

Sat., August 5: Rain and other Falls

At breakfast I met the dad, telling him of the museum coincidence. He mentioned the current rainfall, the first I encountered on the trip. I said it was my fault for having bragged to friends about no rain on the trip to this point.

At least I came prepared. In Seattle, after re-learning how to sail, I bought “foulies” so I could do so in the rain. This refers to the classic yellow rain suit associated with fishermen: a rubber-coated jacket with detachable hood and matching overalls. They had been riding uselessly in the back seat all trip, but now I pulled them on and headed for the West Portage Camp.

Clark’s portage route not only passed all of the falls but cut across a southward curve of the river west of them. On a hill surrounded by farm fields south of the hotel, a set of panels tells of the endpoint, a camp actually somewhere in the distance near the river, or rather where the river was at the time.

There a large artifact of the expedition may still lie. In preparing for the trip, Lewis had a collapsible boat frame of iron built. He thought it would be useful on the choppy Columbia River, of which sailing explorers had provided multiple accounts. (Exactly how it was made portable is unknown.) As the equipment and supplies were being moved, some of the men attached wood braces and covered the frame in hides. It floated just fine initially, but began leaking badly. Tar from pine trees was the primary caulk used in boats then, and since pine trees covered the known United States, Lewis assumed he would find plenty along the way. He was wrong. Reluctantly, they buried the boat and built two dugouts to replace it. An investigation by archaeologists was cut short when the equipment they were using was needed in New York City as part of the recovery from the 9/11 attacks. The marker provided no explanation as to why they haven’t come back in two decades.

A map I picked up at the Lewis & Clark Center allows you to sort-of drive the route of the portage, except that was diagonal and the modern roads mostly take right angles. At the end of the 20-minute run northeast, during which my admiration for these men rose exponentially, I pulled into a fenced enclosure on top of another small rise with scattered history panels—and no more rain. On Friday, June 21, 1805, Lewis led most of the men up a creek off the river, now called Portage Creek, to a bend almost two miles inland:

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From there they dragged all of their supplies and five canoes up a ravine to this hilltop. They put wooden wheels on the canoes and loaded them up, and then pushed and pulled them *18 miles*. Moving everything took multiple trips over 11 days. The distance, rolling nature of the land, and major gullies they had to cross makes this tiny part of the expedition seem impossible by itself. The Center has a pretty convincing re-creation of a canoe getting dragged up a gully side, shown at right. I acknowledge those men helped displace Native nations across the continent, yet cannot help being moved by what they accomplished on their Northwest Passage.



More gravel was involved in getting to the creek, and then I started toward the camp at the mouth of the creek. The gravel got heavier, and with three miles still to go, I said, "I'm not going to do that to you, Sage." We turned around. Just before getting back to the hilltop, the road paralleled the ravine they used, making it easy to imagine the men dragging the canoes ahead of us.

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The last part of the drive in had been on gravel roads through the kind of farm fields that shock Easterners who thought they had seen farm fields before. I paused to get a permanent reminder for myself:



Wheat field outside Great Falls, with combines in distance

We had to pass through downtown to cross the Missouri and visit the original Great Falls. I had noticed yesterday that the old railroad depot has been turned into law and other offices, a pretty spectacular setting. Coming in from the west, I found the downtown bigger than expected and thriving. We wound around checking it out. Made curious as to what I thought was a courthouse, we went west again on a road dead-ending at what turned out to be a classy civic center. I wasn't sure what could be attracting so many people to it on a Saturday morning, then realized a farmer's market was happening on a closed-off street to the left.

Eschewing the newer bridge carrying the highways, I took the older, two-lane 9th Street span across the Missouri, past the city's public works and sanitation departments, until it met up with US 87, which over several hours would take me back to US 2. First, I pulled onto a narrow farm road that needed repaving 10 years ago, and stopped by a large wooden historical marker I debated skipping and should have, for two reasons. First, I already knew the history it listed, about the Great Falls to which we were headed. And

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second, I could not push the Sage up the sharp climb back to the road in time to get in front of a slow-moving white SUV I knew I was going to be a problem. The narrow, curving, bumpy road gave no opportunity for passing. Nine miles later, when we all finally turned off onto a somehow narrower road and began dropping into the gorge, the Sage was extremely frustrated.

A volunteer at the L&C Center had given what at the time I felt were overly detailed directions, but this morning I appreciated them. She talked about it going on longer than one expected and passing close by three houses—close enough to feel like I was on a shared driveway. Lacking that knowledge, presumably, the SUV slowed even more in hesitation. A short distance downhill, though, I pulled into a spot along what I took to be an artificial channel leading from a power plant to my right.

The riders of the SUV turned out to be a mother, 13-ish son, and her mother. They made onto the footbridge crossing the channel before I did. After impatiently chomping at the bit as we crossed it, I zipped around them in the island park and made my way up a rise on the western end. There was revealed a site that likely stopped Meriwether Lewis' heart: *the* Great Falls.

The top layer he saw has been replaced with a dam, blocking most of the water flow he would have witnessed, but what remains remains formidable:



A history panel told of Lewis' arrival. He heard them first, as he approached from behind me in the photo on Thursday, June 13, 1805: "my ears were saluted with the agreeable sound of a fall of water... I saw the spray arise above the plain like a column of smoke... soon began to make a roaring too tremendous to be mistaken for any cause short of the great falls of the Missouri... which I readily perceived could not be encountered with our canoes."

After Clark and his band showed up, he showed off his expertise. Using surveying tools, Clark calculated the height of the falls to be 97-3/4 feet. Modern electronic measurements put it at 96.

I took my place in the corner of an observation deck and reveled in the sight and sound. Several people came and went, and then a Native American trio, a man and woman in their early 30s and a teen girl, took up the place at the lower end. We all stared for a while. Then the man struck up a conversation, by way of asking if I was from the area. "North Carolina—and yes, I drove." They were from Colorado Springs. I told him of my meeting Odd-daughter Gina Makaroff there. (Officially I'm her godfather, but I'm not a Christian, plus my term better fits my personality.) Her mother Mila was a gymnastics judge, hired for a meet held at the Air Force Academy. I was living in Albuquerque and drove up. During the meet I mostly babysat and fell in love with a bubble of flesh that

entirely fit on my forearm and hand. She's 25 as I type this, and with Mother gone, the most important person in my life.

The girl was his step-daughter. Her father had given her a boat, and they were heading to pick it up. He had crashed his car before the trip, and in fact, getting a rental pickup from his insurance company spurred it. He joked, "Unlimited mileage, you say?" We had a great time chatting.

I congratulated the girl and said I knew she would have fun, because I have a sailboat. I quickly added my usual line: "Don't be impressed. It's almost as old and ugly as I am—but just as functional!"

Stepdad sweetly added, "And just as fun."

This is as good a place as any to make a point I shouldn't have to in 2023, yet many Native Americans report having to again and again. All of those I met on this trip, and in fact have met over all of my travels, are every bit as modern as you are. They do not live in tipis or grunt dialog, the majority are not alcohol- or drug-addicted, they drive the same kinds of vehicles and generally live the same kinds of lives you and I do. There is a greater distance in lifestyle and behavior between wealthy and poor European-Americans than there are between middle-class NAs and EAs (or anything else).



I drifted to the other end of the island to get a shot of the area where Lewis would have been when he finally saw the falls. Along the way I enjoyed discreet glances at a young couple with a toddler giggling away a warm morning with her parents.

Only as I left the island did I attend to the bright yellow sign warning, "Evacuate the

island if you hear 8 short blasts." The number choice is curious. I guess if you hear 6 or 9, all is well.

The Sage and I returned to the main road, such as it was, and bumped a little farther east before I realized we had already passed the shortcut north I had spotted on the atlas. A sulfur spring that *might* be the one Sacagawea drank from, restoring her from some

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gastric upset, turned out to have a trail of some length to get to it from its parking lot. I decided against, since the provenance is not proven. On getting back to my shortcut, I realized it was gravel, more short than cut. Instead we drove back whence we came before rejoining 87 on its northeastern flight.

That course is dictated by the Missouri's, which 87 parallels as best it can. Outside of canyons, major rivers have a tendency to slash about over the years—sometimes year to year—especially in less-rocky terrains. This was illustrated at a scenic overlook not far up the road and thus downriver:



You can see how wide apart the sharp sides of the valley are, and it seems like the river once cut along the far side of the rise in the center. As I stood there I thought, we can say L&C came along the river at this point, in both directions. What we can't say is exactly where the river, and therefore they, were at the time.

A little farther north I turned off toward Fort Benton. The name tickled the back of my history memory, but I wasn't sure why. We dropped down into a town squeezed to a half-dozen blocks wide between terraces above and river below, and parked on the last road before hitting water, Front Street. I pulled in next to a strip park along the river. To my



right rose a stately brick block which, a sign facing it from the park confirmed, was a hotel from back in the day. The Grand Union Hotel was, when it opened in 1882, the most luxurious between Minneapolis and Seattle, the sign claimed. An excellent series of these signs along the park spooled out the story of why such luxury was located here. The history memory I referenced was from a book mentioning a spot in Montana that was the highest that shallow-draft paddlewheelers¹ could navigate. *This* spot.



Starting in 1860, just before the Civil War, steamboats began delivering supplies and people here and taking away gold and furs. This continued for 30 years, a total of 600 boats, one sign said. Nine were here at once in 1869, “unloading whiskey, gold pans, salt, bacon, boots, and miners... Wells Fargo took miners to Helena for \$25.” You may be wondering why a bank was providing transportation. Part of being

¹ Steamboats requiring little water (“draft”) to float. The river became too shallow even for them upstream.

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a bank founded during the gold rush years was moving gold around. That turned Wells Fargo into a mass transit company at a time where the state of the art was the stagecoach. Routes covered the western part of the country the way highways do today. The “stage” part refers to the same scenario the Pony Express followed, which Wells Fargo helped operate at the western end. The coach would travel a certain distance before stopping to change horses and give travelers a break, at a remote station if not a town. Wells had by far the biggest number of routes in the West, operating some into the early 1900s, when railroads expanded their coverage enough to replace them. This is why the modern company still uses a stagecoach as its symbol.

Eventually, another sign claimed, 75% of the goods bound for the Pacific Northwest was unloaded at what now is a quiet semi-green patch:



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The small plaza in the middle of that shot told a sad story. The train eventually came to Fort Benton, and in 1936 it took away the body of a shepherd for burial back East. A collie mix “watched with anxious eyes,” a sign said, and met each train that returned. He continued his vigil for six years, until slipping and falling on the tracks in front of a train. “Shep,” as he was known, was buried on the bluff above the train depot barely visible at the left of the upper photo, with hundreds of mourners in attendance.



I walked onto the old railroad bridge, now a pedestrian walkway with benches, and stood above the middle of the Missouri River pondering all of the histories it has witnessed and facilitated. I cannot explain why I am getting teary-eyed as I type these words. So much hope and despair, triumph and defeat passed under this bridge from millennia before it was built. And I had the great privilege to stand here and witness all of it, in my imagination at least.



A town hosting so many personalities, and so much money, is bound to attract trouble—I was here, after all. A sign identified the “Bloodiest Block in the West,” a claim Deadwood and other towns could surely contest, but the incidents listed gave evidence. The block boasted saloons and brothels open around the clock and the typical patrons thereof. Brothel owner “Madam Moustache brandished Colts (pistols) to halt the landing of a steamboat carrying smallpox.” Gunfighters practiced their trade. To serve arrest warrants on five citizens, a U.S. Marshal had to call in the cavalry to surround the town. The place seems to have calmed down a bit, however.



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A bit downriver stands a small column that completes the story we started back in Helena of acting territorial governor Thomas Meagher, the Irish revolutionary who became a Civil War general. When he sent that disappearing copy of the proposed state constitution by steamboat to St. Louis, it would have boarded ship from Fort Benton. When the new governor took over, Meagher's last government act was to come here to pick up military supplies for the militia. After an evening's outing with friends on Monday, July 1, 1867—a hundred years to the day before I turned seven—he returned to a steamboat tied up at the spot marked by the memorial, where he was spending the night. He disappeared, no body found. The mystery of his presumed death, whether a drunken fall or a robber's push or a conspiracy by political enemies, remains a cold case.



A second consideration in the placement of an inland port here was ready-built protection. What later was named Fort Benton after a Missouri senator began its first log iteration in 1847, as a privately built fur-trading post. They began adding buildings in adobe, and then replaced all of the wood by the time the first steamboat landed. With the Indian Wars firing up and the fur trade winding down, it eventually went over to the military in 1869. After they gave it up 12 years later, the buildings slowly wore away as adobe does without maintenance, leaving behind but two walls and a blockhouse by the time the Daughters of the American Revolution began a restoration.

Outside the front gate of Old Fort Benton, a sign directed me back to the small museum nearby for a ticket. Information-packed if discontinuous, it has one of the arms boxes Meagher came to collect. One sign informed me I was not the first white man to make the trip from Seattle to Fort Benton. A civil engineer and army lieutenant who had visited Puget Sound was ordered to build a military road from today's Walla Walla, Washington. It crossed the Palouse to Coeur d'Alene, probably picking up part of I-90's route and making its way here just in time for steamboat traffic to begin. This helps explain why so much Northwest freight passed through here, taking the first government-built road to that region.

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Back at the fort I made my way through the rebuilt trading post, ever so slightly disgruntled that the volunteer asked the family from Great Falls where they were from but not the guy from North Carolina. Much of it was a standard recreation with fake trade goods and furs on and behind the counter, but a few original items were on display. One artifact was unusual to my experience: the fort's weather vane, shaped like a buffalo, and pockmarked with bullet holes. Since



no battle occurred here, it likely proved too tempting a target for the would-be and real gunslingers in town. My primary target, though, was the blockhouse, now the



oldest building in Montana and “the last original remains of all fur forts in the West,” a panel explained. Eighteen-inch walls kept the inside relatively temperate, part of the reason NAs and Spanish

colonists built with adobe in the Southwest. Slits on the outside accommodated rifle barrels, backed by wider openings that gave the shooter a wider field of fire. Or would have, if anyone had ever attacked.

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One of the reconstructed buildings taught this lifelong writer something, though. I had first heard the word *bourgeois* used the way Karl Marx did. One of the creators of communism, he applied it to capitalists who exploit their workers, essentially *all* of them in his assessment. Later it came to mean the middle class that helps exploit workers—and thus is disliked by them

—but doesn't care about the “classy” things the rich do, and thus is despised by them as well. In the original French of the 1500s, it just meant someone who lives in a town (as opposed to a peasant on a farm), more specifically merchants and craftsmen. At Fort Benton, however, and probably all the French fur forts, *the* bourgeois was simply the guy who ran the post. Hence the “Bourgeois Quarters” were just where the top dog lived with his family, equivalent to the commandant quarters at the military forts. During my visit and until I did this research, I thought the name was a joke applied by the men. The home was upstairs, and various offices downstairs.



Out front of the fort was a curious-looking device, a wood frame taller than me with a log-sized handle angling off a separate axle. This turned out to be a replica of a fur press. If you've ever packed for a long trip, trying to squeeze as many clothes in a single bag, you will understand its use. They wanted as many fur pelts on the limited space of a steamship or barge as possible. So you pile them up on the right side of this thing, press them down using the

log, and tie them into a bundle. I need one of these for my next overseas trip.

I walked back to the car along the storefronts, getting passed by a young girl on her bike. She had been riding back and forth along the former Bloodiest Block in the West since I started toward the fort, which reassured me not every kid in America is addicted to a screen. Along the way I stopped to take in signs explaining what some of the older buildings were or what preceded them. One, for example, was the 1881 Bank of Northern Montana building seen at right, which later served as a Wells Fargo stage station and telegraph office.



Hoping to learn the meaning of the term “Missouri Breaks” I’ve often heard or read without explanation (also an old movie title), I drove the Sage south from downtown to the interpretive center by that name. I was more than a bit surprised to find it closed on a summer Saturday during hours it claimed to be open. I turn to the Web to learn the term refers to the land forms I’ve already described, with high grasslands “breaking” in a series of cliffs and terraces down to the river. Why the center was closed, the Web doesn’t say.

With some reluctance, I left this quintessential Wild Western town and regained Highway 87 northeast. Shortly after I came to a surprise, in the form of a white, painted sign saying Fort Assiniboine was open in summer months. As this appeared in neither the atlas nor my pre-trip Web search for historical sites in Montana, I was happily taken aback. After a U-turn to a dirt road, with the aid of a second sign, I finally found my way to a central set of buildings around a parade ground, noting low abandoned buildings in the distance. The visitor’s center, was, again, closed on a summer Saturday.

Named for a Native nation, this fort on the typical open plan has two particular and related claims to fame. To refresh your memory, much of the Sioux Nation moved into Canada for a while after Custer’s defeat at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. This fort was built in that period, in 1879. Eventually it was massive, with 100-plus buildings on 220,000 acres. Housing up to 500 men, it was the home for a time of the buffalo soldiers of the Tenth Cavalry, one point of fame.

In 1898 war broke out between the United States and Spain, rooted in a war for independence against Spanish rule by rebels in Cuba, the large island-nation 70 miles south of Florida. Ostensibly about U.S. support for freedom, the war’s bigger cause was the damage being done to American business and land holdings. Later president

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Theodore Roosevelt gained fame leading his “Rough Riders” on a cavalry attack up San Juan Hill outside Santiago that broke Spanish resistance. Predictably, though, a crucial part of the story is left out. As a plaque at the fort points out, the Tenth Cavalry rode alongside him, and an eyewitness wrote, “If it had not been for the Negro cavalry, the Rough Riders would have been exterminated.”

As usual, whites were in charge, though non-commissioned officers were black. This leads to a second point of fame. One of the whites was a lieutenant who served with the Tenth here, went off to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and asked to be sent back to rejoin it for the Cuba action. His name was John Pershing, nicknamed Jack—and because of his service with the Tenth, further nicknamed “Black Jack.” If the name sounds familiar, we met him back in Kansas City at the World War I Museum. He commanded U.S. forces during that war.

The former officers’ quarters are still private residences, made distinctive by the turret at one corner. A small sign in front pleaded, “Private residences—Please don’t park here.” I walked along them not staring into the windows, to the far side of the rather modest parade ground for what at its height was the largest military installation in America. My guess is it was only for the original, older part of the fort.



As I sat in the Sage at the other end, I realized I might have a major problem. My plan had been to spend the night just short of my next itinerary destination a couple hours away. Booking.com had bad news for me, though: no hotel rooms anywhere in the region. Havre, where 87 rejoined Highway 2, was the largest town and had a half-dozen hotels. But all were full. I nonetheless pulled into the first to double-check. In the lobby I passed two little blond sisters in softball jerseys, which gave me a hint of the cause. A worn-down-looking woman at the desk confirmed that someone had managed to schedule a softball tournament on top of the annual powwow of the Chippewa-Cree Nation I had passed through just before hitting 2. Back on Booking, the closest place I could find, at any rating or price, was in Wolf Point—more than three hours away. But an itinerary must-see was near Havre, Bear Paw National Historic Park.

Dinner that night would be Chex Mix, string cheese, and grape juice from the convenience store where I topped off the tank for the remaining journey. My only chance of seeing any of Bear Paw was if it could be visited well after 5 o'clock. I took tiny Montana 247 about 20 miles south from tiny Chinook, and pulled into a loop dirt driveway, delighted to find no gates (or visitor center to miss). There was plenty of light left for me to tour the battlefield where the saga of the Nimiipu came to an end.

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You'll recall these "Nez Perce" from Yellowstone, the nation that left its beautiful country in Eastern Oregon and fought its way across the Northwest trying to get to Canada. They made it this far, and camped in a peaceful curl of Snake Creek sheltered from the winds by grass-covered terraces at the end of September 1877.



Then the cavalry showed up. Despite being outnumbered more than four-to-one, the 100 warriors in the band fought off the army's surprise attack on the last day of the month. The bluecoats' casualty count convinced Col. Nelson Miles to settle into a siege, digging pits into the terrace edges from which to fire down on the camp. That dark area near the bottom of the picture above? That's a rifle pit, still there 150 years later. For four days the two sides fought. "Chief Joseph" later described his people's suffering near the end:

Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are all dead... It is cold, and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people, some of them, have run away to the hills, and have no blankets, no food. No one knows where they are, perhaps freezing to death. I want to have time to look for my children, and see how many of them I can find. Perhaps I will find them among the dead.

It didn't help that their tipis had been destroyed during the journey.

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A thin trail leads through high grass and shrubs across the Nimiipu campsite and the creek, then climbs the terrace from which I took the picture of the valley and rifle pit. Several pits dug by both sides remain.

From near the trail's end, I could see a rock outcrop where Tulhuulhulsuit ("Looking Glass") and five comrades were trapped and killed. The trail continued to a point where yet another story of white treachery was told. Miles met with Chief Joseph on the second day under a flag of truce. When Joseph refused his surrender terms, Miles put him in chains. The day after, he was released in an exchange of prisoners.



During the initial attack the 7th Cavalry, still smarting from getting its ass kicked at Little Bighorn the year before, ignored Custer's lesson and charged along this ridge



without, yet again, knowing their opponents' position and numbers. (The trip theme of "hubris" reappears.) Again they got their asses kicked. A captain and lieutenant were killed, along with enlisted men. The army tried to bring up one of the Hotchkiss guns that would later be used to such evil effect at Wounded Knee, but

the warriors drove it off. Eventually the infantry drove them off, and this was the point when the army switched to a siege.

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The Nimiipu tried to care for the wounded soldiers once darkness fell, providing water and one of their scarce blankets. An extended ditch is what's left of a mass grave for 21 soldiers, since moved to the cemetery at Little Bighorn, on the back side of the ridge.

I made my way through an area of low ground with waist-high shrubs on either side of the narrow trail, and quickly realized I was in trouble. A miasma of flying bugs were rising with the dusk. I was in my usual hiking shirt and jeans, thankfully, but jammed my hat down to my ears and tied my handkerchief around my neck, trying to cover as much skin as possible. Before cramming one hand deep as I could in a pocket, I saw three of the critters in a row and wiped them off. The other I kept waving side-to-side in front of my mouth, but I still swallowed one unfortunate little being. Apparently she didn't know I'm vegetarian. Making the walk worse was the knowledge I had to walk back, because a sign at the trailhead had warned me the last part of the loop near the parking lot was closed.

But I had to see the last stop. On the fourth day of the siege, Chief Joseph agreed to give up. At 2 p.m., somewhere near the sign below, he gave up his rifle and spoke the words that have long captivated me: "From where the sun stands, I will fight no more, forever." Would that all the world would follow his lead.



All along the trail, metal disks in the ground marked the spots where warrior bodies were found. As at other sites we have visited, folks had left tokens of respect. I was humbled to lean down and find I was standing at the spot where Chief White Bird fell dead, a name I recognized from earlier battlefield visits. Perhaps ironically, as my nephew Marty pointed out after viewing the slideshow, U.S. coins were left around it. Several rocks seemed carefully arranged. At others, tobacco and sage had been left.



Shockingly, when I got back to *the Sage*, I was not covered in bug bites as expected. I hit the outhouse down at the lot where I was supposed to park, instead of the middle of the driveway where I had, and set off tired but moved from this place I'd wanted to see for 35 years.

US 2 is a scenic byway here as well, but the sun dropped before I could see much of it. One view stands out, from the Fort Belknap Indian Community, the Nakoda and Aaniiih reservation east of Bear Paw. An entire cemetery was decked out like the graves I described at Wounded Knee. This adjective is over-used these days, but I still have to say it was *awesome*.



Tired as I was, and try as I did, I could not simply pass by a historic marker accompanied by a shed. Underneath it were two large rocks or small boulders, whichever you prefer. Sleeping Buffalo Rock at left originally lay on a ridge above the Milk River, bearing ancient markings that gave it the appearance of a buffalo's head in granite. Many nations tell tales of buffalo

hunters getting fooled by rocks. These are considered sacred. That did not stop whites, I presume, from moving this one to a town park for a while and then here. As you can see,

tokens are still left to honor him. A smaller medicine rock from the same area keeps him company.

Remember my saying the Missouri changed course over the years? The Milk River, curving along with the highway to its right as I drove it, now fills the Missouri's former channel before it was diverted by glaciers, a nearby marker said. Another told me more about my friend Highway 2. This portion was part of an early coast-to-coast highway from Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine, named for the recently deceased Pres. Theodore Roosevelt. "The Roosevelt Highway Association warned motorists in 1921 that the route between Glasgow and Malta," where I was at the moment, "was a partly improved dirt road that was almost impassable because of gumbo (mud) in wet weather." Five years later it was designated US 2.

After a couple hours in the dark, including some rest in a rest area, I pulled into the Homestead Inn on the Fort Peck Reservation of the Assiniboine and Sioux. The very friendly Native woman behind the front desk greeted me with, "Greg? Or... Jim!"

"You're psychic!" I joked, then telling her about the gentleman in Custer who had done the same thing. When I explained why I was arriving so late, she said her people were having their powwow too, but most people camped at the site. Only the elders stayed in hotels.

She apologized for the computer system running slow. I gave her the usual line about understanding, because I used to be her a long time ago. She said she hadn't been doing the job long, so I asked how it was going so far. Mostly okay, she said, except when people don't show up for shifts, as was the case now. Then the story got much worse, though relayed in a breezy style. She had a hairline fracture in her leg from an accident the day before! She was not supposed to be walking, much less pulling a double-shift. But she couldn't get ahold of anyone else—or her manager.

The motel was well below my usual rating criterion, in the high 6's as I recall. I am confident one place we had passed was worse. My room was instantly problematic in that it had no drinking cups. I went back downstairs. "Unless I'm really tired, there are no cups in that room."

No, she said, there aren't, explaining that the "truck had been held up."

"Someone held up a cup truck?," I quipped. She started to explain before getting the joke and laughing. A few cups remained by the breakfast bar, so she offered one of those.

Drinking from cups usually leads to letting liquids out, which I did back in the room, only to discover the toilet would not flush. A quick investigation proved the water was off,

presumably because, as I discovered after turning it back on, the flapper was leaking. Also, the float got stuck partway up, so the tank only half-filled.² I flushed manually inside the tank, turned the water back off, and resigned myself to letting any overnight yellow mellow till morning.

Besides the cups, there also was no luggage rack, so I squeezed everything onto a corner desk and credenza, definitely concerned about bed bugs under the circumstances. I wanted to wash my white painter pants, but there was no stopper in the bathtub drain, so a stuffed wash rag served. The pants wouldn't dry overnight, but by leaving them on top of my clothes bag during the day the summer heat would finish the job.

Setting up my usual sleep arrangements, I found the HVAC fan squeaked so bad, I turned it off and cranked up the White Noise app on the phone. It was not enough to stop the next door neighbor's TV from traveling through our shared wall, and the pillows if I slept on my side, so I was stuck on my back all night.

I realize none of this rivals an adventure paddle up the Amazon for hardship, and I was still better off than many people living within 50 miles of me at that spot. With that perspective, even in the moment I found some amusement at this awkward ending to my long day's journey into night.

² In case you've never opened a toilet tank, a circle of rubber (the flapper) sits atop a hole at the bottom. When you flush, that handle just lifts the flapper, which a mechanism holds up long enough for all the water to run out and down the bowl. Then the flapper drops, and as fresh incoming water rises, it pushes a float up attached to a lever that cuts off the inflow before the tank overflows. When it works.