

## ***LIFE'S ROAD TRIPS***

*“I would rather own a little and see the world, than own the world and see a little.”*

Alexander Sattler

*“Because the greatest part of a road trip isn't arriving at your destination. It's all the wild stuff that happens along the way.”*

Emma Chase

*“Look at life through the windshield, not the rearview mirror.”*

Byrd Baggett

*“Never underestimate the therapeutic power of driving and listening to very loud music.”*

Unknown

It occurred to me this week that the long winding road of my life, and the windows of time wherein it unfolds, are best measured in road trips.

That's right, road trips!

Early this week, for example, Ima and I took off on one such road trip. My sister Vicki Sue and Ed, her husband, have been talking for weeks about a special hamburger joint located about an hour from our house in Springboro, Ohio. Any of you that know about my love for burgers and know talk like this is like waving a red cape in front of a bull.

We drove north, above the terminal moraine—that point where the last glacier stopped—and where the land becomes as flat as a tabletop, with the scenery dominated by huge farms as far as the eye can see, on both sides of the road. Our goal was the city of Greenville, Ohio, home of Annie Oakley (a museum in her honor is on main street), and the place where the famous Treaty of Greenville was signed.

In the old part of Greenville, across the street from a tattoo parlor, stands a small, squat, brick, bar-looking edifice called the Maid-Rite Sandwich Shoppe. Since the mid-1930s, this establishment has been famous for two things: a unique hamburger recipe, and its famous “gum wall”—outside brick walls covered with layers of chewing gum pressed on the walls by successive generations of customers.

The burger was as good as advertised. (I didn't try one of the wads of gum ☺). The beef has the shredded consistency of a Sloppy Joe sandwich (before the

sauce is mixed in), seasoned with salt, sugar, onion, mustard, Worcester sauce and other spices. Workers constantly stir the hamburger in two large, metal pits, to meet the demands of a constant flow of drive-in orders that can have cars lined up for blocks outside.

What an experience! Ima and I loved it.

This brings up Akers' Road Trip Law #3: road trips are always made better, and certainly more memorable, when there is a food stop involved.

A good burger is one thing: a place where there is a ton of history is another. (Akers' Road Trip Law #4). As soon as I returned home, I started researching the significance of what happened in Greenville, within walking distance of the Maid-Rite hamburger emporium. I read that in early August 1795, an event occurred close to those hallowed eating grounds that ended the Northwest Indian War (1785-1795) and laid the groundwork for Ohio to become a state eight years later: the Treaty of Greenville.

Of course, I'm sure we discussed all this in Mr. Stubb's Ohio History class in our eighth grade at good ol' Clearcreek Local High School. But I don't remember it ...

The Indian tribal confederacy that fought the new American government constituted, in the words of historian William Hogeland, the "high-water mark in resistance to white expansion."<sup>1</sup> It was sandwiched between the two better known pan-Indian movements led by Pontiac, the gifted Odawa tribal leader (1763-1766) and Shawnee Tecumseh's Rebellion—along with his brother Tenskwatawa, "The Prophet"<sup>2</sup>—(1810-1813, which merged with the War of 1812). At any rate, the defeats suffered by the U.S. Army during the early battles against the Indian confederation were among their worst in history, largely because of poor training, equipment, and morale.

Nothing remains of the old Fort Greenville—built two years before the treaty was signed—built as part of a string of forts on the Northwestern border of the newly independent United States. The architect of this string of forts was General "Mad" Anthony Wayne, who had battled the British in the War for Independence and was appointed as commander-in-chief of the Army by President George Washington. The fort, at the time, was the largest wooden fort in America, covering over 50 acres, with eight blockhouses located about 250 yards away from

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<sup>1</sup> William Hogeland, *Autumn of the Black Snake*, (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), p. 374.

<sup>2</sup> Tenskwatawa emerged as a tribal leader in the early 1800's as the most prominent Shawnee witch hunter. The death of important native leader of Lenape Chief Buckongahelas in mid-1805, probably from smallpox or influenza, triggered rumors that witchcraft was responsible for the great leader's death and triggering a witch-hunt that resulted in the death of several suspected tribal witches. The result was a nativist religious revival led by Tecumseh's brother that rejected European-American customs and ways (liquor, clothing, and use of firearms), calling on Indian tribes to stop ceding land, and accusing Indians that cooperated with the United States of witchcraft.

the main fort. The fort was named after Revolutionary War hero Nathaniel Greene. Most important, the fortification served as a vital training center for some 3,000 members of General Wayne's Legion of the United States before they marched north in August 1794, to defeat the Indian confederation at the Battle of Fallen Timbers (near present-day Toledo, Ohio).

With the Indian threat greatly reduced, Fort Greenville was abandoned in 1796, and most of the ruins were destroyed as the town of Greenville was built. Much of the fort's materials were used to build buildings in nearby Dayton, Ohio. The remains of Blockhouse 8, across Mud Creek from the fort, close to where the courthouse and fountain are today, was dug up in 2002 by an amateur archeologist.<sup>3</sup>

Adjacent to the parking lot behind the Maid-Rite bar-turned-restaurant, is the Tecumseh walking path. It was hard for me to imagine the huge gathering outside the great council of Indian chiefs and tribes—held on Tuesday, September 22, 1795—where some 1,100 chiefs and delegates representing 12 Indian tribes of the Northwest Territory, met to discuss the recently signed treaty.<sup>4</sup>

One who didn't sign the treaty was the great Shawnee warrior and chief Tecumseh (lit. "Panther-Passing-Across," 1768-1813). Close to where the restaurant stands today, Tecumseh's eloquently answered Chief Blue Jacket and the 91 other signatories of the treaty: "I stated only that I could not make peace with the whites and could not live with those who did. What I feared would happen *has* happened: we have entirely lost, by the terms of the treaty, practically all in Ohio that was our own. Even the land of this little village where we now sit has been signed away and we no longer have any right to be here ... This is—*was*—our land and it is here that the bones of our fathers and our fathers' fathers are buried, and if we cannot protect what is ours, what is left to us?"<sup>5</sup>

Why am I so interested in the Native Americans? Many of you have heard or read a story I have told many times over the years. On my dad's side of the family, going back three generations, one of the men married a full-blooded Cherokee princess. In fact, my grandfather (Wiley Akers), one of eight brothers and sisters—all orphaned at an early age—had enough Indian blood that he and his siblings qualified for one of the periodic Oklahoma land rushes that began in the 1880s. The brothers and sisters pooled their money and sent the youngest brother to participate. Did I tell you all the Akers love to play cards? It runs in our blood.

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<sup>3</sup> Fort Greenville, Ohio, *The Archeological Conservancy (website)*, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Allan W. Eckert, *A Sorrow In Our Heart: The Life of Tecumseh*, Bantam Books (paperback version), 1993, p. 495. The Delawares, the Potawatomes, the Wyandots, the Shawnees, the Miamis (including the Eel River Miamis, Weas, and Piankeshaws,), the Chippewas, the Ottwas, the Kickapoos, and the Kaskasias. (The Sacs and Foxes were invited but refused to attend).s wh

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Bottom line: the youngest brother got flimflammed in a card game on the train heading west and lost the family's money.

“Sigh.”

One of my most powerful memories involves a visit many years ago to the National Museum of the American Indian in the Smithsonian Museum complex at one end of the mall in Washington D.C. On the second floor, if memory serves me correctly, is a large room dominated by a large, wall-sized map showing the names of all the Indian tribes that once occupied the continental United States. Hundreds of Indian tribes are displayed. However, the names of Native American tribes that no longer exist are highlighted in red. All of a sudden, the carnage becomes very real to the observer. A very small percentage of indigenous tribes survived waves of disease, westward expansion, and inter-tribal wars.

It is a sobering experience.

If I tried to describe all the road trips that have influenced my life, it would make this missive at least thirty pages long. I have described one or two in previous missives. My most sacred memories were the completely unscripted road trips with my dad, with the first ten directional decisions of our trip decided by the random toss of a coin.

Recently, Ima and I made the long drive down I-75 from Ohio to Fort Lauderdale. This was our second trip in that direction within a month. On the drive we go through Chattanooga, Tennessee, and passing south of the city, go by an exit designating the National Battlefield sites at Lookout Mountain—also known as the Battle Above the Clouds—where a battle was fought on November 24, 1863, during the Civil War. Although not a huge battle by Civil War standards (in terms of casualties at least), the result of the battle opened the gateway into the Deep South for Union forces.

Nevertheless, I have a special fondness for the place.

It raises memories, of course, of a road trip. At the time, I was a student at Cumberland College (now Cumberland University). I don't think I've written about this experience before. There was an extended weekend and break during one of the semesters. Sitting (and bored) in the dorm, four of us decide to launch out on a road trip to Florida: suddenly, spontaneously, and with very little thought. All the ingredients for a perfect road trip! One of the guys said he had relatives in Florida who would provide us a place to stay and, hopefully, money for the return trip.

What could go wrong with a road trip plan like that, right?

We hopped in the car and made it as far as Chattanooga, before it became apparent that we didn't have enough money to make it all the way to Florida. So, instead we made the thoroughly mature decision to go to a movie theater

downtown and watch an afternoon matinee featuring Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*, a risqué movie by 1968 standards (but ho-hum by today's rapidly eviscerating standards).

Afterwards, we briefly toured the battlefield site at Lookout Mountain.

By then it was getting dark and so we looked for a place to stay. We found a fleabag, dilapidated hotel clinging to the side of the mountain. If I recall correctly, it cost us ten dollars for a room with double beds. No questions asked. Can you imagine a group of four male teenagers doing that today, with the media- and Hollywood-induced homophobia? Back then we thought nothing of it.

In the middle of the night, about 2:00 in the morning, we heard a loud, terrible, and chilling noise. Almost like the sound of a train crashing through the trees. When we went outside to investigate the strange sound, we saw fresh tread marks on the road in a curve—just down the steep mountain road from the hotel—and could see that a car had gone airborne over the guardrail and crashed through a cluster of trees.

We scrambled down the road and looked breathlessly down the mountain.

It was a chilly, but bright, moonlit night.

Three of us attempted to climb down the steep decline toward the wreck, one of our group stayed up top to flag down approaching traffic.

It was a difficult, bordering on treacherous, descent.

By then, a car had come by on the road above and said they would call for help.

As we half slid, half stumbled downward, we could see that the car had snapped off several trees before coming to rest on its roof, the crumpled vehicle frame wedging itself on a shelf of large rocks and trees.

Broken glass, car parts and things from the inside were strewn about everywhere.

Smoke was spewing out of the car.

A female passenger had been hurtled out of car and lay bleeding and unconscious several feet from the car. (It was a time just before seatbelts were mandatory).

The driver, a young teenager like us, was trapped under the car and screaming in pain.

What would you have done?

There was no such thing as cellphones in those days.

I took off my coat and placed it over the girl to keep her warm.

I thought she muttered something but wasn't sure.

I felt so helpless. All I could do was pray. I remember more about shivering from the cold than the words I prayed during those early morning hours for the complete stranger at my feet.

After that, I went over to help my friend as we tried to console the teenager trapped under the car as best we could. It was obvious to us that he had a serious back injury, and although we didn't know much about first-aid treatment, we were reluctant to move him.

A weak "hang on," was all I could muster, and muttered yet another prayer under my breath.

By then an emergency vehicle arrived at the scene on the road above.

We were so relieved to have help.

We heard them crashing down the hill hauling a litter with them.

Our joy at seeing them arrive soon turned to dismay when we noticed that each of them were drunk.

I mean really drunk. As they say in the mountains, "drunk as skunks."

Two of them immediately started to tug on the trapped young driver prompting a new round of painful squeals. "Don't do that," my friend said with a determined voice, "he may have a back injury."

"Shut up kid," one of the would-be rescuers slurred.

Imagine the scene if you can. Four teenagers in a strange hotel roused from their sleep by a horrible accident. Unexpectedly thrust into a situation beyond their control. Then they encounter drunken would-be rescuers. All resulting in an uncomfortable, unexpected stand-off at the wreckage site halfway down the side of Lookout Mountain. Four college boys standing our ground until a more experienced and capable, rescue team arrived.

Only then, after helping all we could and feeling the accident victims were in good hands, did we feel free to leave.

The old, grizzled veteran rescue worker in charge of the team grabbed me by the arm. "You kids did well," he said with his deep southern drawl. That made me feel good.

We were still talking about the incident later the next morning when we stopped by a diner in downtown Chattanooga. The waitress teased us about our northern accents. We barely made it back to campus, gas indicator pinging on empty, without a dollar between us.

But what a road trip!

I have thought about that early morning encounter on Lookout Mountain many times over the years. I was so young and naïve then. Just another innocent road trip. I have no idea whether the young girl or the teenage boy survived. I assume they did.

Why else was I there except to pray ...

I wonder what they're doing now?

A century earlier that same mountain—only the rock formations are unchanging—witnessed multiple, unspeakable tragedies of a different kind.

Almost all of them were far too young, with hopes, dreams and girlfriends left behind. The human condition. The terrible physical and mental carnage of war. In those days, they wore thick wool uniforms of gray and blue as they scrambled down the mountain rather than blue jeans and T-shirts.

Looking backward in time, I wonder what took place on that very same spot a century before our early morning experience?

Is it disrespectful to compare the two?

In 1863, it was a nation bitterly divided.

Like today.

Over the years, I have never attempted to visit that place on the road. I'm sure the hotel is long since gone, the road itself improved.

Guardrails can be repaired, car wreckage removed, broken bones healed ... only memories remain as they were.

On that very spot, separated in time by a hundred years, I wonder how many memories remained on both ends of the time spectrum: how many prayers were offered over the broken bodies of wounded comrades.

Faith endures even longer than memories.

Even for those on the mountain snared in their own cross-hairs of times and circumstances beyond their control.