

MY JUNE 2015

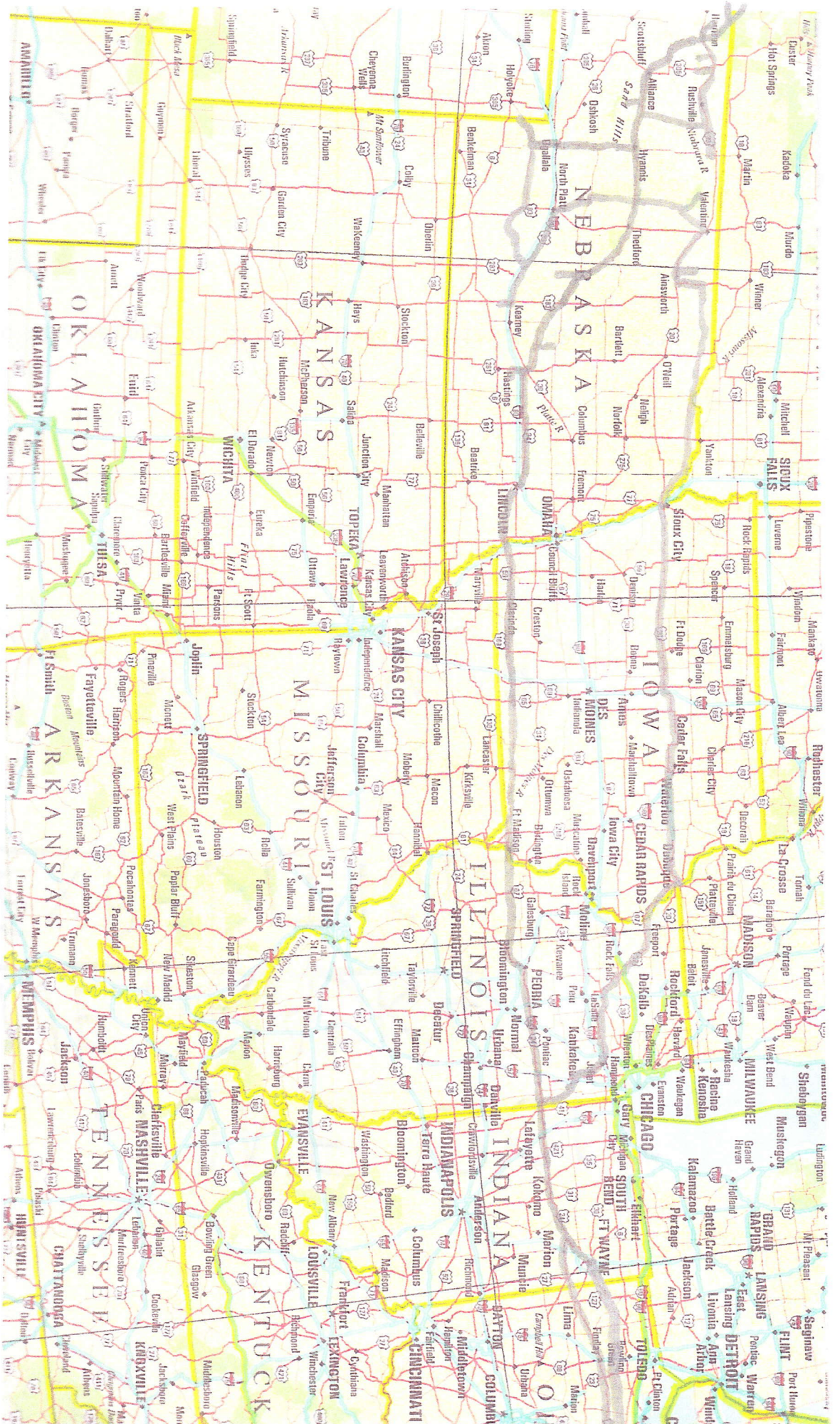
NEBRASKA

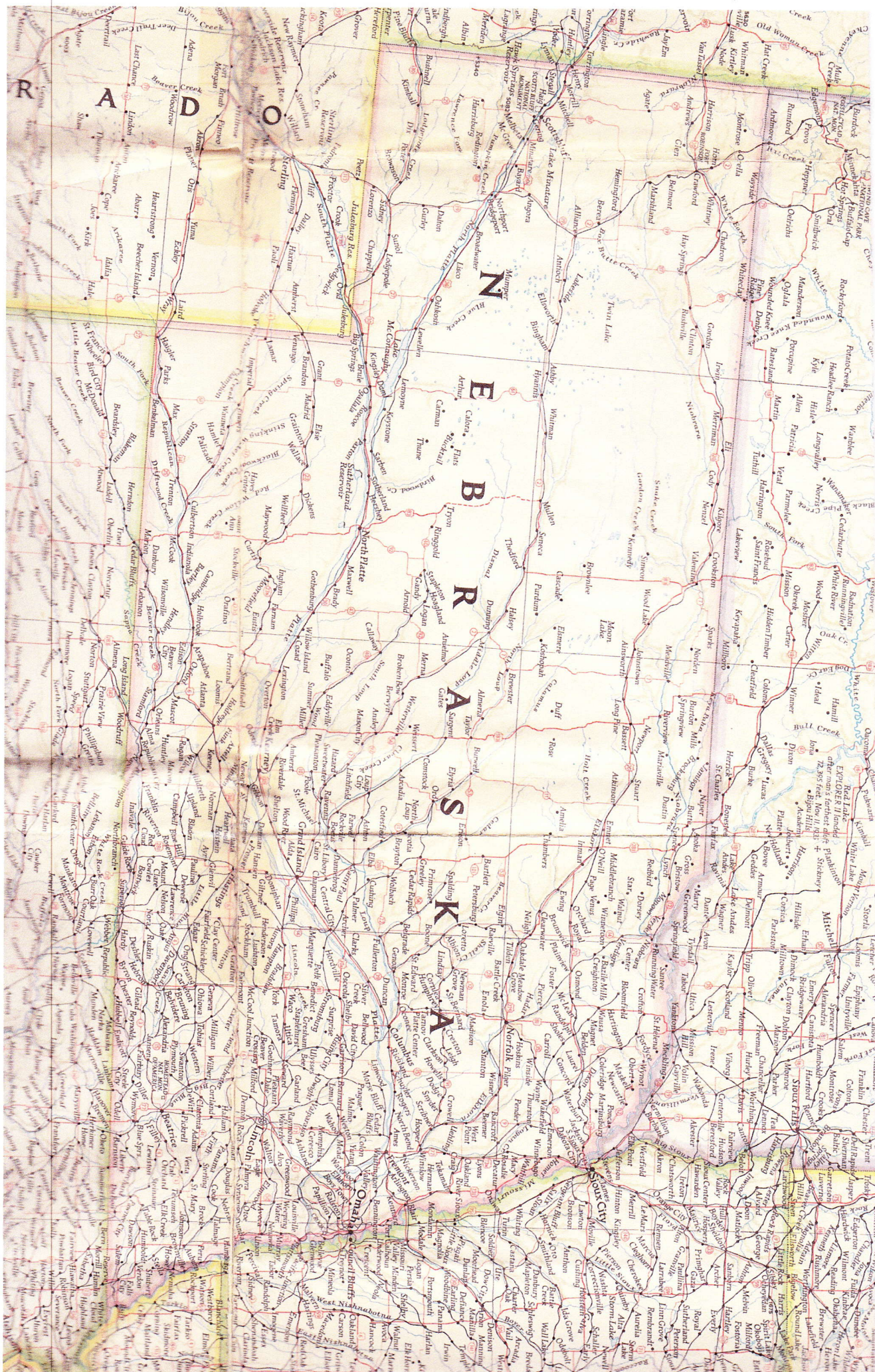
EXPEDITION

by RIP SMOPS

Dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Bell Friou, 1928 - 2016

My route





MY JUNE 2015 NEBRASKA EXPEDITION

by Rip Smops

Sometime at the very beginning of my road tripping career I decided I liked Nebraska. In fact, I mistakenly decided that Nebraska was the second best state to drive through, after Nevada. It really isn't all that great overall, but certain parts of it certainly carry an undyingly understated beauty, and U.S. route 30 in Nebraska deservedly ranks near or at the top of the lists of my all-time favorite roads. Otherwise, my love of Nebraska has a lot to do with championing an overlooked, mainly unremarkable place that most people probably don't want to go to or think about.

So I've made somewhat of a mission out of Nebraska. I took the tape of instrumental tracks that my brother Mr. Duck had recorded in 1985-1987, called "Frequent Ruins", and wrote lyrics that turned it into a Nebraska-themed concept album. In 1997 I went there to spend a whole week driving around the state. In 2001 and 2006 I made my wife Alice go with me on two "Prairie Trips", largely involving Nebraska, but also the Dakotas and neighboring states. Several other cross-country road trips have involved Nebraska in varying large degrees. I had last driven through there in 2013 on route 92. I was already desiring to go back and spend more time there, as a vacation, rationalizing that it was closer to my Ohio home than Nevada or El Paso, and suitably treeless. I needed to get away from trees, as is often the case.

I had a list of certain places I wanted to visit, and certain roads I wanted to drive. (I've never actually known anybody in Nebraska, except briefly in the mid-90's when I became slightly acquainted with an old woman in Blair named Eleanor Jensen, a grandmother of a housemate in Frisco.) This time, I also had a new motivation. In 2013 I had acquired a great many discarded USGS topographic quadrangle maps that the Oberlin College geology department had gotten rid of. Some of them were of rural areas in Nebraska. I decided to go see some of these otherwise random places, places I had been totally un-

aware of, now that I had the official maps of them. What I hadn't realized until I gathered them for my trip, was that the names of the quadrangles all began with D or E, and I had gotten the discarded remains of just that portion of the alphabetically-ordered Geology Department map collection.

I took a AAA Nebraska state map and marked the locations of desired roads, points of interest, and quadrangles, and planned out a route, which eventually had me zigzagging around the state, west north east south east west north east, in a rather silly fuel and time wasting manner.

DAY 1

I set out from Oberlin, Ohio on a Sunday morning. It was hard to find a place to eat breakfast without waiting in a big line. Americans have to eat out on late Sunday mornings. I drove west on U.S. 20, west on Ohio 281, then I was sent off on a detour. But I had my Ohio road atlas, and did my own renegade detour on the county road paralleling Ohio 281 one mile north, seeing some farming communities I had never before encountered. Then west on U.S. 24 and old route 24 into Fort Wayne, Indiana, where I spent a couple of hours having ice cream at Zesto, shopping at the food co-op, and having my afternoon walk while straddling bouts of rain. West on U.S. 24 all across Indiana and Illinois. Drove all the way to El Paso, Illinois, which is named "El Paso" even if it's in Illinois. I stayed in a motel there after a very long day's drive.

DAY 2

I strolled through downtown El Paso, which somehow seems very feminine of a town. I got the impression the town was run by women. West on U.S. 24. Stopped in Peoria to get Indian food for lunch in the university neighborhood, but the place was gone, and the other Indian place was gone, and I walked around looking for someplace cool to eat. Nothing seemed cool anymore, unlike several years before, last time I stopped in, when the area seemed surprisingly hip. So I frustratedly hungrily drove on the many empty miles west of Peoria, finally stopping in Canton at a Mexican joint. West on Illinois 9, and across the Mississippi to Fort Madison, Iowa. Afternoon



El Paso, Illinois



Custer County, Nebraska



111 0 1 2



111 0 1 2

walk there by the old fort next to the river, which is surrounded with goose shit, and over a pedestrian bridge over a busy railroad track. There was no pedestrian bridge over the second busy railroad track though, so I was trapped for a few minutes.

Here I began the first of two consecutive route 2's. This can be an interesting phenomenon, state highway numbers that continue into the next state. Like when I drove Illinois 92, Iowa 92, Nebraska 92, and Wyoming 92, all in a row. Sometimes roads change numbers when they cross state lines. Anyway, Iowa route 2, along the southern bottom of the state, is one of the most peaceful, uneventful, tranquil roads in the country. I don't remember any of it. I don't remember any of those towns I drove through. I think at one point I made a wrong turn and entered Missouri for a second. What I do remember is that I had dinner at a Pizza Hut somewhere, and there was a large Amish family in the Pizza Hut. The waitress was bringing out their pizza, but they were praying and she had to wait before serving it. Amish people are still an exotic curiosity to me. I tried to listen for snippets of their conversation, but they were the quietest very large family I've ever encountered. When they were done they all piled in a white van and drove off, which I thought they weren't supposed to do. That night I boondocked somewhere I can't remember.

DAY 3

Entered Nebraska City, where I stopped in at Lewis & Clark Center, Arbor Lodge, and finally downtown main Street. It's one of those towns that thinks it's very historic, and has lots of architectural edifices to prove it. Here I began Nebraska route 2, one of my destination roads that I had to drive the entire length of. It begins disappointingly. 50 miles of super-dull freeway from Nebraska City to Lincoln. I knew it wasn't going to get good till past Grand Island, which is really the case with pretty much any east-west Nebraska road.

Drove around Lincoln getting lost, then eventually landed in Haymarket, the "trendy" "offbeat" restaurant shopping area. There was one really unique thing there, a store called Licorice International, which looked like a candy store, but the name was true, all they had was licorice from around the world.

I sampled some nationalities, and settled for Australian. It was black, and tasted like licorice. Also I visited a tourist information center and received information about Nebraska and also where to find the Indian restaurant in Lincoln.

It was way on the south side of town. It took me forever to find it. It was one of the most artfully, deceptively, impossibly hidden suburban restaurants you'll never find. There were people in there, though. The menu had a strange thing prominently featured, a scale of one to five for how spicy you want your food. Often at Indian restaurants, the waiter will ask you your spicy preference, "hot", "mild", "medium". But it's never in numbers on the menu. When the waitress took my order, she asked what number I wanted. I usually say "medium hot", so I figured that was a four.

"Oh no, four is too hot. Even the local Indian people don't order four."

"What? Huh!? All right, give me a three, then."

"Three is too hot, also. Usually the locals order two."

"Are you kidding me!?! This is Nebraska! What the hell are these numbers for then? Give me three. And some hot sauce on the side just in case."

They took their sweet time sprinkling a three's worth of capicum on my food. When I finally got my plate, I placed a forkful in my mouth. It was the hottest food I've ever tasted. Burning tongue-scorching devilous unbearableness. I had to get all sorts of raita, naan, rice, and lassi to even put that stuff in my mouth. It was dangerously unedible. Those people were out of their minds. So the burning question is: What is a four or a five?

I had to drive all of Nebraska route 2, and somehow I thought that it merged with interstate 80 from Lincoln to Grand Island, although the map didn't exactly say so. As I approached interstate 80, a sign said "End 2", meaning route 2 was over. Even though it starts again further west. Hooray! That meant I didn't have to go on the interstate. I hadn't gone on any yet, and now I decided I would consciously avoid them for the rest of the trip. I happily headed west on U.S. 34, going through those towns you never see when you take 80. I needed a milkshake to cool off my innards after that Lincoln Indian "three" meal. I went to a Runza, which is a Nebraska state fast food chain.

They had mini milkshakes for a dollar. I ordered two different flavors. They were both terrible. It was dark and I started seeking a place to stay. I got to Grand Island, which has myriads of hotels on the same street. I checked 'em all out, couldn't make up my mind, and called Sancho, my special travel agent. He found me a great deal at another hotel in a totally different area. SLEEPPPPP.

DAY 4

My first topographic map assignment. Doniphan, Nebraska. It turns out that my hotel was probably actually in Doniphan quadrangle, although not for certain since the map was old and the hotel and adjacent freeway exit were new. But I was there. Drove around the quadrangle with this big map in my lap. Looking for places to check out. The landscape was featureless. A lot of the things on the map were no longer there in real life. A lot of the roads that looked okay on the map were actually perilously muddy and puddled. That became a general problem on this trip. Nebraska was wet. Wetter than it had been in years. It must have been an incredibly rainy spring.

Doniphan was kind of ugly. I got back onto the new, second route 2. 15 miles later I got off again to go check out the Elba, Nebraska quadrangle. North on Nebraska 11, passing hundreds of bicyclists. There was some enormous bicycle gang migration. Later I found out they were going to a place called Dannebrog, a little Danish theme village for bicycle tourists. Elba was a small village on the Loup River, surrounded by little hills with muddy roads on them that looked okay on the map. I had to turn around a lot rather than getting my van quagnired.

Back on route 2. Stopped at the Buffalo County Park in Ravenna for an afternoon wander. Wished I had driven out here the night before, for free camping. It seemed like a great boondock spot, although there were mosquitoes. But then I would have missed out on the glories of Elba and Doniphan. Visited a tourist information center in Broken Bow. I chatted with the slightly senile woman working there, who was very friendly and concerned that she didn't have all the maps I needed. And she had these stories about meeting the governor at a barbe-

cue, and a rich billionaire who built a top secret celebrity golf course in an obscure corner of the Sand Hills.

From Broken Bow I turned south on some local gravel roads to reach my third topographic quadrangle of the day, which might have been "Eddyville NE" but I'm not sure. There were no towns on it, except a ghost town called Buckeye, which when I got there had a historical marker. This area was actually very pretty. The roads were all unpaved, but not wet, and there were lots of cows. This one I was glad I went to.

Got to Nebraska National Forest at sundown. I wanted to boondock on one of the forest roads at the west end, but it turned out to be four wheel drive terrain, so I drove all the way back to the official campground for the night, and paid \$8.

DAY 5

West on Nebraska 2. Went off the road to see Seneca, where I found some friendly goats in somebody's yard. They let me take their picture. Stopped in Mullen, the county seat and only town in Hooker County, to find breakfast. For being a bustling lonely outpost in the vast Sand Hills, Mullen was not very friendly. I found what appeared to be a hipster artist cafe. They claimed to have food, but when I ordered some they didn't seem to think they should prepare it for me, or that they even knew how, or really had food. They were much more interested in gossiping with their hipster Sand Hills buddies walking in the door. I think I at some point received a bagel.

This was the Sand Hills, an illustrious legendary scenic nowhere-land. It is thousands of square miles of sand dunes with grass growing on them. Hardly anybody lives there because you can't do anything with the land, except some cattle grazing. It is very pretty, and also impossible to really get your bearings in. There are no landmarks, except the road and the occasional lake. The hills are all the same size and all look the same, therefore you can't really tell one spot from another. Nevertheless, it is a very pleasant region for driving in, and I did a lot of Sand Hills driving on this trip.

The Sand Hills end around Alliance, where I got off to visit Carhenge, passing a Mexican restaurant at the junction.



Custer County, Nebraska



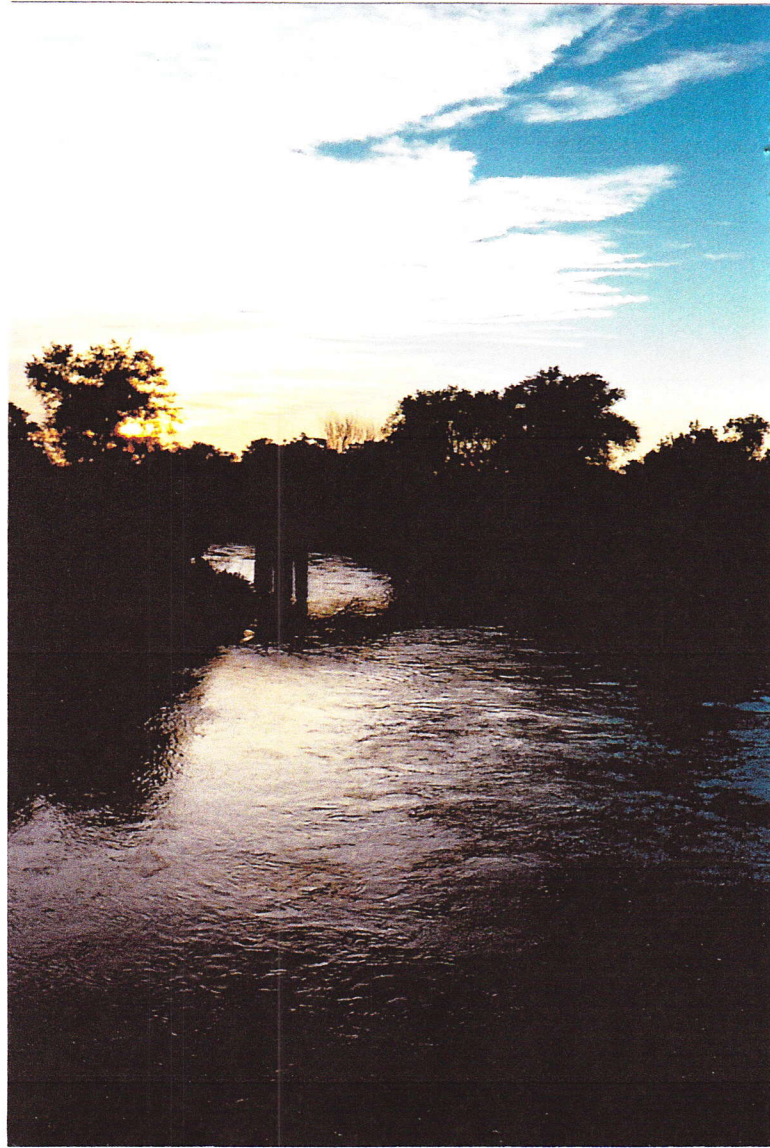


THE END OF THE WORLD



Middle Loup River

Nebraska National
Forest



Thomas County



Seneca



I had been advised to inquire at the Carhenge gift shop for directions to the good Mexican restaurant in town. I had been to Carhenge a few times and didn't know they had a gift shop. There it was, Stonehenge made out of cars, and a whole bunch of other sculptures made out of cars. And other tourists this time. It had been a while. Pretty cool, as usual. And there was a gift shop. They told me to go to the restaurant I passed driving in. So I did. It was pretty good. Then I walked around downtown Alliance, which is a small city with "Historic" structures.

Back on route 2, I stopped to check on the progress of the Niobrara River. The Niobrara flows along the entire length of Northern Nebraska. I recall that at Agate Fossil Beds National Monument, about 30 miles upstream, the "river" is a trickle about four inches wide. And it's still about 100 miles downstream from its source. At this point where it crosses route 2, with a big sign announcing it, it looks like puddles in a big marsh.

Visited Crawford, a town emanating a "wild west" vibe. I drove by a house with a collie dog in the yard. The dog saw me and ran over to my car with its tennis ball, for me to throw. I've never thrown balls for dogs while sitting in the driver seat before. He/she reminded me of my trendy border collie at home.

The big destination now was Toadstool Park, in Nebraska's extreme northwest corner. I've been there a lot. It's a delightful badlands rock playground with a free campground in a National Grassland. My plan was to camp there two nights, and hike the national scenic trail to Hudson Meng Bison Kill Site, a nearby attraction.

To get to Toadstool Park, you take a left on a gravel country road a few miles north of Crawford, then drive beside railroad tracks for many miles until the turnoff. Well, I was about halfway there, when there appeared a new lake supplanting the road. That was never there before, I thought. It was much wider than the road. There was no way around. I cursed my luck and turned back. Sigh. Finish route 2.

Driving up to South Dakota, where it stops being 2 and is thereafter route 71, I passed a sign directing to a different road to Toadstool Park, something I hadn't before noticed or

considered, and another one near the state line. So I still had options. Right inside South Dakota is a picturesque dilapidated ghost town named Ardmore. I turned around and got off at the first Toadstool Park exit. Dangerously rutted, puddled mud road. Rats. My only option now was the middle road, which according to my Forest Service map is "unimproved" Sugarloaf Road. I was wary, but this turned out to be the one. A thoroughly lovely, dry one-lane dirt road rolling through empty grassland, no distractions or civilization or hassles or mud. Just a few cattle and an owl in a cattle guard. Happiness at sunset. Spent a peaceful night at my beloved Toadstool Park.

DAY 6

Met some out-of-place-looking tourists at the campground. I wanted to avoid them but they were very friendly and unavoidable. They were a middle-aged couple from Wisconsin, on their first road trip, looking to Discover America. They seemed delighted with Toadstool Park, exclaiming that they had never imagined such beauty. I asked how they had gotten there. They took the road beside the railroad tracks. They hadn't seen any lake in the road. "Huh?" I told them about Sugarloaf Road, and showed them on my map.

I tried to go on my big hike, but the trail had literally turned into a river. I saw some other intrepid hikers try to wade through it, but hell if I was going to. It really had rained a lot in Nebraska. God damn. Did a short hike to the usual Toadstool Park sights in unusual mud, then headed back to Sugarloaf Road, which incidentally is only "Sugarloaf Road" on the map. There's no sign calling it that. Up ahead on this one-lane road was a very slow-moving vehicle. When I got up to it, it pulled over and stopped. It was from Wisconsin. They were a little surprised to see me, then they spoke worshippingly about how this was the true America they've been searching for, the most beautiful place they've ever seen, their lives are now transformed, stuff like that.

I wished them well and returned to Crawford, stopping for ice cream at a Twist. My new plan was to hike at Soldier Creek Wilderness, which you get to by driving through Fort Robinson State Park. At the entrance to the wilderness area, it's a bit



Carhenge
Box Butte County





2018-2019
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Niobrara River

Box Butte County







Ardmore, South Dakota



Sioux County, Nebraska



Toadstool Park

Sioux County

Oglala National
Grassland

Nebraska



Toadstool Park
Oglala National Grassland
Sioux County



Boots And Saddle Trail
Soldier Creek Wilderness
Nebraska National Forest
Sioux County

unclear which way you go for the various trails, and my map wasn't much help. I was walking in a grassy field when a jeep comes rolling up with a ranger driving. I asked if I was on the Trooper Trail. He said no and showed me where to go. I asked if we were in the wilderness area, considering my understanding that motor vehicles were prohibited in such places. He said normally they don't drive there, but the other day they had to rescue somebody who did something stupid, so yes they were driving. That kind of ruined my perception of this "wilderness" deal. I thought it was supposed to be total absolute, and if you endangered yourself then that's your tough luck. Oh well. It was a beautiful hot hike through a devastated forest fired hilly prairie land, with lots of tire tracks in the grass.

Stopped in at Chadron in the evening. There was a rather good local hard rock station on the radio. I was hoping there'd be something going on downtown, but it was pretty quiet. I went searching for the Spotted Tail Trailhead, which took some doing in the dark. It wasn't very safe to drive or park in, being all rutted and sloped. A slightly uncomfortable boondock for the night.

DAY 7

There was supposed to be a Spotted Tail Trail, but it disappeared soon after starting. In both directions. Went back into Chadron and visited the visitor center, where I spoke with, rather, listened to, the talkative visitor center host, who kept rattling on about how he's been there 29 years and everything's going to hell and the funding's been pulled out, etc. But I made a big score there, finding the free Nebraska Public Access Atlas, which showed every road in Nebraska and all the possible public Boondocking WMAs (hunting areas). Had to discreetly but firmly sneak out during a tirade.

Went to the Coffee Mill Trailhead for a further hiking attempt, but again the trail soon vanished in the weeds and logs. These places are in the Pine Ridge area of the Nebraska National Forest, which is supposedly Nebraska's premier hiking destination. But I'm the kind of hiker that needs a real trail to follow. Can't just go scampering aimlessly through the woods.

There's not actually that many trees there.

Visited Gordon, and took a walk around the town, which was slightly larger than I imagined. Gordon is the home town of Sarah, our cleaning lady in Ohio. I thought I would honor her heritage with a stopover. Then I drove south on route 27, another empty gorgeous Sand Hills highway. Route 27 is another nebraska road that's broken up into two non-continuous sections, like route 2, but there's an unpaved connection going through Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, where I hoped to spend the night. Going south from route 2, for a little while the road was gravel and okay, but when it crosses a county line, the road became paved but full of incessant potholes, requiring driving 10 MPH for far too long, so I gave up and went back.

I used my new Public Access Atlas and located Frye Lake WMA near Hyannis. The driveway to the lake had some pretty big puddles in it, which I had to skillfully avoid, to secure a safe overnight boondock site. The wind was blowing fiercely and a storm was brewing. I slept for a couple of hours but was wokened by pounding winds and rain. I realized it was a dangerous situation, possibly being flooded in, so I got up and quickly drove to the WMA entrance, where there was a small paved spot to park in.

DAY 8

So I'm lying there on my bed in my van, in a little paved spot apparently at a barbed-wire fence next to a ranch or farm. The sun is rising, I'm safe from the storm, starting to open my eyes. Slowly I glimpse a big cow or bull across the road, standing at the fence watching my van. That's nice, I think, a cow greeting me in the morning. It takes me a few minutes to leisurely turn and look at the other window. And there, staring right into the window, right there, is a horse. I jump out of bed to confront my morning greeters. I step outside, and there at the fence I'm parked next to, are three of the friendliest horses I've ever met. (I'm not sure I've met any other friendly ones.) They were waiting for me to get up so they could nuzzle with me and purr or whatever happy friendly horses do to express joy and affection. The cow was just standing there being aloof nearby, but these horses loved me. What



Soldier Creek
Wilderness

Nebraska National
Forest

Sioux County





Grant County





Grant County



Venango

a great way to wake up. This was the high point of the trip.

Drove south, using the public restroom in Arthur, and trying to get breakfast and a shower in Ogalalla, not a pleasant search despite the variety of truckstops and such. Landed in Venango, on the Colorado border, site of another USGS topographic quadrangle. Remember those? Drove into Colorado to extensively explore the featureless area depicted on the map. Downtown Venango had the singular surprise feature of a young dancing black girl in a fancy dress.

From there I headed east a long way on route 23. Dickens was my next (and last) topographic quadrangle. On the map from 1960 or so, Dickens was a small incorporated community, but when I got there the sign said "unincorporated". It was a deserted ghost town. The abandoned church was about the only structure still surviving. It seemed sad. I continued west a long way, then eventually turned north for Cozad.

Cozad was one of my favorite small towns from way back. I'm not sure why. I just always get a good vibe there. Or sometimes anyway. Maybe not this time. But I figured I should spend the evening strolling there, and then drive on east to Sandy Channel, one of my all-time favorite campgrounds. But then I looked in my motel coupon book and found I could get a cheap room at a crappy motel in Cozad. I wouldn't have to leave my little town, and I needed a shower. So I stayed.

DAY 9

Checked out Cozad some more, ate at a good apple-themed cafe downtown, got a personal tour of the Robert Henri House, got gas and stuff. Then drove east 35 miles to visit Sandy Channel state recreation area. Wandered around there in the daytime. It was pointless. That place is excellent for camping, but little else. Turned around and drove back where I came from, on U.S. 30, my favorite road. Stopped in Gothenburg to exercise in the city park, where a weird woman flirted with me briefly. I took route 30 as far as North Platte, where I ate Japanese food.

From there I turned north onto route 97, another great empty road across the Sand Hills. Some of those north-south roads are especially great and empty. I was heading back up to the

northern end of the state, which of course makes little sense unless you're me. I passed the invisible mystery billionaire golf course on the Dismal River I had heard tell of. I stopped for the night somewhere in Cherry County to boondock at a historical marker. No one was there, anywhere.

DAY 10

I went to Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest to go hiking. This is a very unique national forest, in that it has no trees. Why it's a National Forest instead of a National Grassland remains a shrouded mystery. It also has no hiking trails. I stopped at the campground picnic area to make breakfast, and there was a tree at my picnic table. So maybe it's a forest after all. I talked to a ranger and asked where to go hiking. They said to use one of the "forest roads" indicated on my National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map. The map showed roads, but the actual landscape didn't. I parked at some vague gate, and followed an old track in the grass, which was a numbered "forest road" route, and ran into a herd of cattle that got extremely upset at my intrusion. They all started howling and hollering and moaning and mooing, making a great sonic uproar with their many individual cow tones. I ran back to the van, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile back, to get my digital "handy recorder" to record the ruckus. I could still hear them all the way back at the van, and they were still whining upon my return. Omigod, it was like the biggest event in that herd's history.

So they wouldn't let me hike on Forest Road 621, so I went across the state highway to Forest Road 601, which is where someone once drove a pickup truck through the grass. The map showed the road forking off in two directions within a mile of where I started, but who knows where that actually was. I got to an unpassable locked gate, turned around and went searching for the other fork.

I got lost. As I said, it's pretty impossible to keep your bearings in the Sand Hills. Everything you see is just grass and thousands of little indistinguishable featureless hills. At some point I came upon my footprints in the sand, going both directions, meaning it was the third time I had been in that spot. I figured it out and got back to my car and drove

Dickens

Cherry
County



Cherry County



Merritt Reservoir State Recreation Area



Samuel R. McKelvie National Forest
Cherry County



off.

Stopped in the somewhat famed Western town of Valentine for dinner. In Ainsworth I looked for the quaint, bygone Skinner's Motor Court where Alice and I had stayed in an antiquated motor court room during our 2006 Prairie Trip. But it was now shut down, which was unsurprising and a little sad. So I looked in my Public Access Atlas and found a couple of nearby Wildlife Management Areas. That atlas shows every road in Nebraska, but doesn't tell you how horrible and muddy and undriveable they might be. I got real close to both of these WMAs, but couldn't do the last mile without getting stuck in deep mud. So I wasted an hour and a half and had to blow money on a Comfort Inn or something in Ainsworth.

DAY 11

I looked for the "ghost town" of Meadville, but again, the road turned to mush within a mile of my destination. Had lunch in the city park in nearby Springview, where a sign said "Free camping here! All boondockers welcome in our lovely secluded dry city park!" I think that's what it said. I cursed my luck, and headed east on route 12 along the northern edge of Nebraska. Crossed the Niobrara River again, which by this point was almost a mile wide. It sure had grown.

I stopped in Monowi, which is legendary, or should be, for being the world's smallest town. Population 1. It used to be bigger, but everybody died or left. There's a Monowi Tavern that is open for business. The mayor was in there making hamburgers, below an official "Monowi (population) 1" highway sign. I asked her if she was the "one", and she said yes. She had a "Monowi, Nebraska's Smallest" T-shirt on, and seemed to be capitalizing on her unique circumstances, but she also seemed a little shy and uncomfortable with that being her lot in life. I walked around town for a little bit and wondered where all the other people went.

A little further east I crossed the Niobrara River again for the last time before it confluences into the Missouri. This time it was completely dry again, an empty riverbed. What the hell? Where did it, they, all go?

Then I drove the rest of route 12, stopping in Crofton for

an afternoon stroll. Got to South Sioux City and that was the end of Nebraska.

Had dinner in Sioux City, Iowa, and then drove east through the night on U.S. route 20, which is one of the most boring non-interstate roads imaginable, and now I did want to stay in a hotel. In Fort Dodge I contacted Sancho for lodging help, and he said all the hotels in that area were over \$100 a night. There are these weird obscure little regions of the United States where for some reason the hotels all charge excessive amounts disproportionate to the relative significance of the local area. I ended up staying in the next town, Webster City, for \$89 or so. I couldn't find a legitimate boondock spot.

DAY 12

Route 20 continued being boring all across the state of Iowa. Then at Dubuque, the eastern terminus, after jogging in a park in 200% humidity, I turned southeast on U.S. route 52, which stayed in Iowa for awhile, following the Mississippi. And that road was very scenic. Hills and river views and startling cathedrals and picturesque villages. At one point I saw what appeared like a small ski area across the river in Illinois. Stopped in Bellevue and got a Subway sandwich which I ate at a riverview picnic table around sunset. It was very lovely.

Later, route 52 crosses the Mississippi, and there's an island with a small town on it, where I got an ice cream cone and strolled the sundown scene with my sundae.

Stopped for the night at a quiet roadside park in Illinois.

DAY 13

At this point I was heading home, obviously. I drove all of U.S. route 52 in Illinois. A pattern emerged during my home-bound drive, wherein I would drive the entire length of each state on a certain numbered U.S. highway, then change roads when I changed states. Hence: Iowa, route 20; Illinois 52; Indiana 24, and Ohio 224. Route 52 was the loveliest of these roads. It was really a very pleasant drive across Illinois, except in Kankakee where there was an incredible slowdown traffic



Monowi





Niobrara River
Brown and Keya Paha Counties
Nebraska



Joliet, Illinois

jam mess for miles, which didn't seem right because Kankakee's not that big.

At Joliet I found a Rax, which is a highly rare fast food chain with an "Endless Salad Bar". There used to be one in Oberlin where I used to pig out on salad, but then one day it was gone, taken away, and I was sad that I didn't foresee it and pig out on salad one last time. Today there about three Raxes left in the world. So I thrillingly swooped in for my attack. The price for the salad bar had spiralled up to \$9.50, and while it was still Endless, none of it was fresh anymore, it tasted bad, and I didn't want to pig out anymore. So goodbye, Rax.

As mentioned, I got on U.S route 24 at the Illinois/Indiana state line. I've travelled this road a lot, it's quite familiar. It got to raining really heavily. I had to stay in a motel again, in Huntington, because it was raining so hard, and besides, It's Indiana and who knows where you can boondock there.

DAY 14

I'm still on the road. I haven't gotten home yet. I cheated and got on route 224 while still in Huntington, Indiana. This was a new road for me, and I saw some new Ohio vistas. Took an afternoon walk through Findlay, where it started raining on me again.

At Willard I stopped at a Pepperidge Farm Outlet Store, with incredibly cheap baked goods. But they wouldn't sell to me. It was for Pepperidge Farm Elite Members only.

Then I went home. I rushed to Drug Mart to get my archaic film camera pictures developed so I could present a special Nebraska Trip Presentation to certain select friends.

This is the end of my tale. Despite all the interesting adventures, explorations, and discoveries here conveyed, I think what I'm proudest of is that for all those thousands of miles driven, I never once set foot on an Interstate highway. I think I'll retire Special Mission status from wet, soggy, formerly dry and arid Nebraska. But I expect that some distant day I'll forget that, and its magical unremarkableness will lure me back.

THE END