

# Beans and I on the Loose

A Traveler and his Cat Exploring America.

Book Two

2018

## A Hot Mess

JOHN LEE KIRN



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A traveler and his cat exploring the back roads of America

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By

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As if it really matters...

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where-” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“-so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”

*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll, 1865

# A Hot Mess

## ARIZONA

Finally!

Finally the long winter's layover in southwest Arizona came to a premature end in February. I couldn't sit still any longer. We moved on, south, to slowly begin our journey for the year. The speed at which we travel is a matter of weather. We can't (or won't) go anywhere until the rest of the country warms up. A cold front from Canada had moved down upon the U.S. so all places seemed equal and the urge to move was too great to ignore. Although the wind was fierce out of the west the drive south to just outside of Yuma went well considering broadside twenty-five mph winds all the way. We arrived at a small VFW Bureau of Land Management (otherwise known as BLM) area just outside of town. I had stayed there before and found it refreshing to see the homeless encampment in among the cottonwood trees bordering the area had been cleared out and cleaned up. The wind continued to howl; the skies were brown with dust. A man walked by wearing a dust mask. *It must be bad out there.* That night around midnight I was awoken by the loud sound of an engine. I thought of the motor used for parasailing. I then realized a low throbbing sound of a pulsejet motor. This continued on and off for an hour and there was no sleep to be had with this contraption flying low and directly overhead. I could only figure a drone being used by the Border Patrol for surveillance of illegal migration traffic. Just a wild guess.

We left before sunrise the next morning to begin a big day of food shopping and filling up fuel and water. Half the day was shot before putting Yuma in the rearview mirror. Ten miles further along lay another free camp area just south of Wellton, another place I had stayed before but Claire, my GPS lady, had other ideas and sent us on the "scenic route". This route showed our destination being over thirty miles away. I could see her tour would take us right pass where I wanted to go so I let her have her fun with me for this time. You will be hearing about more of Claire's antics throughout this book, guaranteed. This small piece of Arizona Trust Land is good for an overnight stop although there are some who obviously stay here much longer than that. It is a small, rather flat desolate looking place but that evening proved otherwise. Around nine P.M. as I lay in bed reading I could hear the approach of a helicopter. Looking out the window I saw it circling then landing off in the distance over by the interstate highway. I assumed there was a nasty accident over there and this was a Medivac chopper. But no, for it took off and then began a repeated back and forth sweep over a quarter-mile square area of farmland just north of camp. Armed with three brilliantly bright searchlights on the front he would swoop down real low to the ground—it looked as if one could jump up and touch the landing rails—then he'd pull up, turnaround and sweep back down covering the next row in his search pattern. It was entertaining to watch and thankfully not in the middle of the night as the drone from the previous night. Again I can only assume some more illegal border crossing activity was in play. After about a half hour of this they finally gave up and flew away. Who or what they were searching for must have eluded them in the rows of spinach. The next morning we moved onward to quieter surroundings.

We stayed outside of Ajo, Arizona for ten days. I had been here before also and there are lots to see and explore. The area lies right in the path of a major traffic route for drug smuggling and illegal immigration

being only thirty-five to forty miles from the Mexican border at Organ Pipe National Monument. It is interesting to hike around and find cast-off pieces of clothing, food containers and water bottles by those trying to get through from Mexico undetected. As you can imagine there is daily Border Patrol vehicle activity passing by camp all the time. That aside, the Darby Wells Road is a great place to camp for free. From there we had a hundred-twenty mile drive on Highway 86 east towards Tucson. This is a narrow two lane highway that for the entire length is littered with roadside memorials erected by family members of those who have died in an automobile accident along the route. There were well over a hundred of these crosses and shrines which makes one think the locals around here are very inattentive or reckless (or both) in their driving. With great relief we reached the outskirts of Tucson not having been caught up in one of these incidents ourselves and with no one to establish a marker for Beans and I.

## NEW MEXICO

A new state; now we were making progress.

We free-camped at tourist trading posts along the way and a Veterans Park in Lordsburg. Progress was slow; as slow as an algebra class. Headlong winds were once again in the twenty-five mph range. I'd drive only thirty miles or so a day. There was no need to waste fuel beating on into the wind. After a few days we arrived at Rockhound State Park outside of Deming. We were in the middle of spring break and all the schools were out. Families were vacationing. We got the last available campsite. In the wake of my good fortune I broke one of my long standing rules, never pay for more than one night at a time. I had paid for two. Late that afternoon the two-year-old next to us started in on his or her (I couldn't really tell the gender by looking at it) daily screaming, crying, wailing tantrum session. Normally I'd move but the campground was full with nowhere else to move to. In a situation like this I would leave the next morning. Ah, but I had paid for two days. We were stuck. I did move to the other side of our site and that helped as they were down the slope a bit further away now. New Mexico has great facilities, campgrounds and rest stops alike. Their campgrounds have showers, the kind of shower where you don't need a fist-full of quarters to take a three minute tepid bath. I like New Mexico.

On the third day we broke free from the family of six and their two-year-old noisemaker for Pancho Villa State Park thirty miles to the south at Columbus, on the border with Mexico. All the way the winds had their way with us again. The little town of Columbus (pop. 1600 plus) lies three miles north of the U.S./Mexican Border. On March 8, 1916, Pancho Villa sent two of his officers to Columbus to scout around. He and his 485 troops were in desperate need of arms, ammunition, food and clothing to carry on in their revolutionary battle with the Mexican dictatorship in power. The officers returned reporting there were only thirty to fifty soldiers present. In reality there were three hundred fifty U.S. soldiers. Oops! Someone probably got demoted in rank (or shot) for that bad piece of intel. The Mexicans raided the town in the early morning hours of March 9. After the dust had settled ten citizens and eight soldiers had died along with seventy to seventy-five of Villa's troops lying dead in the streets. Four buildings were burned to the ground one being the mercantile store, the very place containing those much needed supplies they so desperately sought and the whole reason for the raid! These banditos weren't the smartest by any means. Soon thereafter President Woodrow Wilson ordered General John "Black Jack" Pershing and ten thousand troops to pursue and capture Villa. They trailed him some five hundred miles south into Mexico and never located the raiders. With the outbreak of the First World War and the U.S. entering into the war, President Wilson ordered Pershing and his U.S. 13<sup>th</sup> Cavalry to cease the "Punitive Expedition" and

return to the states. Today Pancho Villa State Park resides where the Calvary had established Camp Furlong. Here we stayed for four peaceful warm days.

## TEXAS

We crossed into Texas at El Paso. Slowly we worked our way east with no real destination in mind. The further east we went the more desolation we saw. This is oilfield country. We spent a night at the city dump in Pecos. Okay, it was really a picnic rest stop. There were six graffiti covered cement picnic tables each with a shade structure and a large fifty-gallon barrel drum for trash. None of the barrels had trash in them. It is easier to just toss your rubbish on the ground. Trash was everywhere. Hundreds (not exaggerating) of beer bottles littered the ground, many of them broken. The place was a minefield of broken glass, not something I wanted Beans walking around in. The weather was nice with no wind, the birds were singing and the view was abysmal. While camped I surveyed the incessant stream of oilfield related traffic that rolled by on the highway within a stone's (or a beer bottle) throw away. About nine out of every ten vehicles that passed had to do with oil production: crew-cab pickup trucks (most were white, or were at one time), pickup trucks towing trailers, pickup trucks with dual rear wheels towing fifth wheel flatbed trailers, big rig trucks hauling drilling pipe, compressors and other implements of oil extraction and of course tanker trucks going back and forth. All this truck traffic destroyed the roads through the town of Pecos itself. The asphalt was grooved with two large furrows where the tires ran. The road heaved, buckled and was strewn with potholes for every mile of it. And there was no color. What was once a red gas station, a green grocery store, was no more. Everything in town was covered with dull dirty oil-town brown dirt: automobiles, trucks, buildings, signs, dogs and cats, all the same dirty brown color. The noise of diesel engines powering all of this traffic was mind numbing. By the fourth day of being immersed in this environment my attitude towards the trip was so low it might have struck oil had we lingered any longer. I did some research. At Midland we turned southeast. Then finally after four hundred thirty miles of driving since crossing the Texas border at El Paso there was the first green to be seen along the highway and down the center median. Once again there was happiness in The Little House on the Highway

We spent a relaxing and refreshing three days at a nice little city park along the steep banks of the Llano River in Junction, Texas. It was there I decided we would go to Padre Island National Seashore off the coast of Texas at Corpus Christi. I had watched a few YouTube videos from a couple fellow travelers I knew and although they reported it being windy and chilly I decided to be brave and go. Upon arriving the ranger at the kiosk booth advised me to go to North Beach and there we went. I drove down the last bit of pavement onto the beach sand and was astonished to see the water up so close to the dunes. I could see campers scurrying about moving their gear up toward the dune embankment. I stopped and talked with the first set of campers. In one more hour it would be official high tide and with the recent storm and we were in a full moon, "...this is a bit unusual" he said. He added a ways down there were some open spaces which implied there were a lot more people strung out there along the beach than I bargained for. I told him that I don't need this kind of adventure, thanked him and backed on out of there. *We'll go to South Beach Beans.*

South Beach was no better. In fact what small bit of sand there was to drive on was wet sand! Good grief! And to think this is going to repeat itself twelve hours later at four A.M., I wanted no part of that. We went over onto the other side of the barrier island to Bird Island Basin. This camping area was a sandy

gravel parking lot with thirty-four spots so close together, practically door handle to door handle parking, you could hear your neighbor snore at night. We left the next day. A couple days later another video showed up on YouTube. She showed the thick fog rolling in where she couldn't see over fifty feet away and was worried about someone driving into her. Sounds lovely.

During all of this I had a worn brake pads warning light come on. This could not be. I had new pads and rotors installed not that many miles ago. Plus I am careful when braking gearing down for every stop. I stopped at a shop on the way out and they directed me to another shop in Corpus Christi that had a lift for RVs. They got me right in, pulled all four wheels and found the pads to be just fine. I've had an issue in the past where the sensor wires grounded out sending a false signal but here that was not the case. The guy did some research and learned that the emergency brake has pads which are located within the rear axle housing. Imagine that. Well there's no way I'm going to say yes to tearing down the rear end so I told him to put the wheels back on and I'll live with it. Days later the light was more than annoying so I blocked it off from view. (A few weeks later I noticed the light was off. A few weeks more and it came back on.)

After a series of truck stop, picnic area and roadside rest overnight camps we came to Lake Limestone near Jewett, Texas. This was a lovely campground of trees and cut lawn grass, well away from any roads or towns. We stayed an entire week there and besides the occasional fisherman launching his boat we had the place all to ourselves. No other campers, picnickers, day use people...no one. Sometimes I make a good call.

One day on a little walk along the shoreline I came to the cement boat ramp, paused to look out on the water then proceeded up the ramp. Suddenly about five feet away I see this large dark grey snake lying out on the rocks to the side of the ramp. Now I like snakes. I especially like them when I see them before they see me. This encounter quite unnerved me for he gave me no warning that he was there. I could have easily walked into him. I'm from the west. There the snakes that can do you harm are rattlesnakes. Rattlesnakes are always kind enough to warn you well in advance with their rattling. This snake did nothing. Once I regained my composure, I found a stick and prodded him out from the rocks a bit more. I wanted to see the tail. No rattles. The snake was close to four feet long and as thick as my forearm. *Is this a water moccasin?* I had never seen one before. So now I am unsettled once again thinking this water moccasin could have bit me before I knew he was there. Back at camp I got online and compared my photos. The snake turned out to be a "harmless" water snake. Well, so be it. It got **my** attention.

We continued our tour of the Hill Country of Texas and eventually had driven out of it. Still the scenery was wonderful doing short drives from here to there camps. Near Holliday (yes, it is spelt with two L's) Texas we found Stonewall Jackson Camp. The camp was one of several by that name so it seems. They were little camps and parks established for veterans of the Civil War to get together for annual reunions. For this particular camp was the fact that this was in Comanche Indian territory. Nearby was a certified Indian Marker tree. Indians would bend over and tie down a young sapling as to mark a direction of travel on a trail, a water source, a place to cross a river or stream, or any other useful piece of information. The tree would continue to grow and take on an abnormal shape horizontal to the ground. There are many misshapen trees all over that are due to natural acts such as lightning strikes, another tree falling on it during the wind storm, or snow bend from heavy drifts of snow. So a very few trees are certified as actual Indian Marker trees. I found this very interesting and would look at these malformed trees I find during my hikes in a different light from now on.



## OKLAHOMA

I had planned on staying there a few days but on the second day I noticed the coach batteries were reading a low voltage. I have had these batteries for ten years, well past their normal life expectancy. But I take care of them and they've continued to take on and hold a charge through the two hundred watts solar panel system onboard. Alas, one battery finally passed on. The nearest place I could buy two new Trojan six-volt golf cart batteries was in Oklahoma City a hundred miles to the northeast. Well, our route had been decided for us. We arrived on a Monday morning. I installed the new batteries and we were on our way heading west by noon.

I aimed for a free camp at American Horse Lake some thirty-five miles northwest from Interstate 40 at Calumet. Once there we were met with a large Oklahoma Wildlife Department sign listing all the rules and regulations for hunters and fishermen using the facilities. "A hunting or fishing license or Conservation Passport is required to enter unless exempt", then a list of rules for fishing and another list for "other". There on the "other" list among hunting, boating and skiing was one reference to camping—three day limit. We ran into the very same thing at another "free" camp, Lake Burttschi, on the way to Oklahoma City. What is this *Conservation Passport* and do I need one to camp? How and where do I even get one? I got on their [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com) site and looked all over finding no answer. I gave up and left. A day later brought us to our third "free" Oklahoma site, Lake Vanderwork, near Cordell. Yep, there was another one of those signs greeting us. By now I was a bit frustrated and aggravated and decide to stay. Being a nice grassy spot by the water with no one else anywhere I felt I couldn't go wrong. I took the time and did more research. Finally, this is the third of fourth attempt mind you, I found something that *implied* that yes, I needed a passport to camp, and that it cost fifteen dollars and was good for three days. But nowhere did it say how to get one, no page to fill out a form and PayPal button to pay the fifteen to buy one, nothing! Why don't they just stick an iron pipe into the ground, provide some envelopes and you drop your money in down the slot?! *Just let someone of authority come by and ask me if I have a passport. By the time I'm done with my rant they will be sorry they stopped.* By day two the weather was deteriorating. I felt confined in the hollow of the reservoir and I decided we best move out. Plus I had discovered a National Grassland managed by the Forest Service that looked promising. I never got to confront anyone of authority.

Black Kettle Grasslands wasn't exactly what I was expecting, like the vast grasslands of Montana for example, but we weren't greeted buy any confusing signs by the Oklahoma Wildlife Department. This was Federal Forest Service land and we'll take that. The area is named for Chief Black Kettle, a leader of the Southern Cheyenne. He was known for his peacekeeping efforts with the white man. And for that, in November of 1868 he was killed by then Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer during a raid upon their winter encampment.

Our camp was at the base of Dead Indian Lake dam, a reservoir that was constructed in the 1950's on Dead Indian Creek. The creek was named by early settlers to the area since they discovered many Native American *sky burials* along the creek. A sky burial is method of generally the Sioux and Lakota Plains Indians to honor their dead. The body is placed on a wooden scaffold for the spirit to rise. Birds, mostly vultures, deal with the remains. However you view this method of dealing with the body, I for one would want my moldy carcass done this way rather than being tossed into a hole in the ground and buried under six feet of dirt. Cremation doesn't appeal to me all that much better. But I've got off track here. Sometime

around 2001 a do-gooder felt the names for the creek and lake were derogatory to the Native American and petitioned for the State of Oklahoma to change it to Black Kettle Creek or Medicine Woman Creek, after Black Kettle's wife. Meanwhile there were those who wanted everything to remain named as they were. This group contacted the nearby Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes where they accumulated more than a thousand signatures to leave it Dead Indian Creek/Lake. The do-gooder had by then moved to California, where a lot of do-gooders with their misdirected ways reside, was never heard from again, and the petition was given its own sky burial.

## TEXAS AGAIN

A week later a check of the weather showed the winds would be out of the east. We were running low on fuel and seventy-six miles away from the next town where I could fill up. So we took advantage of the situation, set sail, left Dead Indian Creek sooner than planned and blew back over the state line into Texas. We arrived at our next camp at Lake Meredith, north of Amarillo, not a minute too soon. The wind immediately picked up with some serious intent, rocking the RV back and forth reminding me why I could never manage being on a boat on the ocean – I get seasick. This was a nice campground run by the National Forest Service. It is free to stay for fourteen days and even had showers for the price of admission. It is very rare for that combination to occur. As nice as this camp was, including the much appreciated hot shower, the wind was a constant issue. Beans didn't like to be out in it. I didn't like to be out in it. The weather forecasted our third day there to be calm and peaceful. I was really looking forward to that and do some cooking in the Dutch oven among other outdoor activities. But the day before the wind became fierce with gusts at fifty mph. Looking ahead, after the predicted calm day we would be in for a string of four to five days or howling winds. I couldn't see being trapped inside for all that time. We left on that one calm day heading south as much as possible to get out of the wind-plagued Texas panhandle.

We stopped at Jack Sisemore's RV Museum in Amarillo, something I saw on a YouTube video and made of note of wanting to see. There are nearly two dozen vintage RVs and trailers from the 1930's through to the 70's to see. All are fully restored and accessible to walk in, look around and imagine. This was such a delight that I forgot all about the disappointment of leaving Lake Meredith sooner than planned. I met and visited with Jack, a very nice gentleman and he suggested we go to Palo Duro Canyon State Park just south of town. I have had others recommend going there so we did. When we arrived unfortunately there were no camp spots available unless I had made a reservation beforehand. Nope. We didn't even do a drive-thru. With the urgency to get out of the wind tunnel we pressed on further south.

Two days later we were in the little town of Floydada and stayed at their community run RV Park. A nice quiet little place, free for the first two days, ten dollars thereafter and complete with hook-ups and a dump station. This also is very rare to have those services in a city-run park let alone being free. I did a little drive around their downtown business district which revealed the same story as most all small towns we visit, all closed up out of business stores. The extra wide brick paved streets were void of any activity. No people, no cars, and this was at high noon on a Saturday. It had a very apocalyptic feel to it. The next day was a short drive to Crosbyton and their small RV Park. It had the same set-up as Floydada and here we stayed for two days.

These little city parks are great and I had our route planned for another in Haslett, a two-hour drive. Along the way I kept looking for a place to get propane. The propane tank was low, like on *E* low. There

was nothing to be had and Haslett being a larger town I felt for sure they would have propane. Nope. It was iffy the refrigerator would make it through the night and I certainly did not want my ice cream to melt. The park in Haslett wasn't as nice as the previous two so we continued on northward in search of propane. Finally, fifty miles later and out of the way from our direction of travel I found propane in the little town of Knox. With that done and the ice cream now safe we backtracked towards the town of Munday. Outside of town was the *Believers Chapel of the Knox Prairie*. Here we took sanctuary and stayed the night in their parking lot.

The next day and onto another city park in Throckmorton. We never made it. I stopped in the middle of nowhere alongside the road for lunch. All of three cars passed by while there. *Why go into a town when no one and no cars come by here?* There we stayed with the flat prairie surrounding us, the birds singing and the wind keeping us comfortable in ninety degree weather. Then all hell broke loose.

I received a 'severe storm warning in your area' alert on the phone. To the south the skies were dark and lightning played about. I sat outside for forty-five minutes enjoying the show when the first raindrops were felt. I decided I would stand out in the rain as I had done before. Well that didn't last long. The wind-driven rain hurt. Before I could get inside the wind picked up in intensity and it took all I could do to shut the door to the motor home. Picture the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy's family is trying to get the storm cellar door shut. Once inside the wind grew even stronger; rain sounded like pea gravel being shot against the side. The RV shook and shook like it never had before. Outside the grasses were laid down flat onto the ground. Initially quite frightening, I reasoned there wasn't a thing I could do about it so I may as well enjoy the experience. No longer frightening, the storm was now fascinating. After five or ten minutes (I had lost any sense of time) the storm was over in an instant. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun and soon the outside was bathed in sunshine. I stepped out, perceived no damage to The Little House on the Highway and watched the storm cell moved northward with bolts of lightning playing against a dark backdrop. I couldn't recall the sound of any thunder during the tempest. It could have been there but was drowned out by the noise of the wind and rain, I don't know. A beautiful full arc rainbow was left behind.

The planned city park stop in Throckmorton wasn't all that great. Being still early in the day we pressed on to Hubbard Creek Reservoir near Breckenridge, Texas. Upon arrival it looked promising despite all the trash lying about. Shade trees, lakeside camps and no one camping. *Yes, this will do fine for a week.* Well, that didn't last long either. Later in the day the local yahoos showed up hot-rodding their trucks around the camp roads. I had already moved once for no soon as I had finally got a somewhat level set-up some clown pulls in right down the way, leaves the doors open playing loud music while he fished and his blonde bimbo girl friend did whatever blonde bimbos so. Then there were the ski boats with their loud sound systems blasting rap-crap noise. Sounds carries wonderfully over water so a quarter of a mile away was just like them being right offshore.

The next day was a Friday, the weather was overcast and cool which kept the yahoos away. But I knew the weekend would be mayhem and so we left for Lake Daniel south of town twenty miles away. This looked better in that no ski boats, no swimming and not as inviting for idiots from town, with only about a half a dozen campsites. But every site was being used. *Now what?* Just as I pulled out past the locked gate there was a back-in spot on the end of the road. I backed in, found it quiet and no one else in their right mind would want to be there. We stayed the weekend.

The first week of May and the weather forecast called for mid nineties weather all the next week. This was my first indication that Texas wasn't going to last much longer for us. I'd have to consider higher elevations for the summer if we were to remain in the south. Last summer we were up in Idaho and Montana which was nice. Now I needed to consider National Forest land in New Mexico and Colorado but that was three hundred miles away. What to do for the immediate? We went back to Hubbard Creek Reservoir to sit out the hot week coming.

The week went well considering the infrequent visits of the locals. I sort of planned on leaving on Friday and Thursday evening when I went out to leave some food for this orange tabby that would come to visit Beans I spotted a baby rattlesnake curled up beneath the slide-out of the RV. This was the regular path that Beans would walk and needless to say the sight of the rattler left me a bit unnerved as to what would have happened had she been out with me. Most people would have killed the snake without hesitation but I could not. This is its home; we're just visitors. I relocated the snake down by the water and decided for sure, we're leaving.

Our first night was HOT at a Walmart Travel Lodge in Snyder, Texas. That was followed by a couple real nice city traveler RV parks in Lamesa and Levelland. These were extra special in the fact that they provided electrical and water hook-ups and still all for the price of FREE. At each we were able to get some shade from the blazing Texas sun. Our next stop would be the Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge. On our way there I turned on the air conditioner and no cool air. *Are you kidding me? Now, on the hottest day you don't work?!* Beans was none too happy about this and let me know about it. *Meow!* The refuge turned out to be a dead dry grass field with no shade and no redeeming qualities of any type. We left for the town of Muleshoe hoping to find an auto repair shop that could deal with an air conditioner.

I had another free city run park lined up for this town and drove by a small auto shop a quarter of a mile before it. I pulled in, parked, went inside and was soon greeted by Michael. He was welcoming, had a positive attitude and I thought *he'll do just fine*. Outside he had me start the engine and said right off that the compressor was working. This was what I thought the problem was. Then he pointed out where a leak was in the condenser, the radiator looking like piece of equipment mounted in front of **the** radiator. I could see where a rock had hit it and recalled taking a hit the day before just that I knew not where. He made a call and said a new condenser would be here from Lubbock in the morning. This is what I like about small towns and small shops, no making of an appointment or "We can probably get to you later this week".

With that set we moved up to the street to Ray and Donna West RV Park. Again, free hook-ups but no shade. But you get the added pleasure of being a stone's throw from the railroad tracks where trains rolled by at all hours blasting their air horns at every street crossing which there are a dozen or so in close proximity to each other. So essentially it is one long continual horn blast. Very nice at four A.M. in the morning. My fellow resident in the park was an older, rather large woman in a Class C RV about the same size as my Winnebago View. She only came out to hook up her power cord and sewer hose. The rest of the time she was inside sewing, long into the evening with the TV playing. She had her sewing machine set up on the dining table what looked like permanently. I could see inside that a wall of little cubby hole bins and drawers were immediately behind the seats in the cab so her only way into the living space was to get out, walk around and come in through the coach door. These bins held all of her sewing supplies: thread, needles, buttons and whatever else needed for sewing. Bolts of fabric were stacked elsewhere

inside. Where she and her little dog slept, I don't know. Even eating a meal must have been a cramped affair. I don't mean to mock her. I admired her passion for her hobby and making it work out living full time on the road.

The next morning I arrived at the shop. I had already removed the grill and so Michael started work with me helping out every so often. I honestly expected this to be an all day affair and staying another night at Train Horn RV Park but we were done in two hours. Sometimes things just go good. Being barely past noon we carried on like any other normal day of travel.

## NEW MEXICO

We crossed over the state line into New Mexico heading for Fort Sumner. Sinbad and I had been there seven years ago to see Billy the Kid's Gravesite as here is where the Kid got gunned down by Pat Garret, or rather ambushed and shot in the back by Pat Garret. This time though we here just for the camp at Bosque Redondo Lake south of town. It proved to be a nice little spot for a couple of days used mostly by fisherman as the lake was posted NO SWIMMING. The weather was still warm and we really needed to get into some cooler environments.

A short drive north brought us to Santa Rosa Lake State Park. Here Claire was up to her old shenanigans trying to get me to drive onto dirt roads passing through Mr. Hoolihan's ranch. *This can't be right.* I backed on out and followed the pavement after reviewing the satellite image of the area. Here I finally had to pay for a camp – ten dollars. The showers were worth it. The neighboring campers playing their loud mariachi music was not. The next morning with the music starting up again I moved to another campsite for a quiet morning breakfast before heading out for Las Vegas...New Mexico that is. Claire started up where she left off the afternoon before. *No Claire, I am not driving off road even though you think Highway 91 is there.*

We spent a night in Las Vegas to resupply at Walmart Hilton then moved on up to Taos. RV's are allowed to stay overnight in their downtown free public parking area which turned out to be okay...for one night. Otherwise the town is too touristy for me with a lot of traffic. We motored on the next day northwest to Tres Peidas. Just west of the very small town is the beginning eastern edge of the Carson National Forest. A quarter mile past the ranger station is a forest road with dispersed camping. I parked at the first spot as the road was well rutted but passable. The longer we stayed there the better we liked it so we called it home. There was zero traffic and no other campers in the area. Also there was no cell service or sometimes one bar. I figured one night here then maybe move on. Later I had the idea to try out the cell booster.

I bought a WeBoost cellular booster device a year and half ago and never used it. I've always picked up pretty good AT&T signal wherever I am. Part of the time of ownership was just in trying to get it set up correctly (no fault of the manufacturer) and then not even knowing if the thing worked or not. So here I was, I crank up the TV antennae mast which I had mounted the signal capturing antenna to, plugged in the wires inside, set my phone in the cradle and *Whoa! This thing actually works!* I had four bars reception across the board. You can imagine the glee I felt now knowing I hadn't just wasted my money. I now set the plan to be here on through the Memorial Day weekend.

Throughout the week only one other RV came in to stay plus one car camping couple. Otherwise just a few day-use folks who came for the hiking and rock climbing of one of the three nearby rock outcroppings, thus the name Tres Piedras – three rocks. Beans liked this place too for there were an abundance of lizards about. It had been a long dry spell of lizard hunting for her all the while in Texas. If it weren't for running low on cat food I would have been content to stay even long until there was the incident.

### The Missing Woman

One afternoon around three P.M. a Harley Davidson motorcycle with a man and woman riding rolled by camp on the rough old forest service dirt road. That was very unusual for a street bike to be on this road, I reasoned. The woman on the back was really pretty, simply stunning. In her twenties, dirty blonde hair in a single braid down her back and a big smile on her face. I only caught a glimpse of her so I was ready for them to come back by when they left. Around four-thirty here comes the bike. The woman is not on the back. This road only goes in a quarter of a mile and stops at a barbed-wire fence. The other side is private property. There is a walk-through gate as the land owner allows access for those who want to hike and climb the rocks. There is no other way out than the way you come in, right by our camp.

So this is really weird. I go for a walk up to the end and stop by the only other RV there to talk with the old guy. While talking here comes the guy back on his Harley. So we figure he just left her there for awhile why he did something and she communed with Nature. All good. (Or perhaps he returned to the scene of the crime?) I walked back to camp. Thirty minutes later I hear the bike coming. I'm ready to get a better look at this woman. She's not on the bike! Now this is more than weird; it's highly suspicious. The guy came back one more time. He left at seven-thirty P.M. and that was for the last time. I never saw the woman again.

This ate at me. Besides the RV guy, there was only one other camper there, a red car. I never saw the owner all week. Maybe she was with the red car and the biker was a friend who came up to visit. The next morning I walked up there and finally saw the campers with the red car. Not her. Even if they got into a fight and she stormed off, there was nowhere for her to go. Naturally she would walk out the road she came in on being that was the only route she was familiar with and would lead her down the highway a quarter of a mile to the ranger station. No other roads led in or out from the area. Trails led off in the opposite directions into wilderness forest.

I couldn't enjoy my time there any longer. I left the next day and stopped in at the New Mexico State Police in Espanola. I left them with my story plus photos of the guy on his bike. When I left I felt a sense of relief and could now continue on with a clear mind. Hopefully there was nothing to it all. The officer I talked with said he'd pass this information on to the Taos area in the case of a missing person report. I said "Don't people have to wait twenty-four (or forty-eight) hours before they can file a missing persons report? It hasn't been that long." Nope. You can't believe the stuff we see on TV or in the movies.

After I finished filing my report on the mysterious missing woman with the New Mexico State Police I got on with the really important business of the day - laundry. With that completed I drove down the street to Walmart Camper Village where we'd spend the night. (I checked online for a month afterwards and no missing woman reports in the area ever showed up)

## The Thief

I usually park off to the side at Walmarts near the garden department. I pulled in near the chain link fence around the outdoor plants and sat there looking around as if there might be a better spot and what could I expect for night time noise like with big rigs parking near me leaving their engines running all night long. Ahead of me is this Mexican guy crouched down between his little Chevy car and the fencing doing something. He's undoing some wire on the fence. He sees me just sitting there thinking, stops what he's doing (he's done anyway) gets back in his car and waits. He's looking over at the staff running the garden department and back at me. Finally he gets frustrated and leaves. I decide this is a good spot and stay. I get out and walk over to the fence. There is now a gaping hole. I walk over and talk to a Walmart guy who just happens to be the Assistant Manager. We go over to the fence and I point out the hole. He thanks me and gets Joseph to fix up the hole with some more wire.

Sometime later the little Chevy guy returns, sees the hole has been patched up and takes off. I happen to see Joseph out there so I tell him the guy came back. "He's persistent" I say. Joseph tells me they don't have a night time patrol anymore, something about not renewing the contract. "I think you're going to need more wire."

Come eight-thirty in the evening while I am reading I hear this car park right next to us. There is no one else in this whole lane. *"Really?"* The door to the RV is open to let the cool breeze blow. So I look out the back window to see who is out there. No one is in the car but the engine is running. Finally a person runs around behind the RV, opens the back door of his car and stuffs a five-foot tall tree in a pot into the back seat. It's that Chevy and that same guy again! He is climbing up onto the chain link, reaching over grabbing a twenty-nine dollar edible fruit tree in a pot. He does this four times, four trees, and then drives away.

I get the license plate number and go into the store asking for the manager. I'm steered to Customer Service and run right into my Assistant Manager friend. "He came back. Reached over the fence and took four trees." He was very grateful for me telling him plus having the plate number. "It'll show on our security video." I told him how I could have stepped out and said something but he'd come back in the middle of the night with his buddies and slash my tires. "No, you did the right thing. I wouldn't want you to get involved" he said.

Good grief! Can't I just have a nice peaceful quiet life without being witness to so much crime?

All the while this drama goes on I am trying to decide where to go next. I want to stay at altitude, preferably in a National Forest for free, and of course have some cell service. South towards Sante Fe? Too much going on there. North back to Tres Piedras? Naw, I'd sit there thinking about that woman. So northwest it is and the first place is an Army Corps of Engineers reservoir at Abiquiu. It looked good, nice country much like Moab, Utah, I can use my old peoples discount and there's SHOWERS! This place proved to be a gem and we stayed until the first where the prime view campsite we had, #19 was reserved for June 1. That was fine as we needed to move on anyway. I can't be spending too much money on camp fees you know.

## COLORADO

We crossed over into Colorado and did a couple of overnights here and there. At a small parcel of BLM land north of Walsenburg I noticed a *scenic route* on the paper map which was the Old Santa Fe Trail. That looked good. We dropped down to Trinidad and filled up with fuel as there would be no services for nearly ninety miles on the Trail. Imagine that. Back in the day when the pioneers and immigrants took this route there were no services for a couple of thousand miles! I have followed several of the pioneer trails, The Oregon, California, Mormon, Lewis and Clark and always am impressed at the vast lands these folks undertook to cross with little or no reliable knowledge as to actually where they were going. Most information was based upon rumor and conjecture. You simply followed the tracks laid down before you by those who came through earlier hoping they knew where they were going. The Trail passed through the Comanche National Grasslands. Yeah, they had that to contend with too. Wild Indians out to rape, rob and kill. I enjoyed the nice drive. Barely any other cars or trucks were seen going either way for two hours. There was a steady tailwind too on a slight downgrade from the Rockies onto the Great Plains all of which contributed to a new record in fuel economy, an average of 28.8mpg for seventy plus miles. We spent the night outside of Lamar, Colorado at a State Wildlife Reserve. The next day we moved on due north to another State Wildlife Reserve near Flagler, Colorado. This one was especially nice...remote, quiet and no one else around. There we stayed for the rest of the week.

### Beans Big Catch.

Beans really enjoyed this place. I get a lot of pleasure watching her bounding through the tall prairie grass. She was so happy and having so much fun. I looked back to how she was destined to a life living inside an apartment building. Then her owners put her up for adoption, we found each other and both of our lives are so much the better. The hunting of lizards and mice was good here for her. One day we were just lounging around outside when she all of a sudden stood up and leaped into the tall grass. There were a few jumps, flips, rolling around and she soon emerged with a big rat in her mouth. She couldn't have seen it in the grass. Her acute hearing tips her off prey is near. Fortunately for Mr. Rat, Beans is well fed so she never has any intention on killing. She just wants to play with her catches. Naturally the rat isn't up for that kind of activity. This guy was so scared he was hyperventilating. Now I felt sorry for it. I gave Beans a handicap by stepping on her lead and the rat made good his escape under a nearby log. But the fool thing came back out and Beans was on it. Fine, so be it. Darwin's theory in action. Eventually she lost it in the grass and the game was over.

## KANSAS

I had made arrangements for the new license plate tags for the upcoming year be mailed to the small little town of St. Francis in the far northwestern corner of Kansas. The tracking showed the package to arrive Friday. It didn't. I was facing having to sit out the weekend in town with mind-numbing temperatures in the ninety-five plus degree range. Ah but the nice post office lady told me to just knock on the door Saturday morning and she'd give it to me...assuming it arrived. In the end I spent a nice day in town walking around a motorcycle museum and their newly remodeled county historical museum. I've been in a few of these little town museums over the years and I must say this was one of the best. The museum wasn't overwhelming with way too many collectables and what they did have was nicely staged. Well done Cheyenne County. The tags arrived the following morning.

## NEBRASKA



We left Kansas driving through Bird City then turned north for Nebraska. I chose a small county road and let the winds push us along up to Ogallala, Nebraska. There I filled up with fuel. It took 21.3 gallons meaning there was still five gallons in the tank. That was with five hundred-one miles of driving which worked out 23.6 miles per gallon. That is a new best and I doubt it will ever be matched again, unless I take on the Santa Fe Trail again. That brought the overall running average for the past couple of years up to 19.86 mpg. Very few if any twenty-four foot RVs can boast that. It all comes down to driving slow and smart, plus having a fuel efficient five-cylinder Mercedes diesel engine.

The small State Highway 61 route north although being very nice and scenic with lush green prairie farmlands all the way, left virtually no places to layover for the night. Out of desperation I stopped at one of those highway historical marker turnouts about fifty miles shy of the South Dakota border which was very nice. I doubt a dozen or so cars and trucks passed us by the twelve hours we were there. That is how remote Survey Valley is.

## SOUTH DAKOTA

The next morning I awoke to see the propane indicator light was in the red. I learned from the last time to not procrastinate and take care of it right away. Well now that I know better only that now I am miles from anywhere where there is a propane filling station plus it is a Sunday. The planned route going north which I researched thoroughly would now be trashed. We drove two hundred miles east to Pierre, South Dakota for a Walmart Retreat night then picked up propane in the morning.

### Beans Gets a Two-fer

After a couple days of long drives we both were looking forward to some peace and quiet in one spot. About thirty miles south of Pierre is the Fort Pierre National Grasslands. Down the highway then off into the prairie on eight miles of nicely graded dirt road we arrived at a small freshly mowed few acres of grassland set aside for free camping. *This will do just fine.* There were two other campers there whom I saw very little of. This place really demonstrated how the vast expanse of the Plains grasslands accentuates your sense of feeling free. I hiked a couple of miles through the knee and crotch high grasses just to get a sense of how it must have been for the pioneers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I couldn't walk normally. Imagine walking through deep snow. After an hour of this it got a bit tiring. Ah, but those tough immigrants to the west did this for days upon days, weeks, months.

Beans liked this place as the mouse hunting was excellent. On her first outing she caught one which proved to be no fun at all. It simply laid down in the grass and died, most likely from fright. *Gee Dad, these South Dakota mice aren't anything like those out west and in the desert.* The next day she caught herself a two-fer...two mice in one catch. Beans had in her mouth a mother mouse with a nearly full grown youngster hanging from her teat! There were probably siblings having breakfast also but they had enough sense to let go. Like the out of control hot air balloon where the one guy holding onto the rope realizes he held on too long and cannot safely drop, this was the case for this one young mouse. It eventually shook off and fell to the grass. I noticed a bit of blood on a blade of grass. I suspect the baby bit off mom's nipple. Ouch! Meanwhile Beans is dragging me away with mom in her mouth. She dropped her and played around a few times and unlike the previous day's mouse, this one made a run for it escaping into the tall grass making good her getaway, although minus one nipple. Well she had spares.

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