Maysville, Kentucky — the legal side of the river. Maysville is a river town that has maintained some of its old river charm and architecture, but we had to pass on lodging in that area and head up into the hills looking for a chain motel where I could smuggle in Mu Shu the barky dog. We found a Quality Inn that was totally nondescript and didn't offer a view of the river. Malls and chain restaurants were abundant. We passed a night without exploring the local scene because it was not a scene we'd ever seek.

In the morning we went back down to the river, found a good breakfast at a diner with outdoor tables and a view of the river. Daniel Boone, we read on a sign, had a place by the original river landing back in 1784. This was the best foray, so far, into Ohio River culture.

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Though 52 did not seem to be dangerous or sinful, and it would prove to be rather dull in many places, Ohio 52 has a song that warns the young to be careful if they find themselves out there. Perhaps any road (or river) is dangerous because to travel it too far is to open oneself to change and other views of life. To a people steeped in rural, Christian tradition a road can be threatening and a road that runs along a river is doubly dangerous.

"Highway 52"'s lyrics begin with a mother's plea —

> well Momma said, "Son before you go
> There's something I want you to do
> Promise me that you won't go wrong
> As you travel down Highway 52."

and ends with, perhaps, that son's challenge to his girl —

> So tell me my love, oh tell me my darlin'
> What are you going to do
> If you don't love me or care about me
> I'll be headin' on down highway 52

In between there's some travel narrative —

> From the old Queen City to New Boston town
> Ironton and old Hanging Rock
> I've made every stop, I've played every station
> While travelin' there on Highway 52

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After breakfast we crossed the river again and took our chances on 52. About twenty miles downriver we drove into Ripley. History was kicking in. In Ripley, at Freedom's Landing, we read of the town's importance to the Underground Railroad. Historical markers told us about abolitionist Rev. John Rankin, and we found that this was the place that inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's story of Eliza's crossing the frozen Ohio River. Heat Moon also stopped here because Ripley had a convenient and friendly dock. Much of the Ohio's banks didn't offer River-Horse, or any other small craft, a safe place to harbor because the banks were either steep, rocky, muddy or industrial and concrete. Again, the Ohio's not meant for recreation. But here Heat Moon found a good dock, tied up and came ashore. He and Pilotis walked around town hoping for good conversation and good food but found neither. We had our lunch in our cooler and ate at a picnic table overlooking the river.

The next stop on the US 52 history tour was Point Pleasant, the birthplace of Ulysses S. Grant. The Grant House Museum was only a few feet from the highway, so we stopped to look around and stretch. Grant's probably not anyone's favorite president, unless they live around Point Pleasant, but I enjoyed this site. It was a proverbial humble log cabin and wood frame house stuck between the roadside and a steep hill. Very much the opposite of Mount Vernon or Monticello. Grant did not have a silver spoon childhood. During the 1937 flood, the house was saved by placing a large boulder on its roof to keep it from floating away. The '37 flood was among the greatest catastrophes of U.S. history. In many places the river crested 25 feet above flood stage. Three hundred eighty-five people were killed along the river. Damages were pegged at 500 million dollars, which would be about nine billion dollars today. In my hometown of Baden, PA, there was a marker in our little downtown, next to Overholt's Grocery and the flat my grandparents lived in, that

showed the highwater mark to be far above my head.

We drove through Utopia, but it felt not much different than the other towns. Smaller, as no doubt, utopia should be. When Lewis floated past here, almost all the journal entries are about the Kentucky side of the river. What's now the Ohio side was then the Northwest Territory, and everything beyond the northern or western bank of the river was yet to be settled. Marietta, at the mouth of the Scioto River, was the largest town south of Steubenville.

We continued along the river to Cincinnati. It's become all too apparent to me while writing this that I have never known how to spell Cincinnati. There's no rhyme to help out as there is for Mississippi. I used to dislike the Queen City because the Red Legs, my Pirates' rivals, played baseball there. Now, though, the football Bengals are better fodder for Steeler fan animosity. These things fail to stand up to rational explanation and don't help with spelling problems either.

On a previous trip here to attend a conference I was drinking in the hotel bar and talking to, showing off for, a man I'd just met. I'd just gotten my long-delayed BA and was telling him about all the books he should read. Too late in this revelry, I thought to ask him what he did, and he said he was the Chair of the English department at the U of Wyoming. I was, as I usually am when I stick my foot in my mouth, chagrined. You probably don't need me to tell you what to read, I said. He, Henry, was polite and pretended that I had enlightened him immensely. Then he asked what I did, and I told him I'd just graduated and accepted a grad position at the U of Pittsburgh, but I didn't really want it because it was going to bring me too close to home and my father. Henry said he'd give me a fellowship to Wyoming and I took it. That's how I used to not plan my life.

Today we were following 52 into the city, and traffic was getting bad. It was late afternoon, close enough to rush hour, and after getting turned around twice trying to follow 52 through downtown's one-way streets, I opted to take the interstate. We took the 74 toward Indiana.

The Queen City was where we would leave the Ohio River behind as 52 turned north to cross central Indiana. My literary companions, Meriwether Lewis and William Least Heat Moon, were also going off down river as we turned north.

South of Cincinnati one could find Big Bone Lick, where mammoth and mastodon fossils have been found. I still regret not making a detour to see this, but we had a mission. The 74 took us to Harrison, named for William Henry Harrison. It was president day. The Indiana-Ohio state line runs through the center of town.

The area around Harrison has the distinction of being one of the northernmost battle sites of the Civil War. A rogue Confederate, Brigadier General Thomas Morgan led troops from Tennessee across Kentucky and into Indiana. He had been forbidden by his commander to cross the Ohio River, but he did so anyway. He hoped to draw Union troops away from Vicksburg. Why I find this significant has to do with Morgan's path of retreat. After a number of crazy battles, burnings and lootings (such as the time they stole a bunch of smoked hams and then dropped them because they were attracting flies and the Union troops used the hams to track Morgan) he made his way back into Ohio where he fought and lost a number of battles while trying to cross the Ohio into West Virginia. After many skirmishes, his force of 400 (down from the 2400 he left Tennessee with) fought one of his final battles at Salinesville, where my grandfather's family lived. He retreated from there to West Point on the Ohio River where he was captured. In some bizarre way, Morgan unites US 52 with my family history.

The first few miles 52 traverses in Indiana are scenic. It runs along the Whitewater River, complete with rapids and shoals as its name promises. The river is the swiftest in Indiana. This portion of the drive was promising and had it continued in this manner, 52 would have been a great highway. It didn't. The Whitewater went north and 52 went west. Westering, in this case, was not the scenic option.

It would be an excellent idea to write nothing more about US 52 in Indiana, but a couple of things ought to be said. It won't be about the highway being interesting, and it won't make the highway interesting. This is probably some sort of Principle. Frankly, this road isn't going to get interesting, not for a lot of miles. But there's an Origin question to be answered. Why did the original segment of 52 begin in Huntington and end in Fowler, Indiana? I'd already determined that I didn't know why the southern/eastern terminus was in Huntington, but in a few miles more we were going to get to Fowler. I figured something

would be there, some logical explanation for why in 1926, 52 stopped there. We drove through Indianapolis and Lafayette and through either a hundred or just one giant cornfield. 52 was straight, usually four-laned; we found nothing that begged us to stop and look around. I was so hung up on seeing Fowler that we drove past dark and should have stopped in Lafayette to see a Boilermaker and maybe find a good beer and deli.

We drove on to Fowler as if it was a Grail. I'd made Fowler mythic. When we got there, we saw no distinguishing marks, just two gas stations and no motels. We can come back and look in the morning, I said, as we drove a few more miles to find a motel on US 41. It looked like an expressway compared to 52, and I thought of it running through Georgia and on through Florida. I thought of the Allman Brothers' "Ramblin' Man" and conceded that 41 was a far greater highway with a far better song. US 41runs north through Chicago and on to Michigan's UP and Lake Superior. I was too tired to reason about this once it was revealed. I suppose one could make a case for connecting the Ohio River to Chicago and the Great Lakes. I didn't make it that night.

However, when morning came, we proved Frost's maxim, that way leads on to way, and we did not return to explore Fowler. If we had we might have discovered that we had been hasty the night before in our judgment of Fowler's utmost emptiness because the small downtown was not on 52, so we'd not seen it. My research (Wikipedia) revealed that about 2200 people live in Fowler; it has a library and a theater. It was once a "booming" small town. Now it's just a small town. And there was no explanation of why 52 once ended there. My theory was as good or bad as any.

We were headed north again. 52 and 41 ran together until 52 takes a left toward Illinois and joins US 24 and to cross the Illinois line. This stretch is famous for being the place where Cary Grant is chased by the crop duster in *North by Northwest*. Its iconic flatness can still make you think that some large, winged thing, machine or dinosaur, might swoop down and carry you away.

Indiana had come and gone and except for the first 20 miles along the Whitewater River, there was nothing but its nothingness

to write about. How interesting can finding nothing be? Was the constant and consistent lack of answers going to be enough to carry this narrative to Portal?

It's time to talk about coffee. DL wants Starbucks in the morning. These little farm towns were not making her happy. I will drink any gas station coffee because I put so much cream and sugar in it that it's just a notch below a warm milk shake. When it started to get dark and we'd be looking for lodging, we also watched for Starbucks so that the morning might start smoothly and without panic. I was not tech savvy enough to use a find Starbucks app for a web search. We had some tumultuous mornings executing a Starbucks search, and sometimes it just didn't bear fruit.

Just across the state line in Sheldon, IL, 52 makes a right turn and heads north. One of the other enduring mysteries about 52 is why it turns where it does. Why make a 90 degree northern turn in Sheldon? Why turn west a few miles later in Donovan? Why turn north at IL 49 and run north to Kankakee and on to Joliet? Why turn west in Joliet and not go on to Chicago? These questions didn't get answered either.

52 enters Kankakee on the bad side of town. The Projects were what one expected of them, and downtown was sorely failing. This American Life did a show on Kankakee as the worst American city when it came in 354th of 354. Letterman was more practical and helpful when he donated two gazebos to help out. I guess really crappy cities need gazebos. The big K did not seem to be a place to dally.

The WPA Guides offer a section called Tours that follow highways that were important in the late 1930s and give excellent and detailed descriptions of what can be found on the highway. The writers, whoever they may have been for the 52 tour, note that the highway "picks it erratic course across northern Illinois."

Above Kankakee, at Bourbonnais, IL, 102 split off from 52 toward Braidwood. The WPA Guide said 52 went to Braidwood, and we realized that in the years since 1936 the highway had been adjusted and resigned. On the map, 52 and 45 went into Joliet, but this older version skirted the city. It sounded like a good idea.

102 followed the Kankakee River and seemed to offer a much better drive than the current 52, so we took it. We were on the river with the French explorer, La Salle. A smaller road to the left went to Diamond, where a flood in 1883 trapped and killed at least 74 miners. The mine was sealed and became a monument to the dead workers. At Morris, the Kankakee joined the Illinois River. This drive into WPA history required us to read the guide's descriptions and mileage markers, which were meticulous, and transfer them to our road atlas like an overlay. We saw that we needed to go north on IL 47 to rejoin 52 as it ran west from Joliet. We made it.

Back on 52 we saw a sign for Norway, the first permanent Norwegian settlement in the US, and realized that now the guidebook and the atlas were giving us the same information. Norway was founded by Cleng Person, who was sort of the Johnny Appleseed of Norwegian migration. He was a wandering man who liked to found settlements like Appleseed planted trees; Person founded 30 settlements from Norway, IL, to Texas.

It was early afternoon when we drove into Troy Grove and saw a sign for the Wild Bill Hickok State Monument. It seemed like a good place for lunch, and I hoped for a restroom too. My hope was fulfilled and then we carried our lunch to a picnic table by a black granite obelisk with a historical marker and Wild Bill's story. He was born here, toured with Buffalo Bill, and was shot dead in Deadwood. We also noted that his name was James Butler Hickok, not Bill. As we were eating, a pickup with big tires and dark windows stopped a few feet from us. Some encounter like this seemed inevitable to me, so I screwed up some courage and turned toward the truck as the window slid slowly down. A big man said you interested in Hickok? Even if I wasn't, I would have said yes, so it was easy to say yes. He got out and proceeded to not only tell us more about Wild Bill but invite us to hang around Troy Grove for a few days until the town celebrated his life with live shootouts, cemetery tours, and wagon rides. There'd be lots of guns on display too, the guy promised. He was a good man, but we told him thanks and that we had to get on down the road.

We were about to take a break from our 52 exploration and head for the big city of Milwaukee, where I would visit a dear

friend and catch a ball game. As luck would have it the Pirates were playing the Brewers, and it fit into our road trip schedule. After Wild Bill we got on the 39 and headed north to Rockford and another dog friendly motel.

Though our digression along the original 52 was a great ride, it meant that we didn't go through Joliet. For some reason when I think of Joliet I think of prison. It was the home of the Illinois State Penitentiary back in the day — from 1858-2002. Leopold and Loeb were there and Baby Face Nelson too. Many gangster flicks referred to doing time in Joliet. Jake Blues of the Blues Brothers did his time there. Steve Goodman referred to it as "the charm school in Joliet."

I'd spent a few days there (Joliet, not the prison) in the early 70s. My mother was visiting relatives, and I was hitchhiking from somewhere, probably California, when I found out she would be there. I hopped off the 80 at a Joliet exit and went to my cousin Jodie's house.

I spent a few days there and then caught a ride south with my uncle as they headed back to Florida. I had them drop me off at Indiana 28, and I hitched to Elwood where my mother was raised. Hitching backroads in rural Indiana wasn't easy, but by evening I made it. I had my great aunt's address and knocked on her door. A small white-haired woman answered the door cautiously. I looked like a lot of hippies in 1973 and few of them knocked on old women's doors. She wasn't scared of me and let me talk. Hi, I said, I'm Rick Campbell. That meant nothing. Rosemary Campbell's son. Nothing. Rosemary Merritt's son. Her eyes glistened and she started to softly cry. I didn't think I'd ever see one of Rosemary's children, she said. But there I was, and she told me to come in. We talked. My mother had never been back to her hometown. She left when she was entering high school to live in Dunbar, WV. Her father was a glass blower, and he moved around for work a lot. When my mother married, she moved to Baden, PA, my father's hometown, and they'd never been back to Indiana. I filled my great aunt in on our lives; I left out a lot of the bad parts. And after a while she took me to meet a bunch of cousins and relatives. It was a great and surprising night. I wasn't sure I'd be welcome at all; when I left town, I felt loved. I hitched on east to Pennsylvania.

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After our Milwaukee digression, we headed back to 52. We followed IL 2 down the Rock River, through Oregon and Grand Detour. This area was the site of numerous battles in the Black Hawk War, including the first at Stillman's Run. Isiah Stillman commanded a unit of militia men who were defeated in the battle. The Rock River and 102 joined 52 in Dixon, the home of Ronald Reagan. Presidents kept popping up along the roadside. Since 52 has no official nickname, not the Lincoln Highway or the National Road, I'm thinking of submitting President's Highway as a choice. Another future president was commemorated here too: Abraham Lincoln served in the militia.

Any road next to a river is a good road to drive, and we followed the Rock a few miles west until 52 jogged north again and began its final run to the Mississippi. It's hard to say that 52 was always heading for the Mississippi or that it ever intended to go there, but someone meant it to and soon we would see the big river from high bluffs above Savanna, IL. We were a few miles south of the Mississippi Palisades in the Driftless Area — a formation created by the lack of glacial drift and the presence of the Mississippi. The area has steep cliffs, elevations above 1500 feet, and is said to resemble New England and the land around the Great Lakes. We rolled over the southern edge and crossed the Great River into Sabula, Iowa.

Even though US 61 is called the Great River Road, it does not closely follow the river in this part of Iowa. 52 runs along the riverbank until it gets to Dubuque and joins 61. Dubuque was another one of our goals, a place we planned to stop, though I'm not sure why. It was the first Mississippi river town we came to, and we knew someone from there, though she now lived in Ohio. Sometimes any little connection influences a decision when life offers some latitude.

From Sabula to Dubuque. we traveled along and under high bluffs; elevation markers put us between 600 and 800 feet. This too was in the Driftless Area, but it was not as spectacular as the land on the eastern side of the river.

Dubuque's highways are far more convoluted than one expects from a small town in Iowa; the steep bluffs and the riverbank served to funnel Highways 61, 20, and 52 into exactly same place. Overpasses and underpasses and exits came up fast as we were being swept downhill and staring at the Father of Rivers. We found a river front exit and explored that part of the city before heading to our cheap motel, high on a curving bluff above the river.

Dubuque's an old river town and those are the best there are. We spent two nights, ate, drank, walked, and looked at the river.

After Dubuque, we detoured again to go camping in Wisconsin, east of Prairie Du Chien at Wylasuing State Park. It sat on a bluff overlooking the Wisconsin river. We were back in the Driftless Area. From our campsite we looked down over rock outcrops at buzzards drafting and wheeling; it's not often you get to be above buzzards. There were many facets of this trip and most of them went very well. Camping wasn't one of them. We got to our site and set up. We admired our beautiful view. Then I heard heavy equipment and went to explore. The area around the restrooms was being graded and bulldozed. It was loud, and they didn't back off when you had to go pee. It was a few days before Memorial Day, and maybe they were under orders get the job done before the holiday crowd made it here. At first it seemed a minor setback, but road graders and camping solace don't mix well. By dark they quit, and we had our peace. The campground was relatively empty. Then, sometime in the night the rain came, and we discovered that my old tent leaked. Water flowed down the tent walls and what didn't get absorbed by our blankets, puddled on the floor. The next morning, as we were hanging our bedding out to dry, the machines came back. They brought dump trucks of gravel too. My notes have a mystery entry here: beware of wild parsnip. I know now that it causes rashes and blisters like poison ivy, but I can't recall if it attacked us when we there or if we just diligently heeded a warning in the park literature. Rain, construction, and dangerous plant life — sometimes camping is overrated. We decided to get back to Iowa and back to our mission.

On the way back to Iowa we toured Prairie Du Chien because we liked the name and thought we'd spend a few more arbitrary

minutes in Wisconsin before crossing the river again. 52 crosses the Mississippi three times, but we'd already crossed three times in three days. We had two more crossings to go when we reached Minneapolis.

52 heads inland just south of Marquette, across the river from Prairie Du Chien, but we took an alternate route that may or may not have been an older version of 52. It looked more interesting and was a legitimate Blue Highway. We drove by Effigy Mounds National Monument and on to Decorah where we rejoined 52. Soon we were in Minnesota. There's something about crossing a state line that makes me think I have gone somewhere, that things have really changed, even though I am on the same road, same landscape, just in a different political entity.

Many times I have driven down the 95 to Florida and felt a rush when I cross the St. Marys River and tell myself I'm in Florida, home. Except when I was doing that I was on my way to South Florida and home was still more than 400 miles away. The rush usually wore off in the rest area north of Jacksonville and was thoroughly gone by the time I'd negotiated the Jacksonville traffic. Three hundred more miles of straight and flat and bright was really what was going on.

But here we were crossing into Minnesota, and it seemed different than Iowa. Maybe because I'd spent a lot of time in Iowa in my driving life and hardly any in Minnesota. We drove through Rochester and thought of the Mayo Clinic and figured it had something to do with how green and well-manicured the city seemed. It was near dinner time, and should have been near stopping time, but the Twin Cities were up ahead and for some reason it seemed we should stop there.

North of Rochester, I should have remembered and recited James Wright's "A Blessing." I could have convinced myself that 52 was the highway he was on when he saw the Indian ponies and the slenderer one walked over and nuzzled his left hand. Had I thought of this then maybe I too would have broken into blossom.

On we went. No ponies. 52 took us into St. Paul and across the Mississippi River again. It had been a big point in my earlier

research on 52 that it was only US highway to parallel the Ohio and cross the Mississippi three times. I tried to believe that this was still a significant attribute and that third crossing would be met with cheers.

It was getting dark, though, and traffic was heavy. 52 joined the 35 after it crossed the river, and there didn't seem to be a way or a reason to avoid merging, so we took the 35 into Minneapolis and decided (probably I decided) to go through the city and find lodging on the other side. Lodging decisions were far too often left to me. Why? It's clear that I have bad (cheap) taste in motels, but it was my dog on this trip and my money that seemed to governing fiscal decisions. We ended up somehow picking up the 94 and running it out of the city, finding a dog motel, and finally coming to rest.

In retrospect, or on a do over, I would have driven fewer hours and stopped more often. This was a good case for that amended behavior. Why pass up a city and the meal and sights it offered for the suburbs? Why such a dogged push to get to the city just to go through it at 70 mph in the dark? Maybe because it was easier to keep going? Maybe I thought the dog would be a problem in some downtown hotel. Whatever my reasons were, it meant not seeing Minneapolis.

At our dog motel we probably ate from our cooler again. This was usually a meal of grapes, cheese and crackers. Wine for DL and a beer for me. Dog food for Mu Shu and always a scrap from my plate. DL would watch TV, and I'd read the atlas to see where tomorrow would go. I suspect DL tolerated my motel choices because she did not own a TV and these motel nights allowed her to watch what the rest of America feasted on.

After finding Starbucks, one of the trip's subthemes, we took the 94 northwest. 52 was subsumed by the 94, so this was an interstate day. If there was anything to see, we did not see it. The 94, like all interstates, flows like a big river isolated from the land it flows through. We were on the river in a speedboat, not a keel boat. We drove for hours until we got to Fergus Falls, where we got off just because I liked the name. The WPA Guide told of a tornado that in 1919 ripped through the town and picked a flock of chickens clean. That's hard to top. After a brief look around, we were off for

Fargo and North Dakota. 94 entered the Red River Valley and of course I broke into song.

> Then come sit by my side if you love me
> Do not hasten to bid me adieu
> Just remember the Red River Valley
> And the cowboy that's loved you so true

I think I do the Marty Robbins version. He's the voice of most of my western songs.

Another state line to cross and we would be in the final state of this journey. If Portal was the terminus of 52, then North Dakota was the terminal state. We had yet to see a buffalo. That would soon be remedied.

My road atlas says US 10 comes out of Fargo and 52 isn't on the map. The WPA Guide says 10 is the highway here too. Websites about 52 don't mention 10. It remains unclear to me where 52 was, unless it was cosigned with 10. The Guide has it beginning about 40 miles north of Jamestown in Carrington at the intersection of what's now 281 and ND 20. However, AASHO documented that in 1935, 52 did cover the area from Jamestown to Fargo. This discrepancy might be explained by the fact that many states were reluctant to adhere to federal highway numbering changes, and some held on to older designations longer than others. It doesn't explain why my modern atlas does not have 52 on it.

Regardless of what highway number we were on, we were certainly traveling through towns and a landscape described in the guidebook. The towns had changed in the nearly 80 years since the guide was written; however, the land was much the same.
The Guide says the highway (10 or 52) traverses three topographic areas of North Dakota, the low, flat Red River Valley, the rolling Drift Plain, and the Missouri Plateau:

> Most of the country along the road is cultivated, and in the fields the cycle of farming operations — plowing, seeding, cultivating, harvesting — repeats itself as the seasons progress. During the growing season, stretching far across the flat

> plains and over the sloping hills, the varying
> greens of the grains blend with the blue flax fields
> and the invading yellow patches of mustard. In
> the fall the prairies have a somber, peaceful air
> as their tawny stubblefields and newly plowed
> black acres await the first snowfall. When winter
> comes the never-ending expanse of white is
> broken by the dark pattern of roads and an
> occasional lead-colored clump of trees, bare
> and shivering in the wind, while at the distant
> horizon the whiteness unites with the pale blue
> of clear winter skies.

The guide continues, "west of the Red River Valley trees are few except along the rivers. Yet, according to legend, this country was once heavily forested — until Paul Bunyan" cut them down. It's true that there are few trees, but the blame falls on ice age climate events, not Paul B.

It's about 95 miles from Fargo to Jamestown. We covered the run from Minneapolis to Jamestown in about half a day. We didn't stop much. It looks like a long drive on the map because there's little between here and there, now and later, here and gone. By late afternoon we were in Jamestown, ND. There 52 makes a sharp right and heads off to Canada. That and the billboards for the National Buffalo Museum made it look like a good stopping point. To a guy who wears a buffalo charm around his neck this seemed like the best place on 52. Add a herd of live buffalo and a sacred white buffalo and the deal was clinched. I didn't know how great the world's largest buffalo statue would be.

Jamestown sits at the confluence of Pipestream Creek and the James River; the James, I read, is supposed to be the longest unnavigable river in the world. It's flows for 710 miles. In town, it made a fine little park on the water for our late lunch. The town is on the plains. Most of the buildings are the color of sand and substantial in the western blocky style. We found a decent motel and a couple blocks away the best restaurant we'd seen on the whole trip. Full, tired and nicely buzzed, we walked the wind-blown street back to the hotel to sleep and see buffalo in the morning.

The National Buffalo Museum — I thought "National" might be too large a claim, but leaving that aside, this is an excellent small museum full of exhibits about buffalo, (I know they are bison but don't like the music of the word) Native American history, and some odd bits of Lewis and Clark. It was a very pleasant surprise. Add the live buffalo herd to the mix and it was certainly one of best experiences on this long journey.

When I checked the web to refresh my memory about the museum, I read that the white bull buffalo had rather recently died when he fell into a ravine. I guess buffalo can have accidents like the rest of us, but it seemed both unfortunate and weird. How did it feel to be the museum's buffalo herder who lost the prize bull?

I can't say the World's Largest Buffalo Statue, 26 feet high, was the best part, but it was very cool, and the only photo of the day at the museum I still look at.

My love of buffalo harkens back to a day in the mid-70s in Custer State Park. We were driving a Ford van on a cross country trip, and our wandering path took us to Custer. I don't think I knew about the buffalo herd there, and I think we were there more because I love the idea of Custer getting his butt kicked by Indians. I did most of the driving and no one in our crew cared where we went. So, we were driving through the park just looking at the rolling hills and plains when hundreds of buffalo came slowly toward the road and began to cross. We stopped. What else do you do when a herd of buffalo are blocking the road? The herd just kept growing. Eventually there were so many that they were walking up to our van and flowing around it as if we were a boulder in a dark shaggy stream. My memory has been fixed on that scene ever since. It's perhaps the single greatest encounter with nature I have ever had. It was many minutes of awe and wonder. It was sacred, holy, and it was never frightening, even though many of those creatures seemed almost as large as our van. The herd moved slowly, leisurely, as if we weren't there, or maybe even as if we were supposed to be, like a boulder that rolled on to their path. I wonder still if that migration happened often or if we were incredibly lucky travelers who happened to be in the right spot at the sacred time. Ten minutes earlier and we would have missed it. Forty-five minutes later we would have driven through just dust and buffalo pies. But it was one of those moments when the universe makes things

happen in such a glorious way that we feel blessed, or we certainly should, and I would not like to talk to anyone who didn't feel blessed by an encounter like this.

We left Jamestown and headed north; 52 joined 281, a great long highway that runs from the Canadian border to the Mexican border at McCallen, Texas. At Carrington, 52 jogged northwest and began its diagonal run across the high plains toward Minot and Canada. This was the homestretch for our 52 journey.

It was late spring, and the fields were green but turning a darker summer color. By fall they would be yellow. The prairie stretched away, as prairies do, far and flat to the east, rolling to the foothills of the Rockies to the west. Where we were, angling between east and west, the land was flat.

On both sides of the highway, flat-topped hills rise. Most of them are part of Indian stories. Hawk's Nest and the Sioux; Butte Du Morale, where the Metis people camped on buffalo hunts. We passed Fessenden, which was once founded by Welsh settlers and later gave way to Scandinavian farmers. Words like bucolic fit here and a certain nostalgia for the days of the Alfalfa queen. Small towns were strung along the highway like beads on a chain. Spaced five to ten miles apart, each was about the same size and looked about the same as the previous one. Grain towns, silos, railroad tracks.

At Velva the highway dipped into the Mouse River valley, and the river made this area greener than the other beads on 52's chain. We stopped in a park to walk, to allow Mu Shu to water the land, and to have a bite to eat.

I should say more about Mu Shu here. He was a little 10-pound white mutt whose breed seemed to change with his haircuts. When his hair was long, he looked like a Bichon. When he first came to my house in North Florida, he wandered down the long driveway and he was absolutely dirty, scraggly and forlorn. We had four other big dogs, and they ran him back up the driveway where he squeezed under the gate and escaped their clutches. The next day he came back down the drive. He was ugly, but I admired his spirit and took him to the vet on my way to school. Coming home I stopped to check on him, and the whole clinic staff came out to meet me. You should see this dog, they said, and presented me with a beautiful snow-white ball of fur. We thought he might be a Lhasa

Apso, a temple dog; I took him home. His hair when long would get matted, so around May we would have him shorn. He looked goofy and skinny; then you'd think maybe he was a terrier, a Westy. Under no circumstances would I allow people to call him a poodle.

As mentioned, he began this trip by barking almost nonstop. I had a kennel in the back of the car, and he'd have a few quiet periods if I put him in it and covered it with a blanket. It was his first long car trip. Somewhere in Iowa or Minnesota we let him sit up front. He would ride in DL's lap or down by her feet and he was suddenly happy, or at least silent. He'd bark at traffic cones or when he was rudely awakened by a bump in the road. He was calm, slept a lot, peed on bushes, and had developed a fondness for walking into bodies of water. He stepped in the Monongahela, the Ohio, the Missouri and a few creeks and ponds too. He'd looked out over Lake Michigan, but it was too cold for him and me to venture to the water. He was, with a couple thousand miles under his collar, a good road dog. All of us enjoyed Velva's little park on the Mouse River.

Minot, at the junction of US 2 and 52, is one of the larger towns of North Dakota. It seemed to sit in a shallow bowl. The afternoon sun was high and bright, and there were few trees. Nothing relieved the bright glare rising from the beige and white sandstone land. As was true of plains towns, the wind and too many large trucks threw a screen of gravelly dust over everything from metal buildings to the near horizon. We decided to keep going. The pull of the end of the road was great, and the absence of anything attractive in Minot made going on easy.

A few more miles up the road we passed through Burlington, a lignite coal mining town. Yes, I had to look up lignite to find that it was a low grade, soft coal. It's sort of the butt end of coal production, but it was enough to get this little town going and keep it on the map.

We were in the Des Lacs River valley now. A number of small towns sat in the river watershed, which is also a migratory bird habitat. It's disturbingly treeless, but not without a sparse beauty. There are three small lakes, and one can drive along the shore, engage in bird watching (or at least read the markers that say

what birds are often here.) It was very open. The sky was high, the land flat, and everything seemed to roll in all directions forever.

There's a town called Donnybrook that was settled by Irish immigrants. We skipped it in case something rough broke out. We passed through Kenmare, where we would come back later to a little mom-and-pop, as they say, motel. Whether there was a mom or pop I don't know, but it was not a chain motel. We were only an hour from Portal now. No stopping.

From 52 near Kenmare, the Guide to North Dakota says

> the highway leaves the valley for the Drift Plain, which stretches away to the East to meet the flat bed of glacial Lake Souris, beyond which lie the Turtle Mountains. To the West against the horizon rises the eastern edge of the great Missouri Plateau topped by the Altamont Moraine, the height of land between the Missouri and Souris Rivers.

It also claims that once this northernmost lake in the Des Lacs chain used to be deep enough that steamboats could navigate the water and carry grain and other commerce to Canada. By the late 1930's, years of drought had brought the water level so low that this was no longer possible. Looking at the lake from our current vantage point, it's impossible to imagine steamboats on this shallow water.

Next Bowbells, which is, as the WPA guide says, almost treeless and squat so that it blends into the flat terrain. That's a generous way of describing the town. All of this was just getting in the way of our Grail quest, our final stop. Portal was finally real.

We swept into it on a long wide curve. We crossed a little slough, passed a steel frame building with two cows made out of oil drums. There were only a couple of streets. The sign said Pop. 126. This was it. End of the road. There was stretch of no man's land that made me worry that we had accidentally crossed the border and were in an even more unpopulated Canada, but then we saw the trucks lined up. They hid the small Canadian border

sign.

The Guidebook calls Portal an important international port of entry. It is a port of entry; I suppose importance is a relative term. I wondered too what, or how little, was involved in being international. Certainly, given the number of countries in the world, two is the smallest number that can be deemed international. It's like the World Series, which is only international because the Blue Jays are in Canada.

In the late 1930s, Portal had slightly over 500 people living there; by the time we got to town the population had fallen to 126. It's still the second busiest port of entry in North Dakota, but there are only three. It looked busy with its line of trucks waiting to enter Saskatchewan, but it was a far cry from a major border crossing.

In the 1930s it was also an important point on the SOO Line Railroad, and much of the traffic into the Canadian Northwest passed though Portal. The Colonial Style Customs House described in the Guide has been replaced by a "sprawling modern structure." Progress strikes again. Though I was unimpressed with the Portal border crossing, it's true I had little to compare it to. A few days later when we crossed over at Dunseith, one of the other two crossings, it was clear that Portal had more commercial traffic.

Here's the best story about Portal. It has an International Golf Course with holes on both sides of the border. In August 1934 a young Portal golfer, George Wegener, made an international hole-in-one, driving from the eighth tee in Canada into the cup on the ninth green in the United States. When we were there, I had not done enough research and didn't know about the golf course. I wonder, given our recent Trumpian dust ups, if it's still that easy to cross the border. What about terrorist golfers?

We didn't want to cross today, so I turned off 52 and wandered back toward downtown, so to speak. We passed a bank, a church, a bar and a park with a water tower. I turned down a dirt road that passed behind the Border Crossing office and along a high fence. My phone beeped and gave me instructions for making international calls. I worried again that we had

accidentally crossed the border, so we turned around and went back to town. It was time for beer.

The bar was called the Outback, and I guess it was. I suppose it would have been a cliché to call it the Border, but I'm not sure what it was the outback of. I felt like we had been in the outback for quite a few days.
One of my favorite songs goes, "Out with the kickers and the cowboy angels / and a good saloon in every town," so I figured we should give this one a try. I remember, or imagine, that the front door was not inviting. Scarred plywood. I hate scarred plywood doors, but I figured how much trouble could we get into in a town of 125 people. I don't believe DL would have protected me if things went south toward the Dakotas. She talks tough but is not a shit kicker. It's true that I would not have gone in without her, but that's because I would have just driven away to the next place.

It was a great bar, maybe one of the great bars. No immediate competition, true, but still great. The décor was a mix of Old West kitsch, found junk, and an inexplicable World Series poster from the '93 Blue Jays. I guess it was trying to be international. We took stools at the bar. The barkeep, arms and upper back heavily and beautifully tattooed, brought us two Sam Adams. She was wonderful and asked more questions about our Highway 52 mission than anyone else along the entire trip. Of course, she wasn't busy. There were three men in the bar, and one of them was the mayor of Portal.

We asked how old Portal was; he didn't know, but claimed it was older than his buddy sitting next to him. The tan stone bank, built in 1903, looked like something Jesse James would have robbed. No one in this great bar knew why Portal was there, except to get goods to and from Canada. No one knew where 52 went. I had not expected more. No one mentioned the golf course. Maybe they could guess we weren't golfers.

52 ended here after another round of cold beer.