



THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND, THIS LAND IS MY LAND

Woody Guthrie had it right: be a hobo. I camped pretty much anywhere I could, usually finding a secluded spot well away from the incessant toiling of our species. A railroad track maintenance road, some dormant farm acreage, or just somewhere out in the woods. In White Sands all I could find nearby was an abandoned warehouse parking lot. In Montana a patch of field in front of cow pasture. In Ontario a public beach worked well. In some cases I opted to use a formal campground, but I always sought out the Park Service's offerings instead of anything private, because, well, the Park Service seems more conscientious in their aesthetic than those noisy, crowded KOA-style camper corrals. Usually, though, I had no need for water or power hook-up, and I prefer having a surprising view in the morning (in other words, to camp at random some time after midnight, never really knowing where I was...).

COW ALARM CLOCKS

A pickup truck parked near the entrance to several thousand acres of cow pasture means but one thing to the bovine psyche: feeding time. So I should not have been surprised when at 5:30 in the morning the urgent and prolonged lowing of cows nearby woke me. When I peered out into the warming Montana sky I was surprised and a little unnerved at the sight of some five hundred head of cattle milling about my truck. Some subtle urging within my sleepy brain said "you'd better get going...the ranchers will be here soon...." And the suspicion was correct. Less than an hour later a friendly-but-tough looking ranch-hand pulled up beside me. "Something the matter with your rig?" he asked politely. "Well," I replied, "the pipes froze last night, but other than that I'm okay." He nodded once, his jaw clenching slightly as he



looked my truck over. "Well, you can't camp here," he said, again polite, but firm. "I wasn't planning to," I replied, "just moving on." And to indisputably illustrate my intentions I started my truck. "Good," he said, and without so much as a fare-thee-well, he drove off to feed his cattle.

UNNAMED TOWN, ONTARIO



This was the town that colored my experience in this central Canadian province with the opalescent hue of pickled herring. Let's just say the Parisians learned every nasty nuance of condescension from the folks who live here. One might excuse the behavior of these townies through their habituation to the familiar and fear of anything new, except that anything new would include the face of their neighbor, which they have apparently forgotten in their perpetual self-absorption. Take one customer in a small, locally owned bakery: Well-dressed and middle-aged, he rooted about the croissant case with his bare and undoubtedly moist little hands for the perfectly fresh pastry. Once he had groped a croissant meeting his standards, he took a bite from it, the crumbs falling through his neatly trimmed beard into the rejects now scattered around the case below. Then he walked away, leaving the case wide open to other grubbily undignified onslaughts. How can I emphasize that he was the NORM in this town, and not the exception? It seemed as though any sort of politeness was deemed a weakness, and rudeness and casual usury a just reward for attempted rapport. In New York City or other big cities, the intimate distance between human souls is understandably the inverse of the condensed physical proximity. But this was a small, dirty, mealy little grub of a town with minimal native crowding and zero tourist value. So...where did the attitude come from? I don't know, but I'll tell you this: the supposedly fresh croissants were terrible, too.



ODD NOTES FROM THE ROAD...

***I think I've fallen in love
with the Wisconsin accent.***

BEAUTIFUL MONTREAL

Although I only spent a few hours in Montreal, I feel I could write pages about how compelling this city is. After parking on a side street aglow with Christmas lights and street lamps on the north end of town, I wandered into a local pub. This was a blue-collar neighborhood with everything -- shops, Metro stations, restaurants, apartments -- all piled on top of each other and overflowing with people into the busy night. The pub had a rough edge to it, with everyone riveted to the local boxing matches thumping and sweating out of numerous TVs. There were curses, there were cheers, all in French. When I entered, the white-haired proprietor shook one finger, then two at me...was this some bizarre local shorthand? I replied by shaking one finger back at him. A moment later he appeared with a beer. "Soixante-dix" he said. Relieved that I had passed the initiation, I paid him and settled in, listening intently (it had to be intently since my French was never good) to the conversation around me. That was something long overdue: a cultural emersion so complete I knew I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I only sipped my beer (I've been cutting back on any alcohol intake, you see) but despite being the only beer in the bar, it was exceptional. After sitting a while and soaking it in (my clothes would reek of cigarette smoke for days) I spent a bit more time walking the streets, breathing the air, and watching people. I will go back to Montreal for a longer view for sure.

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

In Savannah, the congenial southern culture provides for ample conversation at every opportunity. While standing on a street corner, or eating lunch, or buying tobacco (to support the corruptive, corrosive image of U.S. tobacco companies, I smoke a cigar or pack a pipe every now and again), I soon found myself discussing the stock market, the attributes of southern cooking, politics, and just about everything else. It was a warm, and informative, welcome. In particular, I remember one older man who volunteered as a docent at the Telfair Museum (for you literature hounds, this is where the "Bird Girl" statue from "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" has been relocated) who lit up like a Christmas tree when he discovered my interest in the faux wood of the Octagon Room. I got the tour of my life that day. I was even allowed to inspect the Bird Girl's ankles for a foundry stamp, and was blessed with a torrent of extraneous facts about the once-and-future "high culture" of the south.



THE SECRET WORLD OF TRUCKERS

Somewhere in Georgia I decided to buy a CB radio. Just a hand-held 4-watter from Radio Shack. I bought it with the thought that if I ever broke down anywhere remote, it might come in handy. What I didn't realize was that this impulse purchase would provide hours and hours of some of the richest entertainment a person could have on the road. Traditionally, truckers use channel 19 to communicate with each other. By truckers I mean eighteen-wheel-semi-tractor-trailer-rig-drivers, with an occasional six-wheel flatbed or the like thrown in. Erudite or phlegmatic are not words to be found on channel 19. But neither are the stereotyped streams of profanity often attributed to these long-hauling buddies. Most of the chatter is confined to reports of bear sightings (i.e. police cruisers), weather or road conditions, accidents, chicken coops (truck scales), and places to eat, sleep, or

have casual sex. As such, these conversations can be of impressive value to the road-tripper, and I took advantage of all they had to offer. Um, well, almost all. Occasionally, though, you'll get a driver who, either because it's late and he's trying to stay awake, or because he's just ornery and ragged, insists on ranting on-and-on-and-on about this, that or the other totally free-associated thing. Usually these monologues are barely comprehensible, accented as they are with local dialect, trucker jargon and the inevitable "echo chamber" sound effects so many truckers use. Something like: "Whhheearoo wweetinawl goottoo wrainglerrreed boowtoonoro shappeddoonn...." On-and-on they'll go for hours, and as I said, basically incomprehensible. But in nearly every case where I intercepted such a rant and countered it with a lightly fermented wisecrack, I found a lonely trucker who was much happier having a dialogue with his buddy than continue unthwarted in his earnest solo opining.

By the time I reached Florida I had already added an external antenna to increase my range, and was adept enough at imitating the trucker protocols and jargon to gain and give valuable road information and a few good laughs. Some of these drivers have had a long, long while ponder the workings of the world, and though their manners and syntax may be gruff, the philosophizing can be deep and even profound, and the humor as dry and delightful as a good box wine. On one occasion in Texas I had a yodeling contest with a trucker, as judged by a half-dozen other truckers who were listening in. In true trucker spirit, the judges agreed: "Ya both done just fine. Different styles like, that's true, but ya both done fine. Keep on singing now, the both of ya, hear?"

FLORIDA, OH FLORIDA

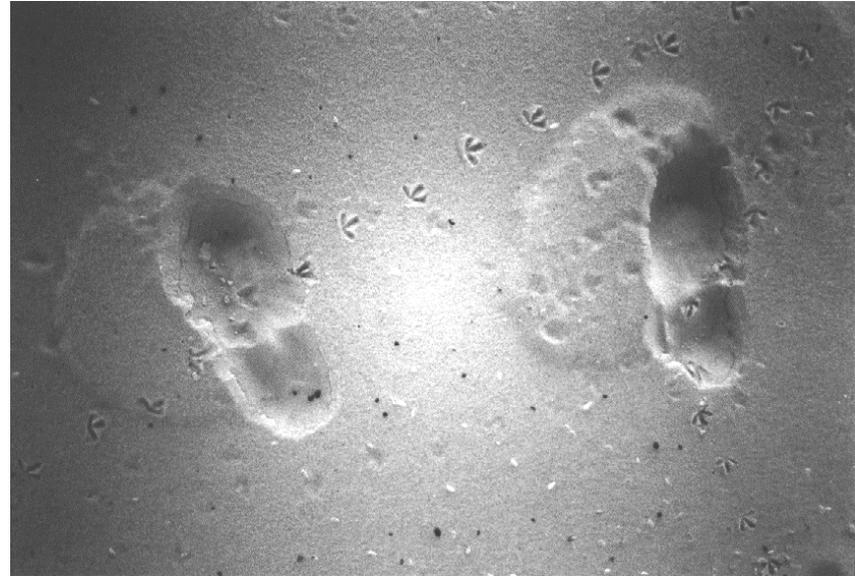
The coastline of the Florida panhandle is one of the most lovely I have ever seen. If you take away the high rise hotels and cheesy Quasi-Pueblo-Victorian housing developments which stretch seemingly forever into the distance in any direction, then the quality of light there, the sand so white and fine it squeaks like talcum powder when you walk on it, and the serenely blue water create a contrast which rivals the Hawaiian seashore. But there are so very many people there, and state and local zoning which has allowed unchecked growth is so crazed it is lowering the water tables. One woman, a sultry Southern Belle in her sixties, explained to me that the original covenants which restricted growth have been challenged in court because they had race-restriction clauses, and instead of protecting the spirit of these covenants (i.e. to keep lot sizes large and stretches of beach undeveloped), the courts have simply crushed them under the relentless onslaught of wordless greed. "Wealth has run amok," she said.

Two of my most pleasant cultural experiences were in Florida, however. One was in Monticello, the Jefferson County seat. This is the sort of town where blacks and whites appear to live peacefully in the same neighborhoods (this seemed to be an exception as I observed the South), where the local gas station shares cookies and chocolates with its customers along with exceptionally friendly and competent service, where the people smile and nod at you as you walk

by, and where a six-dollar all-you-can-eat buffet at the local diner offers really delicious, soul-comforting food like black-eyed peas with roasted green chilies, fried liver and onions in truly mouth-watering gravy, southern fried chicken to make your heart yearn for more, and luscious corn bread...all washed down with that staple of the southern table: sweet tea. Mmmm, mmmm, mmmm. Got any pepper sauce to go with? Sure we do! This town just stuck with me. It had a peaceful, mellow feeling that was, despite itself, attentive and alert to every moment. Many of the turn-of-the-century houses were beautifully restored. Walking along the town's streets had the feel of summer afternoons and family picnics. There was even a gospel-singing propane vendor. Nice fella, he was.



The other Florida surprise awaited me in a little town of Grayton, right on that talcum-powdered coast. In addition to the only few square feet of protected beach along the entire panhandle (with a security-gated campground, no less!), this town has one restaurant and bar whose food and entertainment are as hip and hoppin' as anything I've encountered in San Francisco or Boston. Part of my astonishment was undoubtedly due to its being the ONLY restaurant or bar in Grayton, which lowered my expectations. Add to this that I have simply never tasted fresh Gulf shrimp and scallops so expertly and succulently prepared, and you know this gourmand's stomach has also skewed his judgment. But when you throw in a world-class jazz quartet, a gaggle of pretty women, and the wonderful energy of smiling and excited southerners packing the place, well, I'm afraid I was just blown away.



MIGHTY TEXAS

My entrance into the Lone Star State was less than dignified. A sheriff followed me for some seventeen miles through his otherwise abandoned county, right up to where my GPS indicated a bridge would span the Gulf all the way to Galveston Island. It was around three in the morning, so I was a bit concerned when the highway came to an end instead of to a bridge...was this a ferry dock? It turned out to be just that, and the sheriff actually waited until



the ferry arrived and began to load up before moving on to more important business (although what that might have been I can't imagine! A squirrel sighting, perhaps?). The friendly ferry workers, when they saw my out-of-state license plate, treated me extra-special, too: they put all the local boys on the leeward side of the ferry, and me on the windy, cold and wet side. Of course, my truck did need a good salt wash after so much time on the road...it's just that, well, I myself really didn't need a bath, and standing at the railing peering out into the ocean of night, I just didn't see the ferry begin an unexpected turn into that really big wave..... Once I had debarked I was well inside the borders of the Nation of Texas, and immediately felt at home (though not yet dry). It seems that nearly all of Texas is just like Lynnwood, WA. Same people, same trucks, same hairstyles, same attitudes. From there on out it was easy going.

FRIEDRICKSBURG, TEXAS



This is a really cool town. It's an early German settlement, complete with gothic Cathedral and great German food. It has a touristy feel, but it is full of life and even has a number of Biergarten...mit echte Lager. I was reminded so much of my time in Germany that nostalgia overtook me, and I began speaking German to everyone, my thoughts wandering wistfully to a possible trip some time soon back to the Old Country. I also was able to enter both Cathedrals...and there was no one there! I felt cleansed and worshipful within their sanctuary, was deeply moved, in fact, and left these wonderful spaces with these words ringing in my head: "Great carelessness comes from ignorance and lack of love."

Close by Enchanted Rock, the reason for my passing through this town in the first place, was an astounding geological anomaly (the largest exposed granite dome in the country) offering hours of frolic and romping about. This resplendent mound also sports a resplendent crack for the inspired spelunker, an easy thousand feet down into crawling blackness, sweaty grunting and skinned knees. There were hundreds of people on the open rock above, repelling down the cliffs and swarming over the mound like aimless ants. So my time wasn't really peaceful, but it was inspiring. There were dozens of Armadillos, too; I had never seen an Armadillo before! They are undeniably cute, especially the way they snuffle eagerly through the grass. So much intensity in one shiny little package.



TRASHY BACK YARDS

I'd like to spend a few words on trashy back yards I encountered all across America. There are a lot of them. They all pretty much look the same: old bicycles, rusted out cars, piles of yard waste, pieces of furniture, a dented water heater or two, broken children's toys, and so on. I think it would be worthwhile to do a photo-essay showing the amazing cohesiveness of American culture across our great country, just by capturing these back yards in their natural, synergistic state. Maybe next time.

CANYON DE CHELLY



Crows calling

High up in flight

Running water in the stream

A boy's laughter echoing

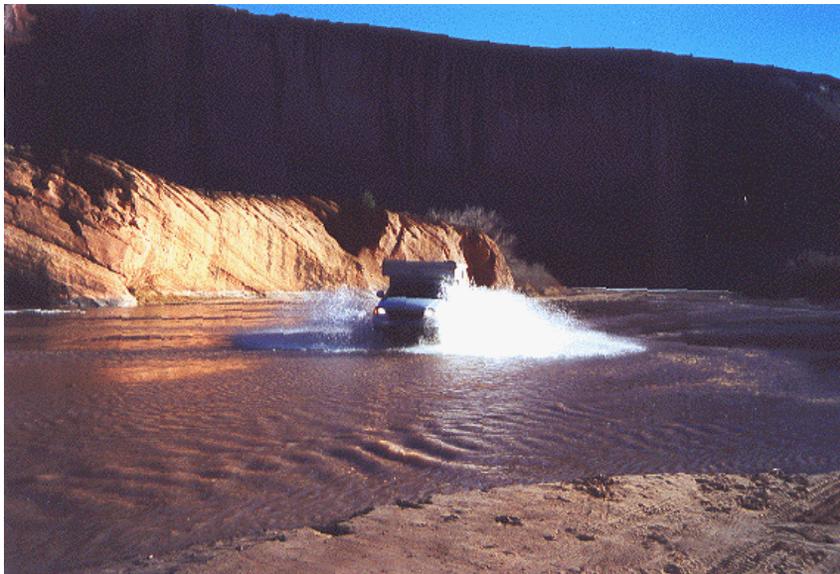
Among the ruins

In peaceful quiet

A perfect quiet

It's easy to rest here

My guide, Nate, showed off his home with laid-back self-confidence. As we drove up the river, the only "road" into the canyon, he guided me carefully between the quicksand and the drop-offs, pointing out all the amazing history of this place, some 2,000 years of it. The drawings of the Anasazi, the ancient cliff dwellings, the ways of the Navajo people who still farm there now. There were horrible battles with the Spanish. There was defeat, exile and attrition under the Anglos. There was the final return of the tenacious few who survived it all under the newly formed Navajo Nation. The people living there today still keep their language and culture alive. Just think about that for a moment. This was perhaps the most precious gem of the entire trip; it is a place I hope to return to some day for a longer stay.



THE END OF INNOCENCE

The Grand Canyon. To see it is to delineate one's existence, to forever cast aside any imposition of meaning, any constructions of our relationship to the unknown, and to finally and clearly be certain of who and what we are. For in the moment of that awareness of self within the immensity of such creation, we can no more reject the miracle of beauty before us as a reflection of God's wonder than we can contain the joy at our capacity to be in such a place, or our capacity to begin, just begin, to understand what we are experiencing. I tried to write a poem about that moment in that moment, and found appropriate words to be scarce, and my innermost thoughts only a whisper in the worshipful silence that filled the morning air:



*"Speechless
I am tearful in wonder
that these vast spaces
could be filled to overflowing
with such astounding beauty.
I try
to fill the distance with my awe
and find the greatness of this place
is beyond what I can feel."*

The tourists here are diverse and as fascinating as their surroundings. It seems that everyone is gawking at everyone else, and it's sometimes hard to tell if the Canyon is getting equal time.

WHITE SANDS: A DELIGHTFUL MYSTERY

Early in the morning the sand here is so cold and flat that you leave no footprints. The silence is complete in such openness, complete and wonderful. I lost myself deliberately among the dunes, using my GPS to find the way back out.





ANOTHER RECURRING THEME



I saw so much natural beauty everywhere, and the truth of America's wealth in natural resources was confirmed at every turn in the highway. What seemed clear to me also was the need to use this magnificent wealth wisely, and support its protection whenever possible. The White Sands national monument began its public life as a gypsum mine...and what a striking contrast its preservation is to the Beaches of South Walton in Florida. One protected for everyone's enjoyment, the other exploited into ugliness by so very few. How wise those rare individuals were who authorized and preserved our National Parks. I can only hope I will be as wise in the use of these wonderful places, in their support, and in their expansion.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

I had my choice of parties. I could either hang with tourists in a hotel in the Grand Canyon Park or join the locals in a less elaborate celebration just a few miles away. I was tempted to join the locals, but ultimately I opted to hang with some swell folks who'd come up from Phoenix just for the party. The evening started off well. When the first couple sat down next to me at one of the long, balloon-infested tables, I asked brightly, "Hi! I'm Todd. Do you two swing -- ?" I had meant to add "dance" to the end of that question, but a piece of partially chewed barbecue chicken abruptly demanded my tongue's attention. There was the briefest of silences while the couple (Al and Lori, as I remember) watched me sip my champagne. Then Al said, very dryly, "How often do you survive that line, Todd?"

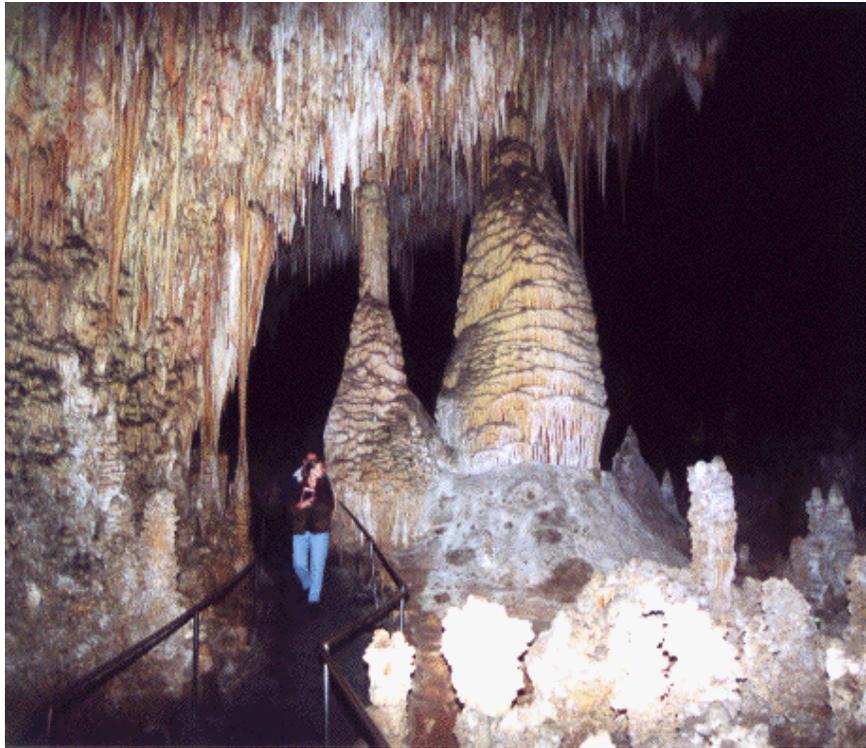
The rest of the evening was equally raucous. Much laughter with very in-depth discussion about food and sex and other casual party topics, and a chorus of inebriated noisemakers competing for airtime with a hellishly loud R&B band. We all had a good time, although next time I may try hanging with the locals, just to see what's swinging over there.

THE THOUGHT OF FOOD

I had many great meals throughout my journey, from a banana bread French toast brunch to a dinner of grilled grouper. It amazed me that the portions, quality and character of food all across the country were consistently high and very satisfying. It also surprised me that Seattle, with all its diversity and availability of fresh food, could not compare, even at its grandest moments, to the simple elegance of country cooking elsewhere. I wonder why this is so, why Seattle cuisine is so...*conservative*, the descriptor seems to be. Why the seasoning, portions, and preparation are so exceedingly humdrum? There are some meals, like the Huevos Rancheros at Nedra's Cafe in Kanab, Utah, whose exceptional flavors will be etched indelibly into my palate for years to come.

CARLSBAD CAVERNS: A MONUMENT TO ODIFEROUS BEEFEATERS?

Just a few brief words: It was awe-inspiring and worth every penny, especially the guided "side tours" where they turn the lights off. Wow. The only downer in the whole experience were the flatulent tourists. In a cave, if you pass gas, it lingers around you for the entire time you're underground. As most of these tourists were beef-eating Americans, it was horrifying how consistent in olfactory dissonance the sticky clouds of odor were. These were definitely NOT healthy people. But back to the awe-inspiring part:



Darkness and silence

Cold droplets from above

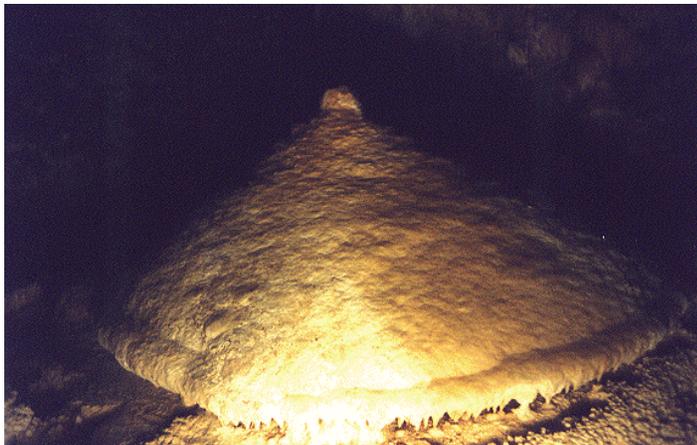
Anointing into mystery

Monoliths and open mouths

Strange pools and spires

A waiting world of stillness

But waiting for what?



THE CAPITAL

Upon completing this report I realized I had FORGOTTEN our fair capital, which I visited on my first leg south. Let's see... the Smithsonian was amazing. I spent nearly all of my time in D.C. there, and most of that in the Air and Space museum drooling over real live lunar modules and such. Other impressions were the ever-billowing steam grates around the city which kept plenty of homeless people warm. The echoes of conversation in the polished halls of Congress. The sirens and flashing lights escorting black limos, just like in the movies! The persistent and distracting reek of urine at the Vietnam Memorial; the contrast of that walls' shiny newness to the fading World War I Memorial, whose untended grounds and cracking marble did not soften the intensity of a country's great effort and great loss. A recurring excitement and wonder at being in a place where power resides in an artfully sprawling concentration of ordinary folks.



WHAT I HAVEN'T TALKED ABOUT

There was much more to this trip, of course. The vagrant who tried to break into my camper while I was taking a shower (I ended up giving him a scented candle after scolding him). The young woman in a Salt Lake City diner who sang the most atrocious karaoke I have ever heard. Endlessly. The amazing synchronicity of meeting people all along the way who shared my interest in alternative medicine and intuitive awakenings. The pleasurable and in-depth visit with a good majority of my relatives back East -- I am so thankful for that. The quality of light out on the Great Plains in the early morning. The riotous density of stars on a clear night when far away from any city. The strange and fascinating sounds of the Georgia swamps I camped in. The sense of self-sufficiency and freedom I felt throughout my trip. All these coalesce into a poignant and enduring memory which I already long to reinvent.

IN CONCLUSION

I will do this again. With more film, more time, and an even greater portion of wonder and thankfulness. I am grateful to my friends and family who helped me chart my way across the country. Next time, I hope to see all the folks I missed on this trip (forgive me!), and spend more time in each inspiring place. Until then...adieu.



Todd



Aggie