Sun., August 6: Some Surprisingly Big Balls

My day started with writing a note to maintenance, telling them what was wrong with the toilet. This may seem arrogant of me, but my intent and wording aimed at saving them diagnosis time. Downstairs at the tiny breakfast bar I waited for an elder, seemingly confused, as a friend/daughter helped her. The helper turned back to apologize, and I said softly, "Take your time."

I'm not sure whether the circle of carbohydrates I settled on was a doughy bagel or a sugarless doughnut. Either way, it had no flavor. The yogurt and orange juice came in similar containers, but at least they were relatively healthy.

A View from the Room

As I loaded out I came to realize every person I had seen, guest or employee, was Native American. This was cool. And it makes me feel horrible as a white man to talk about the inn's problems. I will note that over the years I have stayed in hotels in low-income areas all over the country, and they all had similar problems. With no tourist attraction to draw wealthier visitors, those people will pass by if they can, and people aiming for here don't have a lot of money, either. The hotel's issues come from its low income, not the ethnicity of its operators. The fact is, I had a safe and comfortable sleep with no bedbugs or other vermin, and everyone who spoke to me was nice. Others were as neutral as strangers anywhere, though here I got a few curious looks similar to those I got in India in places whites don't usually travel.

That said, this was a 7.1 on Booking, and the Imperial in Great Falls a 6.9. I swore off anything south of a 7.5, and preferably an 8, if at all possible. I'll note that I'd passed several decent-looking places on the way the night before that were not on the website. This tempts me to say I'll take my chances on the road next time I can't find a joint

online. Given the lack of vacancies in the region, though, I might have ended up sleeping in the Sage.

As I tried to work around the mud patch I'd managed to park on to check the oil, I was supervised by a growing number of yellow jackets. Having left a door open, by the time I was done and ready to leave, five had decided to come with me. I opened both windows and used the journal to gently dissuade them.

I was headed to another fur trading fort, which I might have given a pass if not for its location. Getting there was more of an adventure than expected. There was no signage on Highway 2 pointing to Fort Union National Historic Site, and MapQuest was wrong about State Road 405 continuing south across 2. I made a couple passes along 2 trying to find that, taking me briefly into North Dakota and past a cop twice, which made me nervous given this might seem suspicious and my car is hard to miss. A closer look at the atlas proved the town I was looking for, Bainville, from which a road south originated, was slightly off the highway. So I went back to its main street only to run into an actual roadblock: Railroad gates were down at the tracks, which parallel 2.

The train was just sitting there, apparently awaiting one I could see coming from the other direction. I turned around, went back to the highway past a disgruntled trucker, and slunk slowly down a rock road a block west, toward a railroad crossing without gates. By the time I got there, the approaching westbound train had passed. I bumped over the tracks behind it with a smug grin before the other got moving. Back at the first road, over which the long eastbound train was *not* crawling, I felt bad for the trucker as I continued south.

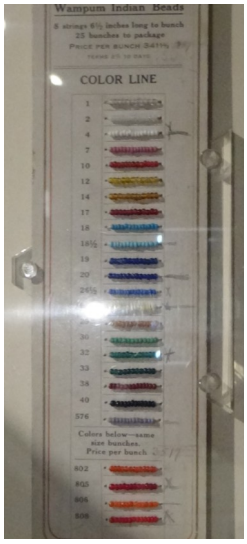
A couple blocks later, already at the edge of Bainville, a sign for Fort Union appeared, pointing left through unused farm fields in ground cover. The atlas indicated the entire route was dirt, so I was surprised to come to a T-intersection at pavement. OpenStreetMap now tells me SR 327, which somehow I missed while on 2, presumably because I was expecting a continuation of SR 405, leaves Highway 2 to go south a bit past 405. I had to check, and thus must credit, Google Maps to confirm my instinct to turn right, because that first sign had no companion at this turn.

Another pretty drive through farmlands to eventually rising bluffs, part of the route alongside another rolling train, brought us into North Dakota and the fort parking lot. This confused me a bit, being both farther from the fort and busier than I'd anticipated on a Sunday morning. A sandwich board explained that an Indian Arts festival was going on, which explained the ranger in a golf cart waiting to shuttle visitors. I nodded from a

distance and took the sidewalk. After picking up a couple, she slowed to ask if I wanted a ride, and I demurred. “I enjoy the walk,” I explained.

After passing an RV where a pair of middle-age Native women were setting up to sell food, I went uphill and around to the entrance gate at the back of the fort. Nearby a Native man was demonstrating traditional games to kids, at the moment showing how to *throw* an arrow with a fully straightened arm by putting one's body into it (as a substitute for a spear, I presume). I wanted to ask him if the Plains warriors preferred hand-to-hand combat, as I know the Cherokees did from my American Revolution research. But he was busy, and on to another game when I exited.

The fort is a reproduction, but built on the exact footprint of the original, I was reassured after asking in the small museum. “Because I was at Fort Boonesborough earlier this trip, and… not so much,” I observed, to big laughs from the three workers. (History geek humor.)



Most of the artifacts in the museum were of a type I’d seen, but one was a delightful surprise. NAs have used decorative belts of “wampum” for millennia, as personal decoration and/or a form of communication, and for a time after European contact, as currency. The word means “white shell beads” in Narragansett[1], and indeed the oldest examples are made from shell. The Dutch began producing glass bead belts for payment in the fur trade in the 1600s. By the late 1800s, the beads were so commoditized, manufacturer reps provided sample cards *exactly* like those you can find in any sewing supplies store today for various items. Each color is numbered for identification and the bulk prices are listed on the top. The colors at the bottom were cheaper.

1 http://nativetech.org/wampum/wamphist.htm

Museum panels said Lewis and Clark noticed this as a promising location for a trading post when they passed by on the Missouri: a high bluff with gravel beaches suitable for landing boats. There was plenty of wood around, but its prominence meant it would be easy for Native traders to find and hard for Native attackers to surprise. The American Fur Company, which made John Jacob Astor the richest man in America, built the fort in 1828. For four decades it transacted the most fur sales in the country, right through the Civil War. In other words, this was *the* fur trading post. The reproduction was guided by the many drawings, paintings, early photographs, and written descriptions left behind by many famous chroniclers of the American West. Among these were John James Audubon, a naturalist who is the best-known painter of birds in this country.

I made the rounds, including a climb to the parapet, the elevated walkway along the wall. Most of the buildings were the standard set we've seen, but the main entrance in the south, river-facing wall was informative. A wall and interior gate combined with the end of the trade house to the left to create a trap. A small window allowed secure trading with Native merchants not trusted enough to gain entrance through the heavy door. The National Park Service says an average of 25,000 buffalo robes a year passed through this gate.[2]

Turn around, and you are just a few steps from the former channel of the Missouri that delivered travelers to the front door:

2 https://www.nps.gov/fous/learn/historyculture/index.htm

Here the *Yellow Stone* arrived from the left in 1832, the first steamboat to land. (The name was usually spelled as two words in those days.) A year later it dropped off Maximilian Alexander Philipp, Prince of Wied-Neuwied, a little state in what now is Germany. A former soldier and university-trained naturalist, he had gone to Brazil in the 1810s and produced a two-volume description of the plant and animal life.

You will recall that the second round of utopians at New Harmony attracted many scientists. After looking over eastern cities with a Swiss artist in tow, Maximilian headed west only to get seriously ill, perhaps with cholera. They spent a winter in New Harmony, where he mingled with the naturalists while recovering, and where I had first heard of him. Then he showed up here. Maximilian took copious notes and published another two-volume journal, which along with the artist's work provide historians many details about the Plains and its indigenous people.

After an intermediate owner, the fort was bought by the U.S. Army in 1867 during Red Cloud's War. The army dismantled it and used much of the lumber to build Fort Buford just downriver, which we'll visit momentarily.

Fort Union

Several booths were set up inside the walls for the arts festival, which I did not visit, not wishing to be tempted. One was a sad first for me: A tent for a group bringing attention to violence against Native American women. The rate is far higher than it is for other ethnic groups; if white women were disappearing as fast, it would be considered a national crisis.

A few miles deeper into North Dakota, I turned toward Fort Benton. First up, though, was the main driver to my coming to this part of the country. My mention of Boonesborough at Fort Union was not incidental. My pursuit of Daniel Boone from the southwestern toe of Virginia was only now coming to its terminus here at the eastern border of Montana, believe it or not. In his 70s, living with his daughter near the stone house we visited outside St. Louis, he was visited by a group of Kentuckians making a *really* long hunt up the Missouri. He apparently went with them—just a half-dozen years after Lewis and Clark passed through. The party is believed to have made it all the way to where the Yellowstone River enters the Missouri. And I was about to enter the Missouri-Yellowstone Confluence Interpretive Center.

There was a minor impediment however, very minor: A toddler was having a meltdown in the entryway, laying on the floor and crying. His father was by him, and his mother a few feet in my direction. I observed them running through the usual methods to teach him to manage his emotions better. “You’re trying all the tricks!,” I said to her with a smile in my voice.

“He gets hangry,” she explained with some embarrassment, adding he was due for lunch.

“So do I, so I completely understand,” I said. She got a needed laugh. Dad finally resorted to the catch-and-carry solution.

Inside I was greeted by a pleasingly cute and ectomorphic young woman with her standard explanation of what there was to do: exhibits in the center, including a temporary one on our friend Sitting Bull, plus access to the buildings of Fort Buford. “All

of that for five dollars," she hard-sold me. I grinned, bought, and went through the permanent exhibits on the confluence to learn something I should have guessed. The juncture has, of course, moved downriver from where it would have been when Lewis, Clark, and Boone found it. I went back to my greeter, explained my Boone hunt, and asked if it's known where the confluence was at the time. Clearly intrigued, she began looking through documents, called in a colleague who checked a book, and then called up a topographic map on her phone. It had to have been a couple miles south, they determined, and gave me directions to the area of an oxbow lake that is a remnant of the Yellowstone's former channel.

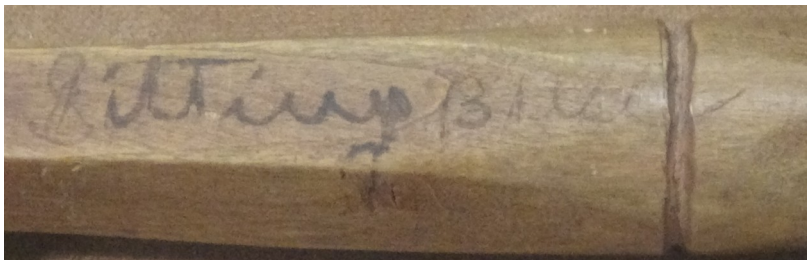
First I read through the panels on Sitting Bull, despite knowing his story well. This remarkable man, born in today's South Dakota as European-American pressure was beginning to be felt there, became a warrior at 14 and rose quickly to being a war leader of the Hunkpapa Sioux. In that role he helped drive Native American rivals west, expanding his people's hunting territory. By 1867, during Red Cloud's War, he had become chief of all the Sioux. Crazy Horse served as his vice-chief for a time.

I've already written about Sitting Bull's victories, including at Little Big Horn, and sojourn to Canada. Recall that Canada refused to supply his people, seeing them as America's responsibility. In July 1881 he brought his remaining followers here to Fort Buford and surrendered. They were moved to another reservation, where he was approached by Buffalo Bill to join the Wild West Show. Then came the rise of the Ghost Dance and Sitting Bull's murder, the events which precipitated Wounded Knee.

One of the large information-filled fabric panels in the exhibit told an extraordinary story, from an 1872 battle with troops protecting workers building a railroad near the Yellowstone River. Crazy Horse rode "in front of the soldiers armed only with a spear." Sitting Bull, not to be outdone, put down his rifle and walked toward the soldiers bearing only his pipe. Somewhere between the lines, he sat down and called out to his people, "'Whoever wishes to smoke with me, come.'" Only four warriors were brave enough, and only Sitting Bull showed no concern at the bullets flying by and popping up the dirt around them. In fact, when done smoking, he cleaned his pipe before calmly walking back to his troops, bullets missing him the entire way.

I was not prepared to find a glass case full of this remarkable man's possessions:

Even less was I prepared to see his signature etched into the pipe above. The most obvious reason for this surprise was, who knew he agreed to learn English? It turns out a man with the Wild West Show, I believe, taught him how to sign so he could sell his autographs.



I nearly floated out of the place, so much so I was partway to the car before remembering I had not yet seen what I came to see! A walk down and up and back down a trail past a lolling family group toward a boat ramp revealed a rarity in modern America: an undeveloped major river junction, protected within the Fort Buford lands. Though this is not the spot where Sacagawea, Lewis, Clark, Boone and countless names of the Wild West saw the rivers combine, the view remains very much like the one they had:

The confluence, with the Yellowstone at center and Missouri running right to left

At the parking lot for the fort, a short distance away, I found I'd parked next to the panel van of the couple with Hangry Child. Their windows being down, I asked if we'd gotten lunch. He in the driver seat and she standing behind confirmed they were in process. He burst out with a recommendation that I take a tour with a guy who was "hard of hearing." I noncommitted, for reasons you will ken, and wished them well as I walked toward what little remains of Fort Buford.

It started as housing for 100 men or less in 1866, but was expanded quickly with the help of Fort Union materials because of Red Cloud's War. It had a stockade, but only on three sides, the river side left open. The rest you basically know, but the post commander's house shown at right was a place of high drama in 1881. When Sitting Bull led his followers back from Canada that summer, he came to this house to surrender. When I stepped in, the elder man of whom the dad spoke was there, but offered no tour as yet. I looped through the building, refurbished beyond recognition on the original foundation. After passing through a room with the obvious evidence of a store-counter footprint on the wooden floor, and a spectacular Monarch Billiard Table from the fort made in the 1880s, I asked the guys where the surrender took place. "Right in there," the tour guide said, pointing back into what was the parlor at the time. He confirmed the story of Sitting Bull and his autographs, which sold for $100 apiece when he was with Buffalo Bill's show, he claimed. Given that translates to $3,000 in modern moola, I question this figure.

He now asked if I wanted a tour of the entirely reconstructed barracks, clearly expecting a yes. Despite the recommendation, I disappointed him, explaining to fill the awkward pause that followed, "I've been to a lot of forts."

I walked the boardwalk loop alone and read the signs, pausing at the parade ground to try imagining it in its day, with minimal success. Most of the buildings are long gone. Soon after, so were the Sage and I.

Past the small cemetery was something I'd not seen at those other forts. A sign indicated the site of the first Masonic Lodge in today's North Dakota, formed in 1871 by men from

the fort and local civilians. Of greater interest to me was another lodge founded 20 years later. African-Americans were not allowed in the Masons, a sad irony given that any number of AA masons surely helped build lodge buildings. Instead the Masons created a segregated arm, the Prince Hall lodges. Fort Buford, too, was occupied by Buffalo Soldiers, who formed the first Prince Hall Lodge in the Dakotas. They, however, "were believed to have met southeast of this location near the river," not in the whites' nice building.

I followed a hunch in taking a dirt road which indeed turned west toward ND 58. Per the guidance from the earnest ectomorph, this took us parallel to the Montana border to tiny Dore, more a collection of agricultural buildings than a town, and a left down a wide gravel road to its end. This was as close as I could drive to the lake she pointed out, marked by the trees on the far side of the wheat field. A map of the "Confluence Area" she gave me shows Lewis and Clark sites back up the highway a bit, in what now is a wildlife management area. But seeing the purported exact spot was not worth the backcountry hiking time to me.

A note in my journal contains a life lesson. It says I used MapQuest to determine my route to my next destination in the middle of North Dakota. I recall pulling over on the gravel road before re-entering the highway, so that must have been when I did so. The journal says I got upset when I realized I was not being taken back to Highway 2. I thought I would get more of it before dropping directly south. The note points out I used this as an opportunity to practice "radical acceptance." This is a Buddhist concept, pointing out that we make our lives worse by resisting bad experiences we either can't change, or are choosing as better than the alternative. That is, when something you want to do is thwarted, that is bad, but we make it worse by letting our mind run through "what ifs" and "I wishes" and dwelling on our disappointment. I was choosing to follow MQ instead of backtracking quite a distance to Hwy 2, and life does not allow us to follow

two mutually exclusive paths at once. I calmed myself by accepting, and the lesson lies in the fact I'd forgotten all about this episode before reading about it in the journal!

Highway 58 continues a short distance before terminating at the twin metropolises of Fairview, Mont., and East Fairview, N.D. There ND 200 put us back on an eastward course a short distance to four-lane U.S. 85. I swung by the Lewis and Clark Museum in Alexander, but it was unpromising, so I kept going, expecting to spend the day driving small roads most of the way across the state. US 85 becomes a scenic byway around Watkins City, around which point I spotted a big brown sign saying Theodore Roosevelt National Park was 13 miles away. In charting this route, I'm not sure I even noticed the park, focused as I was on the roads and not what I would be passing.

I'd heard of this park, but neither knowing exactly where it was nor expecting to come this way until today, I had no idea what was here. I resolved to find out. It turned out the indicated distance was only to the North Unit, providing a 14-mile non-looping look at the geological features of the region. The South Unit was an hour beyond. I learned all this at the entrance gate, while presenting for the first time my Senior Pass (and ID, as demanded), from a beardy young ranger. He spotted and asked about the Grant audio book, mentioned in St. Louis and not yet finished, riding in my passenger seat. I talked it up, and he asked to take a picture for his reading list. He was from Ohio, he explained, so Grant, born there, was a favorite president.

Also Teddy Roosevelt, of course. The park's connection to him is that he built a ranch in 1885 some 45 miles southwest of here. Also part of the park, the site is nearly inaccessible by vehicle, and only the foundation is left of the ranch house, so I didn't worry abut trying to see that. The park was named for him when set aside in 1947, longer ago than I realized.

This unplanned turn became the most serendipitous of the trip. I would see things that not only amazed me, but stumped everyone seeing them in the slideshow. First up was a "slump block." Here's the setup: Thousands of years ago the Little Missouri River is cutting away at a cliff face, creating an overhang of rock. Eventually that collapses, sliding down to rest at an angle in the dent the river dug out. Over the years rain erodes the cliff face farther in one direction while the river shifts in the other. You end up with a massive hunk of striated rock by itself between the two, its lines facing upward.

The next stop, though, is the biggest geological mind-fuck I've seen in a lifetime of travel, excepting perhaps the Grand Canyon. The "Cannonball Concretions Pullout" more than lived up to the name. Here a sandstone cliff, unremarkable at first glance, points at the parking lot. As you take a closer look, the weirdness quite literally emerges. Massive spheres stick out of the butte and dot the sandy ground around it. I'm talking three feet in diameter in some cases, smooth except where the surface is broken. Geologists understand how they form, a sign said—water seeping through the rock to concentrate minerals—but have no idea how they form *round*. More than one viewer of the slideshow had to ask twice to confirm these are not man-made. I assure them they are not, and also usually have to repeat how big they are. After investigating the one at left up close,

and the large cricket warming himself thereupon, I moved around the point dodging tourist children to find the jumble at right, looking like a giant child had lost her marbles.

Along the way I realized humans were not my only companions. A small white snake, his scales not quite perfect camouflage against the sand, zipped away from me toward some bushes.

More intriguing views of the badlands followed, as well as a better view of a buffalo herd than I'd gotten in Yellowstone:

I wanted to shoot another panorama vid at a Little Missouri overlook, but its viewing shelter had attracted a loud-yakking family on one side and a couple bickering over how to use a selfie stick on the other. They seemed not to get that you are supposed to hold it *out*. Something was broken, they concluded. "I didn't break it," she said defensively. Finally he asked me to take the picture. I explained I was taking the time to frame them between the ridge point below and the river. That duty done, I then took three shots with my camera to substitute for the desired vid. Here's one, aiming southwest:

The end of the road overlooked an oxbow in the river that explains the gorge in the shot above. The Little Missouri flows north until the oxbow. A marker explained that at one time, where I was standing to take the picture below, I would have been on the edge of a glacier. That had blocked the river, causing it to almost curl back on itself and then head east 640,000 years ago. The land lost altitude more quickly in that direction, so the river picked up speed and began cutting more deeply into the ground.

Heading back to the car thoroughly gratified by this dead-end detour in my trip, I spotted the bickering couple coming from the parking lot. He asked if I wanted him to take a picture of me. "No, thank you," I called back, seeming to surprise him. 'I'm not a narcissist,' I continued in my head.

You may have noticed none of these pictures have me. You're welcome. Denise in Seattle asked if I was getting pictures of myself. When I said "no," she responded, referring to herself, how did I know that was the answer? I like that she knows me that well.

In the lot at the unit's entrance, I hit up Booking. It wanted me to backtrack 15 minutes, and I did not. So instead I booked the Dakota Inn and followed ND 200 as it left US 85 and went directly east. That's how I found myself in Killdeer, North Dakota, for the night.

A large roundabout at ND 22 got me to gas on the far side and brought me back to the two-story inn. A man slowly came out from the back using a walker. Though wearing a wife-beater,[3] he proved to be pleasant. As at each place I stayed that had more than one floor, I asked for the top one if available. (The reason is to eliminate sounds from upstairs neighbors moving around.) He was surprised, since most people prefer ground floors for reasons I'll never understand, especially when there are elevators. An older white woman

3 Slang for a sleeveless white undershirt.

in housekeeper gear came up the hall. Gloria confirmed his belief none of the upstairs rooms were clean at 5 o'clock. He asked which room was easiest to clean quickly, and she just laughed. They conferred. On the layout chart on the desk, he pointed out one used by one person one night, and she agreed that was the best candidate. Did I mind waiting? No, I said, I'll go grab dinner.

This proved more difficult than expected, it being a small-town Sunday evening. A place that looked interesting "downtown," apparently a distillery, was closed. I settled for The Pipe, which looked like a biker bar outside but was nicer within. Nonetheless, the only thing vegetarian and not on the kid's menu was a mushroom pizza. While waiting and writing in the journal, I listened in on talk between several gas-field workers swapping stories of other places they'd worked, and the same litany of complaints about managers I've heard—differing in detail, not substance—in every industry for 40 years. They and their colleagues in the fracking industry have proven a mixed blessing for North Dakota, providing jobs but driving up costs. The medium pizza and a beer cost $34, in a town of 900.

Back at the inn, the room was small and unfancy, but everything worked, and it was well-cleaned by Gloria. I recommend the joint next time you're in Killdeer.