

This Land: Geneva to North Bay

We four friends packed up and said goodbye at the same time, partly because the weather was typical Geneva, New York weather: cool and wet and promising to get wetter. Zack wanted to linger and perhaps stomp about Ithaca. Mark wanted to haul his kayak off his SUV and spend a few hours fishing (which I found out later he did get the chance to do – “one jerk on one end waiting for another”). Penelope, with a smile on her face, drove home back to help out her daughter clean up a royal mess with her newly purchased and immediately demolished car.

Me? I hit route 14 north and headed toward the New York Thruway. I resumed playing the CD I had listened to on the way into Geneva and Crosby, Stills, and Nash started singing “49 Bye-byes.” How apt for a reunion weekend in which we crashed the other class reunions to meet and be interviewed by me about our Beatles Birthday generation.

So began my cross country road trip combining these Studs Terkel-esque radio interviews of my college classmates with visiting the sites sung about by Woody Guthrie.

My trip from Geneva, despite persistently wet, was equally mindlessly numbing. Albany to Troy to Bennington to Brattleboro to Concord and, realizing what the hell, I pushed toward Portsmouth, crossed the river into Maine and stumbled into the Day’s Inn at Kittery. I must confess how much I love sleeping alone. Right. So it usually was me and Rachel Maddow all night.

A night of abandon
Is best in tandem

It struck me as I crossed the bridge into Maine (three times as it turned out because, lacking GPS, I got lost three times) how many rivers I had already crossed and how many more I would cross over the next month: Erie Canal, Hudson, Hoosic, Piscataqua, Merrimack, Ottawa). There’s plenty of water around here. It likely won’t be the same for me in about week as I cut across North Dakota. I wondered how different would be the terrain see: these rolling rounded tree-filled mountains of New Hampshire – soft, green, convoluted, boulder marked, rocky streams, water-laden, the granite escarpment -- to spill into the flatlands of the Midwest and the colored stark drama of the Rockies.

What awaits? Miles and miles of trees. Islands tree covered in the great lakes. The redwood behemoths. The heavy mists of the Great Smokies. The enormous siloes and the crop dusters. Farms houses clustered amongst the shade trees. Lumber trucks on windy, switch-back roads. The folks in Boone, North Carolina, claiming their places on the sidewalk for the parade. The whole lot of empty heading toward Winnemucca. The Upper Peninsula and all the snowmobile parks. The advertisements in Michigan for pasties, which in New Jersey does not refer to pastry pies. The knoll I drove past in Texas that the sign referred to as a mountain, soon follow by a real mountain: the Capulin National Monument, a volcano. The playdough

tumble of rocks and boulders in Nevada. Fumes clouding above the Oklahoma ammunition plant on the road to Dallas. Driving through Minnesota and confused about how on earth does UPS deliver Amazon Prime out here? Then again seagulls in Utah? The sky in Tennessee smeared like a chalkboard.

So sick I am of driving in this eastern rain. Rain, rain. What cannot be changed must be endured.

I pattered about before I rang the bell at the home of John Rudolph. We hadn't seen each for 40 years. Rudolph would be my third individual of Classmates from 1975, excluding the wonderfully pretentious, ponderous, and portentous interview of Rich, Mark, Zack, Susie, Robin at Hobart and William Smith. The highlight of that group interview? When Mark replied, after I asked about our generation's contribution: "Not guilty."

God, how I love them all. We ought end this interview series as classmate Mark suggested: a blast in the booth with booze and albums.

As Woody appreciated, it is people who fill your life and make it matter. People with commitment, conviction, a cause.

What scars, successes, failures, screw-ups, contributions did our generation bring? What did we experience in our years? What hard times? What good times? So far in all the talks, I've found out how we all have had our share of mistakes, screw-ups, failures, scars, hurts. From failing a class to being fired from his news show, from cancer in the breasts to divorces, from job changes to death of loved ones.

Even now, early on in these interviews of my Beatles Birthday classmates, I am beginning to sense a pattern and harmony of appreciation. What matters? As Penelope said, "being a mom." As John said, "my two daughters." As Susie said, "my grand-children." As Robin said, "my family and the beauty of Keuka Lake."

Hard times. John and I ended up chatting about the perception of hard times. He's been sitting in the catbird seat of news of the last forty years and seeing it all, especially with his more recent promotion of giving a voice to the voices of immigrants in the United States. God bless John.

Hard times.

Some facts:

- Vietnam War – low estimate of 1,353,000 killed
- D-Day casualties – 6,603 (US only) in one day
- Johnston flood – 2,209 drowned

- Rape of Nanking – 300,000 killed
- Cambodia Pol Pot – 2,000,000 murdered
- USA Lynchings from 1882-1951 – 4,730
- World War II – 60,000,000 dead
- Irish potato famine – 1 million dead
- Rwanda – 800,000 killed
- Armenia genocide – 1,500,000
- 1953 polio victims in USA – 60,000
- 1918 influenza epidemic - 20 – 40 million dead
- Great railway strike of 1877 – four killed in Scranton, 2 in Shamokin, 16 shot in Reading, 20 killed in Pittsburgh
- Ludlow Colorado – 11 children dead by suffocation and dozens of miners shot to death

Now you might guess why I am conducting this Woody Guthrie song tour.

Hard Travelin'
Words and Music by Woody Guthrie

*I've been havin' some hard travelin', I thought you knowed
I've been havin' some hard travelin', way down the road
I've been havin' some hard travelin', hard ramblin', hard gamblin'
I've been havin' some hard travelin', lord*

*I've been ridin' them fast rattlers, I thought you knowed
I've been ridin' them flat wheelers, way down the road
I've been ridin' them blind passengers, dead-enders, kickin' up cinders
I've been havin' some hard travelin', lord*

*I've been hittin' some hard-rock minin', I thought you knowed
I've been leanin' on a pressure drill, way down the road
Hammer flyin', air-hose suckin', six foot of mud and I shore been a muckin'
And I've been hittin' some hard travelin', lord*

*I've been hittin' some hard harvestin', I thought you knowed
North Dakota to Kansas City, way down the road
Cuttin' that wheat, stackin' that hay, and I'm tryin' make about a dollar a day
And I've been havin' some hard travelin', lord*

*I've been working that Pittsburgh steel, I thought you knowed
I've been a dumpin' that red-hot slag, way down the road
I've been a blasting, I've been a firin', I've been a pourin' red-hot iron
I've been hittin' some hard travelin', lord*

*I've been layin' in a hard-rock jail, I thought you knowed
I've been a laying out 90 days, way down the road
Damned old judge, he said to me, "It's 90 days for vagrancy."
And I've been hittin' some hard travelin', lord*

*I've been walking that Lincoln highway, I thought you knowed,
I've been hittin' that 66, way down the road
Heavy load and a worried mind, lookin' for a woman that's hard to find,
I've been hittin' some hard travelin', lord*

And we think we got it tough?

I love how my sardonic classmate friend Mark said during that initial classmate interview that his key factor in carrying on is how he puts feet on the floor each morning when he gets out of bed and smells brewed coffee. Of course, what interests me is what encourages you to get out of bed in the first place.

What as the best thing you did? It tends to be something to do with love and flesh.

John shared how hopeful he is, even optimistic, partly because we are in a mess now. How good our world really is and can be, despite the pockets of horror out there. We've come a long way, and the baby boomers helped make it so.

After leaving John and his lovely wife Cathy, it was the Pilgrim Inn at Plymouth, New Hampshire, for Monday night. Delightful. Although, the real Plymouth is a little farther east and I'm uncertain if the New Hampshire settlers considered themselves Pilgrims. No matter. The owners of the Pilgrim Inn was a family from Pakistan. Come to think of it, the register clerk in Kittery was named Patel. Pilgrim Patels and Pakistanis, yes.

It is a wonderful new world. When I went for the free morning coffee in the lobby, the third daughter of the hotel owner smiled as she exited the lobby, but came right back to place the pile of newspapers on the reception desk. The family pitches in just like the way I grew up in our family store and paint factory.

I enjoyed the Pilgrim Inn's little individual cabins as well as the rooms in a row like comfortable stables. For dinner I went to a grocery store for candy, chips, and a sandwich with bourbon and wine I bought at the gas station in Kittery before interviewing John. It saves money. The next morning before checkout, a young French speaking couple from Quebec were confused when no one came to the register when the range the bell and they wanted to return their room key-card. I said just leave it because you already got your receipt. We were the only guests.

Plymouth to Quebec: 13,219 miles on the odometer at Plymouth. Started at 12,505. What would be the mileage at the end of this odyssey, for these are the early stages? It will end up at 21,562 on my odometer.

Entering Quebec: what a joy to be able to cross into another country and be asked only to provide identification and registration for my car. The border officer also asked if I were carrying any weapons because Canada doesn't want lots of us buckaroos (or yahoos) from the United States packing. Now, I did have a buck knife concealed under my car seat but the Canadian customs inspector didn't need to know that. I've been to other places where the borders are much tougher to enter. Oh yes, the toughest I ever faced was when I flew from Nicaragua into Miami and had to go through my nation's Port of Entry. It took two hours.

Striking me also are the names of places I see around here in this Canadian stretch and what I suspect I will see in days to come. How the names – St. Johnsbury, Littleton, Plymouth, Portland, Quebec, Magog, Ottawa, Ste. Catherine de Hately – will change as I head elsewhere. The names signifying history and heritage. Pay attention to the names. I do love the difference between the French and the English: Boulevard de Horizon. Aka: Ridge road.

Soon these names would give way to Trinidad, Santa Rosa, Dalles, Crescent City, Salinas, Coalinga, Winnemucca, Reno, Memphis, Starkville.

Now finally I am arrived at North Bay, Ontario, and, finally, after becoming lost downtown in the muddle of construction, finally settling in at the Super 8 and walking down to the Churchill for a beer and sandwich at the bar. I do like to try the local IPA's. Three fellows and a lady sat near me at the bar. Naturally, I eavesdropped. All young. All starting out. All part of a theatrical troupe, three of them visiting from Australia. The fellow seated next to me was gracious enough to invite me to join the conversation. God bless the young and undeterred! They will, as we did, change the world.

Yes, it is not lost upon me the irony of touring to write about the sites sung about by Woody Guthrie in a 2014 red Miata convertible, five gears. Although, Woody might have the first laugh because it has been raining for most of this trip. His dust bowl drought, my rainfall.

Before I arrived at Northern Bay I skirted past Mattawa, Ontario: the farthest north I've ever been on this continent. I couldn't help but think of folksinger Stan Roger's song about the Northwest Passage and the old explorers of that region replaced by him driving to Vancouver.

God bless the chance to journey. A longish journey. Still, a journey, a journey, like most, discovering love.

Love. Appreciative love. To cherish. What my classmate Robin said in that cramped interview room: to appreciate the beauty that is in front of us. To soak it in. To be part of it.