

Northwest Passage

The Genesis of a Journey

Deaths Cause a Departure

As do all things in life, it came down to death—in this case, one past and one coming.

Perhaps two years earlier, my friend Connie had threatened... okay, offered... to pay for me to come visit her and her husband, my “bro” Guy, in Spokane, Wash. They are retired after long careers and financially comfortable, so I knew this was not a great burden, even though I live across the continent in Durham, N.C. But I have never felt comfortable taking money I didn’t earn or wasn’t expecting to pay back, usually with interest. So I deflected by mentioning a then-vague plan to take a major road trip after the last of my ferrets died. Travel with a ferret isn’t impossible. I’ve done it. But given what homebodies they tend to be, my sense was it would not have been fun for him, while adding hassle and cost for me.

After Groucho made it to the extended age of 7, I had to let him go in January 2023.¹ I no longer had an excuse, other than money, being early retired on a fixed income. Fortunately, a LinkedIn message out of the blue led to my doing a couple of talks paying \$3,000. Then my friend and ex-fiance Kerrie decided she was moving back to Pocatello, Idaho, to support her mother as Sharon descends into dementia.

Plus there was the siren call of yet-unseen Jackson Hole, Wyo., where friend Michael

lives... friends in Seattle I hadn’t seen since moving from there in 2008... and my need for a Univ. of Missouri mug and cap. (For wholly irrational reasons, I’ve always preferred getting my college gear at the college, or at least its town.) Underlying these were my constant wanderlust and incessant curiosity about history. There remained many sites of historical interest or natural beauty I had yet to see after several driving passes through that quadrant of the country. One day I found myself researching and typing, not what I



Groucho Marx

¹ American domestic ferrets tend to live 5-½ to 6-½ years.

intended to be researching and typing, but an itinerary for a road trip to the Pacific Northwest.

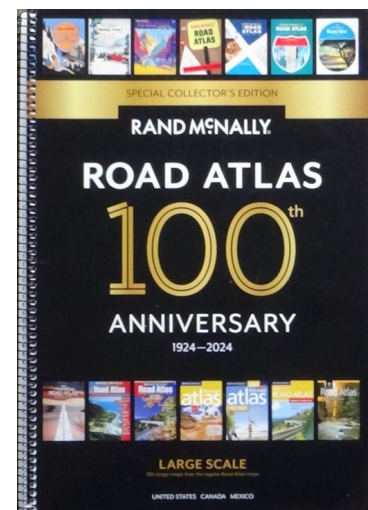
Once sketched out, the trip clearly would not be covered by \$3,000. With my checking account low due to unexpected expenses, I doubted I had enough. On the other hand, just seeing friends and skipping all those sites on the way was a nonstarter for someone who now introduced himself as a “history writer.” In short, I would almost certainly have to draw some money out of my retirement savings. In contrast, if I didn’t take the trip, I would have enough in checking to get me through the rest of the year.

So, as I explained to my cousin Beth Plonk and her son John over beers, and then to my sister Arabelle Fedora at lunch, I now faced three life paths:

1. *Protect my wealth:* Go into the type of retirement my mother led—only leaving town for the occasional short jaunt or family event.
2. *Suffer for money:* Take a crap job somewhere to build up my savings. The first problem with this was, my chronic depression had been in remission since I sorta-retired in December, meaning I gave up active pursuit of project management coaching work. In this scenario, the odds were greatly in favor of my ending up with a lousy (by my standards) boss for low pay and ending up back in depression. Even the practical-minded Arabelle started shaking her head before I could finish this line.
3. *Live:* Take road trips like this one to cover the rest of America that I wanted to see. If I enjoy them, maybe go more extreme: Sell the house, travel around the world, on my return buy whatever tiny place I could afford with whatever I had left, and fully retire with my memories.

The first sign of my leaning was my purchase of an atlas of the United States, which I bought because:

- I am not interested in anybody knowing where I am for large swaths of my life, much less MapQuest, Google, or Verizon. So I usually leave Location off on my phone. I go even further. I don’t trust Google to fully turn it off, and Verizon can triangulate location using cell towers, so at times I travel with my phone turned off.
- Even when I use those mapping services, I find they often do not, in fact, provide the most efficient route. But this is difficult to verify zooming back and forth on a smartphone screen. Hence I find the wider perspective of a map invaluable.



- That same limited screen view also leaves features of interest within reasonable detours unseen. A number of the stops I ended up loving on this trip were not apparent either from my Web searching prior to the trip or from online maps, and I would have missed them if not for the atlas.
- Most importantly, I suspected, correctly, I would end up in areas without cell coverage.

Fortunately I had a credit left on Amazon from a gift card, and I picked up the Rand McNally Road Atlas 100th Anniversary Edition (Large Scale) for \$9 net, which would prove to provide huge ROI.²

To further the goal of privacy, I not only recorded potential places to visit, but also part of the route, turn by turn, and printed out the resulting itinerary. That way I could run *sans* phone for good distances. I would have preferred to wing the exact route day to day, but hotel availability in Jackson Hole proved a barrier. The timing of the trip was bracketed between two dates in July, those of Kerrie’s arrival in Pocatello mid-month and Mike’s departure on a kith-and-kin tour at month’s end. As you may suspect, that major tourist center is booked-up a month or more in advance in the summer. Mike rents a room in someone’s house and couldn’t put me up. Thus I had to book one well in advance, which meant the itinerary up to that point had to be planned for a hard deadline.

I had made a decision to *Live*.

The Saga of the Purple Sage



An unexpected trip cost arose before the trip did. My best inanimate friend is a 1999 Hyundai Accent, a two-door four-cylinder hatchback bought new in 2000 and, most critically, purple. He looks a little like an old East Asian philosopher from the front—a *sage*. And, in a reference only fans of Zane Gray westerns (or 1960s country rock

bands) will get, when driving around with my sentient friends we would be, “Riders of the Purple Sage.”

With classic timing, the Purple Sage’s after-market cruise control died after 23 years—the week before I left on a cross-country trip! This is how I learned nobody installs after-market cruise controls anymore. When I bought the car, virtually any car stereo store

² *Return on investment*, how much money you gain through a specific choice versus the amount laid out, a business metric used to compare, for example, the value of one potential project against another.

also installed cruises. Now, not only did none in my area, I could only find one place in the entire state that seemed to, based on a Web search. I guess cars have come with cruise for so long, the market dried up. When I called Roy's Automotive in Greensboro, even the desk clerk had to ask someone.

The answer came back that they could install one, but did not sell them. In case it couldn't be fixed, I went ahead and ordered a new one online. What I thought would be an hour or so stay turned into three hours, and a higher bill than the car is worth, plus a second visit, but eventually I had cruise again. Sort of. I'll explain later.

After other painful car prep adventures, I was ready to go logistically a day before the published departure, having been ready psychologically for more than a week. I split. With luck, more road time would mean more adventure.

About that History I Mentioned...

This book is part travelogue, part broad-reaching survey of American history. Combine a lifelong interest in the past; a top-flight master's degree in journalism; and an early career as a professional writer; and one can't help but become a history writer at some point. For me that



point came in 2020, when the COVID lock-downs pushed my usual work into abeyance. I turned a new hobby into a new business, a website providing self-guided tours to American Revolution sites across North Carolina (AmRevNC.com). This is the 1770s war fought by the American colonies to gain independence from England, or Great Britain, also known as the Revolutionary War or War of Independence. Though the website is based on exhaustive research, with accuracy my top value, my next value was storytelling. The goal was to provide details aficionados would appreciate, while using a simple and fun writing style for people who think they aren't interested in history. I say "think" because I keep running into people who say they hated history in school, but then found themselves fascinated by period TV dramas and historical movies. I sometimes bill the website as "Reality History," dramatic stories that happen to be true—and unscripted, unlike "Reality" TV.

I have replicated that approach herein. I try not to assume you know anything about the particular topic at hand, regardless of how much you know about other topics. A major goal of the book is to teach you stuff you don't know without boring you to death. The history comes from sources at the sites visited (historical markers, brochures, exhibits,

tour guides, etc.); multiple good-quality Web pages citing their sources (preferably documents from the day, eyewitness accounts, scholarly research, etc.); and in many cases a lifetime of reading and research. For the most part I only footnote sources if I could only find one that met my quality standards, or as a reference for more details if you want to learn more. Sometimes I also footnote extra information instead of jamming it into the text.

As for the travelogue part, if you're into reading glowing descriptions of fancy hotels and gourmet meals, you shall be grossly disappointed. I stayed in some cool places and had some nice dinners I'll briefly describe, but I'm a cheap traveler. On the other hand, should you seek hostel- and dumpster-diving tips, seek onward—I'm not *that* cheap of a traveler. This is a tale of a classic American road trip by a guy who likes a clean bed, a shower, and a solid roof every night, for whom food is most often just a way to stay alive.

...A guy who is the classic misanthropic loner, except capable of extroversion and empathy. I was not out to make friends and hear people's life stories. When called for by courtesy I acted friendly, and there are some interactions I'll relate. But the lack of humans in my pictures will be noticeable to people-lovers, and most of the people I talk about are long dead. I don't apologize for that.

If you still wanna go, let's hit the road.

Tue., July 11, 2023: Climbing the Gap

One very small problem appeared as I backed out of the garage: The Check Engine light came on, a remarkably rare event in 24 years on the road. It had a role in the previous days' painful car prep. One place wanted to charge me \$100 just to diagnose it. O'Reilly Auto Parts checked it for free, and suggested it could just be a loose gas cap. I *had* gassed up that morning, and on checking, found I had not turned the cap to clicking. I removed the negative cable from my battery to clear the light, and hoped for the best.

The best, of course, had not occurred. I debated what to do. I asked the Sage what to do. Like many old philosophers, he had no comment. As I drove toward my first stop two hours away, a plan formed. At a rest area I did some smartphone checking, and proposed we take our chances. The Sage did not object.

When I got to Mount Airy, N.C., I passed my originally planned turn and pulled into a cluster of light industrial buildings which included Parrish Tire & Automotive. The guy up front asked how it was going. "It's going the way Murphy's Law would have it go," I answered, and explained my situation. "So I was hoping you could get me in relatively quickly," I said plaintively, though adding I did have stuff to do in town. He hesitated

over the appointment book, making me a bit nervous, and said he probably couldn't "get it in until 9." The current time was 8:30. That'll do, I said.

This was maybe a mile walk uphill from my intended first stop, Surry County's main library branch. Part of my justification for leaving a day early (and thus paying an extra night's hotel bill) was the need to do research for my American Revolution website. The local history section was sparse, but I took some notes while amused by the lady cursing at one of the free computers nearby, to the degree that I wondered if she was talking to someone on the phone: "*What is going on? This happens every time!*" I noticed the librarian giving her a look behind her back and grinned.

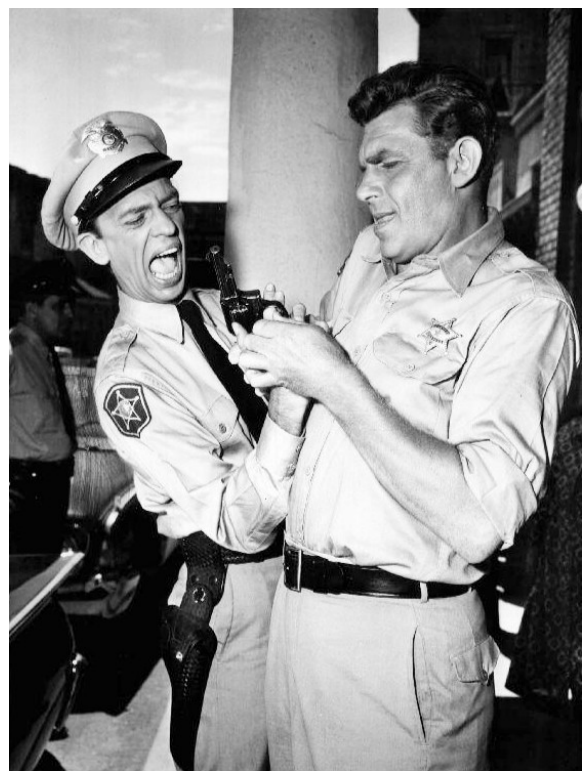
Don't worry. The stops get more exciting. Though maybe not immediately.

Diagonally across the street was the Andy Griffith Museum. Starting in 1960, Griffith starred in a namesake show and sequel as sheriff of a small North Carolina town. Mount Airy's claim to fame is being his hometown and thus the model for "Mayberry." A wall just inside the entrance of the museum is covered by pictures of places referenced in the show, such as buildings and intersections in Mayberry that exist in Mount Airy.

The light comedy followed the mostly benign adventures of widower Andy Taylor (Griffith); his bumbling deputy Barney Fife, played by Don Knotts; Taylor's son Opie (Ron Howard, who grew up to be a respected director); Andy's Aunt Bea, who took care of the home and Opie; and a cast of exaggerated Southern characters. Think of someone you consider a cultural icon everyone in America knows, and that was Griffith in his day.

Granted, that was easier in those days. There were only four networks: ABC, CBS, NBC and PBS. If you were lucky, your TV could get the one local station for each of those, over the air by antenna. And they all were off the air overnight.

Like many of my age group, I grew up on the shows, but in my case with the special attachment of a white kid in North Carolina. The shows stayed far away from the political issues of the day, typical for sitcoms then. Griffith's shows remain popular in



Don Knotts and Andy Griffith, 1960 (public domain)

reruns in part due to a nostalgia for an America that never existed—a utopian view of a past some white people would like to go “back to.” Griffith acknowledged in later years that his shows slighted persons of color, relegating them to a few African-Americans³ in backgrounds. Within the prior year, “CBS Sunday Morning” had done a piece about the town. The visitors skewed conservative politically. Today, as on the day the show visited, they were almost all white.

When I was a child, Daddy introduced me to a comedy routine Griffith created, playing it for me on a 45.⁴ He portrays himself as a country rube who gets swept by a crowd into a building against his will. The character ends up watching a bunch of people in a cow pasture chasing after something, “and I don’t know what all.” The final line gave the answer, and the title: “What it Was, was Football.” It’s success gave him his first taste of fame.

I’d been told Griffith made it up on the fly while in college, on the way to filling in for a friend at a gig. The exhibit on the piece clarified there was more (or less) to the story. Griffith and his first wife Barbara, an actress he met in college, started a touring music-and-storytelling act. Before television took over our evening entertainment, all manner of local organizations—civic groups, the American Legion, churches—would host social events throughout the week and book cheap acts like this. The exhibit implied, and Internet confirms⁵, he developed the act in this period. Regardless, it struck a chord for me to see the original master recording, made at a small local label before it got picked up by a nationwide distributor.

I had not known that Griffith was on Broadway afterward, and unfortunately the museum did not make clear how that happened. The Internet fills in that he and Barbara moved to New York to try their luck, and he got a TV role in “No Time for Sergeants.” This led to Broadway and then film versions. After landing some small parts in movies and TV shows, he got a chance to develop “The Andy Griffith Show.”

3 Yes, I use “politically correct” terms. This is not a political statement. My Southern mother taught me to be polite, and I consider it polite to call people what they want to be called—whether I agree with it or not.

4 Single songs or shorter pieces like this were sold on small records that play at 45 rotations per minute (RPM). Albums spun at 33-1/3 RPM. The 45s had a larger center hole, so you had to put a cylindrical adapter over the turntable’s center spindle to play them.

5 <https://www.biography.com/actors/andy-griffith>.

Given my personal history with the show, I was captivated by his original sheriff's uniform, production scripts, and costumes of other recurring characters, including a famous salt-and-pepper suit goofy, high-strung Deputy Fife wore. A model of the courthouse doors held the original signs from the California set. A re-creation of his desk was admirably honest about the provenance of the items, saying for example that the telephone was "thought to be" the original, bought at auction by the donor. The gavel and gavel block were original, though. The cast had Knott's chair from his character's tiny desk bronzed and gave it to him as a going-away present, but it has returned to a reconstruction of its place.



I was wearing a sheriff's star sticker, my ticket. I asked the man who sold it to me about Andy's boyhood home, which I mistakenly thought was part of the museum. It is a B&B, he explained, owned by a large hotel chain. He strained a bit to sound appreciative that they had restored it, but his expression told me he connected with the disgust that rolled across my face. This should be a museum open to the public, not history you have to pay a corporation to experience a few people at a time. I gave it a pass, being too far to hoof.



The real town of Mount Airy has done what it can to capitalize on the connection. Walking to the library, I was passed by a Ford Fairlane remodeled to match Andy's police car, which was giving people a tour. From the museum I looped through the cute downtown, a mixture of genuine rural South and fake Mayberry. "Floyd's Barbershop" was modeled on the show version, and other businesses imitated art. One location often referenced in the show needed no changes: Snappy Lunch pre-dated it, and is still going strong.

Down the street is the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History, in an old residential/retail block with a clock tower. From what I'd seen online, I gathered the collection would not offer much for someone who has visited dozens of local museums, at least not enough to delay my trip. So I went in, greeted the elderly volunteer at the desk, and asked if there were any exhibits "related to the American Revolution." She started directing me to the Civil War exhibits. That was the war between the United States and those of the South trying to disunite over slavery, calling themselves the Confederate States of America, in the early 1860s. As soon as I could, I politely emphasized that I had a specific interest in anything related to the *American Revolution* in this area.

She looked at me blankly and then said, “Well, here we call it the Civil War.” I thanked her and left.

On leaving the Andy Griffith Museum, I’d noticed a voicemail on my phone from the shop. Sure enough, the problem was the gas cap: A couple of its seals had finally given way. Not wanting to lose more time, I asked, “Can you get me one?” I probably could have found a replacement in any auto parts store, but didn’t want to spend time on that. He hesitated, probably surprised, but said yes. After doing my downtown loop and walking back, it had not yet arrived. He had ordered it from his usual supplier, which had to have it delivered as part of a regular run from Winston-Salem, 35 miles away. He was apologetic, but I pointed out if I were at home, I could have done it myself, meaning he was doing me a favor.

I took advantage of the wait to notify the first friend I would be visiting that the trip was under way. “If you felt a malevolent force moving in your general direction today... that’s just me,” I texted Mike.

“That’s one mystery solved,” he responded.

Finally I saw a guy go out and, for some reason, drive the Purple Sage back into the shop from the parking lot... to replace the gas cap.

As the counter man rang me up, again apologizing, I noted I’d only lost a half-hour, and if an expensive gas cap was the worst thing to happen on the trip, I would count myself lucky. Only, it wasn’t expensive. He only charged me for the gas cap, around \$20. I protested, “But you did some labor...” He rejoined that they had just run the code for the engine light and replaced the cap. I thanked him profusely.

As I sat in the car switching from my black low-rise Converse All Stars into the kung fu shoes or “Chinese slippers” I do most of my long-distance driving in, the tech was walking nearby. I called out a “thank you.” He said the usual and then asked me to hang out a moment, hurrying inside. When he came back out, he had a company card with his name, Sherman, entered on the provided line. Sherman wore a teardrop tattoo, typically a prison tattoo indicating he had killed someone. The card was a nice touch of salesmanship, brave for someone with his background. He told me to come find him if I needed anything. I chose not to tell him I lived two hours away. If I were closer, this would be my new auto shop.

From Mount Airy I established another theme of the trip, taking a two-lane back roads where reasonable rather than freeways. In this case this meant continuing up US 52, no longer a freeway, north from town rather than directly west to pick up I-77. Nothing special leaps from memory or the notes, but it was prettier and more relaxing and more varied an experience as I crossed my first state border of the trip. A brief hookup with 77

took me to I-81 West. On it, after a time, a sign made clear my first change of itinerary would come on the first afternoon of the journey.

Abingdon, Va., is where the northernmost of three prongs of men gathered in the Fall of 1780. All planned to march on a British army operating northwest of Charlotte during the American Revolution. Sent by the British commander in the South to repress Patriot activity and raise Loyalists to the cause, Maj. Patrick Ferguson made the critical error of threatening to “cross the mountains with fire and sword” if Patriots on this side didn’t cease rebellious activity. This was not a good thing to say to a bunch of frontiersmen. What now are called the “Overmountain Men” from today’s Tennessee, two areas of western N.C., and here (as in where I was at that moment) hounded Ferguson into South Carolina. They finally caught and overwhelmed him at the Battle of King’s Mountain, a turning point in the war.

I took the Abingdon exit excitedly, having wanted to see this for several years. When planning my route, I’d failed to notice I would be passing right by it. After a bit of wandering, I pulled into the Abingdon Muster Ground, a small field across the driveway of a pre-Civil War house. More specifically I pulled into the driveway, and was surprised to find a small “interpretive center” at the end, in what appeared to be the home’s former carriage house. Even more surprising, it was staffed. The volunteer announced he was shutting down in 10 minutes and proceeded to talk for the next 30, nearly nonstop, which was partly my fault because I asked follow-up questions. After 15 I went back and started taking pictures of the exhibits to read later, meaning now as I write this, and the few artifacts of interest. Sadly, I failed to record his name.

The volunteer repeated, twice, that he was raised in Arizona and California and did not get interested in history until moving to Abingdon 10 years ago. In between he had done Christian missionary work for three years in Guatemala, and then had a career in health care administration. Meanwhile his wife and he moved to Baltimore. Her parents lived in Northeastern Tennessee, and finally she insisted they move even closer to them. Of Abingdon he told her, “This is close enough.” It was still too close, he said, and that’s part of why she was now his *ex-wife*. He decided to stay, and became involved with the Overmountain Victory Trail Association, hence his presence here.

As part of his new interest, he dug into his ancestry. He learned one 18th-Century fur-trading predecessor was buried in Cahokia, Ill., and another early relative had a town in Nebraska named for him, Chadron. “Get ready for this coincidence,” I said: I was going to Cahokia on this trip, and expected to pass through Chadron! I explained why in each case, which you will learn when we get there. When he took a phone call from what I assumed was his current paramour, I heard him animatedly say the name of the town.

Upon my looking through the exhibit pictures now, two stories from the Revolution stand out. William Cummings was a Presbyterian minister. The government exempted clergy



from having to serve in the part-time military units called “militia” during our pre-Revolutionary days as colonies. But a panel said the British did not recognize *Presbyterian* pastors as clergy in the 1760s, when he began preaching in this region: Great Britain had a state religion, the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church. (Abuses like this of other religions were a major driver behind our Founding Fathers calling for separation of church and state.) Cummings picked up a rifle to help defend his community from Native American attacks, and was put in charge of helping local residents get inside forts, called “forting up.” Militia were not highly trained. They were just regular folks, a model for the modern National Guard, only with less training, if any. In 1774, the panel said, Cummings went with the Virginia militia on a punitive raid against tribes that took him as far as the Ohio River on the far side of today’s West Virginia. Seven years later, he was chosen to remain at home to protect locals during the Overmountain Campaign. But he lent that dagger pictured above to the commander of the Virginia forces, Col. William Campbell, who ended up in charge of the entire operation.

The other story was that of Elizabeth Steele Moore, who learned her husband was wounded at King’s Mountain. She rode over the mountains to the Rutherfordton, N.C., area, around 100 miles by horse, to nurse him back to health.

According to another panel and the volunteer, this area is only the most likely spot for the muster ground, a long meadow on a creek definitely used for such from the later War of 1812 through the Civil War. Unfortunately, the brief Overmountain camp 250 years ago didn’t leave enough of an archaeological record for a positive



ID. The preserved part is a small field with a few historical markers, just a portion of the original site that extended some distance down the creek to a mill. I was getting pics when he left, and we exchanged waves.

Perhaps you can picture Virginia with its long finger sticking out to the left, I was traveling down the finger to the state's southwestern tip. In doing so I was roughly following a Native American trail. Frontiersman Daniel Boone gained fame just before the Revolution by improving it into a wagon road that eased European-American (EA) colonization—or invasion, from the Native American (NA) viewpoint—of Kentucky.

The Appalachian Mountains slowed white encroachment westward. In this region it was blocked by two mountains that parallel each other for 100 miles along the VA/KT border. Through most of that length, “gaps” between peaks on the eastern mountain led to dead-ends along the western one. Boone learned through a colleague in the French & Indian War of the 1760s about a gap long used by NAs that lined up with another to the west. (More about the French & Indian War later.) An English explorer had gone through and named it the “Cumberland Gap” after a British nobleman. Boone, based west of modern Winston-Salem, made hunts lasting a half-year to two years through the gap, going as far as the current site of Louisville.

On one of those trips, Boone led a group to try to illegally settle Kentucky. This was 1773, before the Revolution, and British law prohibited colonial settlements west of the mountains. On the way, Boone sent his son James and three others back to get more supplies from a town the party had passed. They never returned. Other men sent back found them—tortured to death.

Let us dispense with the idea that Native Americans were perfect human beings, the myth of the “Noble Savage.” Many NA nations regularly tortured, killed or enslaved prisoners. Some people raped captured women. They sometimes fought wars to gain personal glory, and killed over points of honor. My position throughout this book is neither, “Whites bad, Indians good,” nor the other way around. It's that humans of every description do despicable things, as individuals and cultures.

Two years later, with the Revolution breaking out, Boone was hired to build the road by a company that claimed to have bought Kentucky from its Native American owners. Never mind that Kentucky was basically a neutral hunting ground for many tribes with overlapping territories, none of which had the authority nor a central government to make such a sale, nor that similar treaties had been made with two other white companies for effectively the same area, nor that new state governments did not want to rile NAs, nor the fact it was still technically illegal. Boone knew all that.

The gap was my goal for the day. But another unexpected stop came when I spotted a white-on-brown sign (used across the United States to indicate historical and other tourist sites) for the Daniel Boone Wilderness Trail Interpretive Center in Duffield, Va. That trail was an improvement upon Boone's improvement, at least in this



area, though it separated from Boone's in places past the Gap.⁶ US Highway 58, the white streak from center-left in the picture, covers much of the old road in this area.

There was not much interpretation at the center, at least that I didn't already know, and the view into the valley wasn't great. But the two women staffing the center were nice, and importantly to a late-middle-age male, there was a bathroom. As I pulled out—of the parking lot, not in the bathroom, you dirty minded person, you—it occurred to me that sexual harassers made it such that one woman could not be there by herself. On a late Tuesday afternoon, I was the only person there. Thanks for driving up our taxes, jackassers.

I continued along long valleys that made the route of the animals, then Natives, then frontiersmen who had plied this path seem obvious. On arriving just short of the gap, where we joined US 25, I pulled off at the Daniel Boone Interpretive Center, really just a set of outdoor panels. The trail map on one made clear I did not have time to walk up the reconstructed Wilderness Trail section a mile-and-change to the gap. After puzzling over why a pickup was blocking the exit to the driveway from the otherwise empty parking lot, I drove out the "In" door and a little farther west. The map had said there was a closer trail entrance, which took two loops through the tiny "holler" town named Cumberland Gap before I found it behind a small parking area. The gap, the trailhead sign said, was only 0.6 miles from there. What it did not say is those six-tenths felt straight up.

On the way you pass a hulking rock chimney that used to be an iron foundry, destroyed by U.S. troops during the Civil War. Shortly afterward, I resorted to a trick from childhood. White Oak Road in Raleigh, N.C., features a severe curve around the point of a ridge that often prompted me to take a longer but shallower detour when bicycling home as a kid. Other times, though, I would gut it out. I learned to stare straight down,

⁶ Contrary to most sources, primary research indicates it was first expanded for wagons starting in 1780. Later it was further improved by government action. Sources even disagree on what to call it depending on the year—Boone's Trail, the Wilderness Trail, or the Wilderness Road.

focusing on the pavement passing under my front wheel, rather than ahead to the demands of the remaining climb. This I did today while climbing the gap, staring down at the gravel trail and maintaining close to my normally fast pace of walk, panting heavily and glad I work out regularly. I wondered bumptiously what percentage of 63-year-olds could match me. Or 23-year-olds, these days.

One pause had a legitimate reason. I noticed an odd feeling in my right Converse All-Star (black). A glance found the problem: I'd blown it out, for the first time in 50 years of wearing this model of shoe. The right rear part of the sole had torn out, so I was feeling a flip-flop effect. Either it had just happened, or it didn't bother me on flat ground, which later proved mostly true.



A few logs laid out as steps gave me another excuse to slow down, but I resorted to pushing on my thighs with my hands a few times. Finally I found myself at a small V of greenery marking the refreshed gap. At one time a paved road had, somehow, run through here, so this is reconstructed history. But a wooden sign announced:

Salt-seeking buffalo
Moccasin clad warriors
Dreaming Pioneer (sic)
Battling Civil War soldiers
Each was here
in the Historic Cumberland Gap
and now so are you
This is the
Historic Cumberland Gap

I don't recall ever seeing poetry announce a historic location. I'm not much of a poetry guy, but in this case, for some reason, it worked. It reflected the development path of many modern routes: Animals created the trails; Native Americans trod them into better paths, often marking them with rock cairns and sometimes tree branches trained to point

the way; and EAs then took them over. Parts of modern highways or railroads still follow those original trails, as one once did here.

Soaked in sweat, I soaked in *being here* for a moment, imagining all of those folks passing me by. Then I went up a small trail to the left to an unusual pyramidal monument, shorter than me, with an embedded marker from the Tennessee Daughters of the American Revolution noting “Daniel Boone’s Trail” and the year 1769. One small problem: Boone’s Trail was not cut until 1775. 1769 is merely the



first year Boone passed through the gap, on a “long hunt” with four other men. Stepping around the pyramid revealed that DARs from Kentucky, North Carolina, and Virginia had chipped in. Back at the gap I took a few steps down the Kentucky slope, pondering an attempt to get a view into the valley beyond, but decided I’d had enough for this day and returned east. Though happy to head downhill, I was aware the tops of my thighs might gripe in a couple days about serving as brakes.

A sign I’d spotted near the entrance to the parking lot told of a multi-year standoff at the gap during the Civil War. The rebel forces here surrendered in 1863, two years before all the rest.

Back at the car, a group of four people around my age were getting out of their adjacent vehicle, and one member gave the perfunctory “how ya’ doin’?” Much better, I said, now that I’d *completed* the hike. They asked how sharp the climb was, and I told them. Thanks for the warning, was the response; we won’t be doing that, then.

The Sage and I re-found the freeway, which passes through the mountain in a tunnel, presumably built in part to allow restoration of the gap. Quickly we found ourselves in Middlesboro, Ken., one of a few towns in North America built inside a meteor crater. One of my favorite spots in the world is the capitalized Meteor Crater in Arizona, the 3/4-mile-wide result of a meteor strike. Apollo astronauts trained there for moon landings. So the idea of spending the night in a meteor crater was too cool to resist. I had found a motel on Booking.com right in town for a reasonable rate.

I first tried Booking during a European trip with good results, so I tried out a new process for this one. I entered the town I had decided I could get to that night, no earlier than 5 p.m. or later than 7 (preferably). Then I would sort the results by “Price (Low to High)” and scroll until I hit an average user rating of at least 7.0. The Econo Lodge in Middlesboro met the mark, though I questioned that upon entering the office and finding

neither a human, nor any indication of how to attract one. I took a seat and began scrolling the news on my phone when I spotted a woman passing the open back door in the distance. She made her way into the office through the front, picking up trash on the way, and with little emotion ran through the usual routine that would become even more familiar over the next month.

Most of the places I stayed in using my Booking process fit the description of a decades-old motel (as opposed to hotel), unevenly maintained but clean. The rooms usually had all the basic modern amenities—mini-fridge, smelly coffee-maker, desk or table, usually a microwave, a comfortable bed with at least three pillows, and most importantly to me as a bald man, a hair dryer. They offered an array of eclectic HVAC units that I usually had to cut off as soon as I got in because the room was too cold for Florida-born me, and in a few cases I ran the heat to get it back to a reasonable temperature. One of the massive wastes of electricity in this country is the millions of HVACs left running all day to placate people who can't stand to be uncomfortable for the 20 minutes or so it takes to cool a place down.

More than half of these lodgings served a cheap continental breakfast. The prices ranged wildly between \$85 and the \$130s for effectively the same room, often with no consistent reason for the price differences (like urban vs. rural, or the number of options in the vicinity). That description out of the way, I will note the exceptions going forward. The Econo Lodge was a two-story joint with exterior doors where I could back the Sage up to mine.

That's good, because I was not traveling light. I'm fully capable of multi-week travel with one carry-on plus a laptop bag. On road trips, I figure I don't need to hassle with that. So I carried more than a week's worth of clothes in a large soft-sider, including loungewear for the motel and some extra cool-weather items like my University of North Carolina sweatshirt. Having room, I decided late to include a small plastic drawer unit to serve as a traveling medicine cabinet. In addition to the Converse All-Stars carried in the passenger-side well between wearings, I also put in my black lace-up Eccos in case of wet weather, which can also pass as dress shoes. My boots live in the back of the car anyway, as does an AmRevNC cap, and I added my summer dress hat, a blue straw fedora bought in Charleston. Rather late I decided to throw a yellow slicker in the back seat along with a windbreaker, good decisions both.

After lugging the bag and laptop into the motel here, and in each subsequent overnight, a second trip was needed to load in: my binder with my itinerary and the notebook on which I would take notes of the day, usually over dinner; a Sony Handycam camera; a book, the first one on political and literal battles for the English throne in the second half of the 15th-Century; my bota-bag-style water bottle; and if the weather remained hot, my

“road food” bag. I save money on road trips by eating lunch in the car, pretty much the same thing I eat most days at home, bread and mixed nuts, but replacing the usual apple with raisins or prunes in hot months because apples tend to spoil. And for those hotels not offering breakfast, I took along Cliff bars.

In decades past I took carrots, and tried doing so this time, but there has been an inexplicable change. In those olden days, the carrots would dry out over time, but remain edible to the bottom of the bag. The partially finished bag I took with me this time rotted instead, going explosively mushy soft. After pulling out the bad ones, I tried leaving the bag open, thinking they may just have cooked. But the rest simply went bad, and when I bought a new bag on the road and left it open from the start, this again didn't work. I don't understand what has changed. Is there something about the way the carrots are processed now? The chemistry of the bags? Or just the weather being hotter, such that the carrots cook instead of simply drying out? You tell me.

I walked into downtown Middlesboro to Shades Cafe and Steakhouse, not fancy but busy, which I knew from checking online had vegetarian options despite the second half of its name. A decent “pizza” of white pesto cheese with mushrooms and tomatoes on flatbread, a side salad with good-quality greens (not just nutritionless iceberg lettuce), and bread with whipped butter came to an absurdly low \$10.60!

As I dove into my note-taking, on her secondary pass my teen-girl server said, “Your handwriting is beautiful.”

I was stunned. “If you had to read it, you wouldn't say that,” I deflected. She grinned. After she left I added out loud, “That's a first.”

Somewhere my first-grade teacher Mrs. Lambert is flipping in her grave, I thought. She struggled heroically to get me to hold my pencil right, yet failed. As a result, my handwriting is terrible, as many, many, many people have commented over the years. The only thing I could figure is, maybe my server was young enough to be in the generation that is no longer taught cursive. To such a one, I suppose, the loops and curls seem aesthetically pleasing.

An older gentleman I took to be the manager or owner stopped by to check on me, and asked about the notes. I told him I was on Day 1 of a cross-country, history centered trip. He was the first of many to express jealousy, which I found entirely gratifying every time.

On the way “home,” I noted the same group of three grade-school children playing on the opposite sidewalk as had been there an hour earlier. I wondered what their story was, but they seemed comfortable, so I didn't worry about them.

I looked past distant buildings and down side streets to try to get a sense of being in a *crater* instead of a valley. Finally at one intersection it was possible to look in all directions and vaguely perceive that the green heights surrounding the town were not parallel to each other—they were circling. I *was* spending the night in a meteor crater!