

US Route 50

The Loneliest Road in America



Our Journey from Sacramento to Cincinnati
May 2008

Bob & Molly Hillery

In October 2003, we started in Cincinnati and drove along US Route 50 to its eastern end-point at Ocean City, Maryland. Since that time we have had the intention to drive the other “half” of this cross-country road from its beginning on the west coast. The original starting point for US 50 had been San Francisco but, as the guide books state, the old route is now part of the Bay Area freeway system. Hence, the new “official” starting point is at the western edge of Sacramento.

May 2008 was the time. With a son and daughter-in-law in Sacramento we were able to spend a weekend visiting them before setting out on our drive east.

The western end of US Route 50 passes from California to Nevada, Utah and Colorado before entering the midwestern states of Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana and finally (for us) Ohio.

While the eastern journey we did a few years ago took us through the history of colonization and independence of the early states, western US 50 took us through the exploration, pioneering and settlement of the “Wild West”.

Both drives were full of history and some spectacular scenery and we can now proudly claim to have crossed the country on one highway: “The Loneliest Road in America”.

US Route 50; the Loneliest Road in America. May 2008

Thursday May 1

We had rented a car to get to the airport (cheaper than paying the parking fees) and were checked in for our flight to Atlanta by about 3pm. We spent some time in the Crown Room, during which a short (25 minute) delay was posted for our scheduled 4:35 departure. With about two hours in Atlanta this seemed to present little problem.

We did indeed leave at the re-scheduled departure time of 5pm but did not reach our take-off runway before the pilot announced that he had an indication that one of the doors was not closed properly. Maintenance had been called!

After several attempts to fix the problem, we returned to the gate and were told that another plane was ready to take us. However, by this time we were dangerously close to missing our connection to Sacramento so we were given the option of a night at the airport Marriott in Cincinnati and a morning flight via Salt Lake City to Sacramento. This suited us fine and we had a leisurely meal at the hotel (on Delta) and then turned in.

Friday May 2



Pony Express Monument

We were up before 7am and took the shuttle back to the airport for our flights to Sacramento. This time the journey proceeded without a hitch and we arrived in Sacramento by noon, west coast time. We spent about 2 hours in Old Town looking for information on our proposed route back to Cincinnati (largely unsuccessful) and having a light lunch. We then spent the remainder of the afternoon relaxing in the hotel before meeting Christopher and Cyndi for dinner at 7:30. We had a good dinner at Strings and caught up on each other's news, although it had only been four weeks since we were last here.

Saturday May 3

We had a light breakfast in the hotel and then relaxed in the lobby until we went to Border's to look for US50 literature (unsuccessful) and then on to Christopher and Cyndi's home around noon. We had lunch at Fresh Choice (a huge salad bar, pasta, etc all-one-price-restaurant) which took us until after 3pm. After that we returned to the hotel to clean up and change for our evening out.

C&C picked us up at 4:15 and we drove to San Rafael in Marin County where we had tickets to the Harmony Sweepstakes A Cappella National Finals. We had attended this same competition a couple of years back and had thoroughly enjoyed it and it has been an annual event for C&C ever since they met. First we had dinner at California Pizza Kitchen and then on to the show.

The competition had eight contestant groups who had 12 minutes each to perform and last year's champions (an excellent four girl group) also sang several songs. Hence, with two intermissions, it was after 11pm before we left after a very enjoyable evening. The singers were very professional, although the use of a lot of "vocal percussion" was not my favorite and I much preferred the more traditional singing without "synthetic" drums, etc.

It was almost 1am before we got back to the hotel, somewhat surprised that we had been able to stay awake so long with only one day away from Eastern Time.

Sunday May 4

We spent the morning in the business center of the hotel checking our proposed route on US 50 and identifying possible hotel stays en route. We actually made reservations as far as next weekend which would take us to Grand Junction, Colorado. All were subject to change, of course, if our plans changed but it was nice to have a few nights covered.

At noon we met C&C at iHop for brunch and then returned to the hotel. They had an appointment with the person who is going to put in their new swimming pool so we arranged to meet up again for dinner later in the day.

Molly and I visited the local Starbucks around 4pm and then got ready for the evening. We met C&C again and went to a local Thai restaurant (Tuk Tuk) which was very good. Christopher certainly seemed to enjoy his first Thai food experience; not as convinced about Cyndi, although she said she enjoyed it. We then said our good-byes for this trip and plan to visit again in late July.



Monday May 5

We had breakfast in the hotel and then checked out about 9am, ready to start our journey on US Route 50. We joined it just a few miles from the hotel where it splits from Interstate 80 and where it officially starts. It used to run all the way to the coast at San Francisco, but has now been swallowed by the mass of freeways in the Bay area.

Through Sacramento and for the next 40 miles or so, US 50 is a four lane (each direction) highway so it is far from the "loneliest road" at this point.



**We're on our way
(although not all the
way to Ocean City)
on US Route 50.**

US 50 starts to climb towards the Sierra Nevada foothills and is already above 1000 feet by the time it reaches Placerville, where we made our first stop. Placerville was one of the original Gold Rush towns and still retains its Wild West feel along its main street. There are a number of late 1800s buildings and, of course, a quite impressive court house. We strolled the main street and visited a couple of book shops, once again vainly seeking more detailed information on our proposed route. After Placerville the road soon becomes a twisty two-lane highway and climbs steeply to its crest on this portion at a little over 7300 feet. Here we were above the existing snow line and saw many small cabins that had snow swept all the way up one wall to the roof line and beyond. There were some fantastic views as we climbed but very few places to stop and admire the panorama. On the eastern slopes down



Main Street, Placerville



**From the first summit looking
towards Lake Tahoe**

towards Tahoe, however, there were a few pull-offs where we could see right across the valley to Lake Tahoe and beyond to the next mountain range in Nevada. It was a beautiful morning with only a few puffy white clouds in an otherwise brilliant blue sky. In South Lake Tahoe we stopped for coffee and a snack before crossing into Nevada. It was here that we took our first detour from Route 50 and turned east to go over Kingsbury Grade and Daggett Pass (7375 feet) to the wide fertile valley of western Nevada. We took this route not only for the drive and the wonderful views but also because, once in the valley, the road passes through the earliest settlement in Nevada, Genoa. We stopped here and admired the few old buildings that still exist and visited a small but interesting museum.



Genoa, Nevada: The Court House; Snowshoe Thompson (see box); and the two of us heading east.

Genoa had been settled by Mormons in 1851 and they had thrived not only on the excellent farmland here but also as traders as the masses moved west to the newly discovered California goldfields. Interestingly, they never built a church here and, at least based on the accounts of the museum ranger, were perhaps more entrepreneurs than evangelists.

Later, Genoa was one of the stops on the Pony Express Trail (Mormon Station) between Sacramento and St Joseph, Missouri. This early communication network had stations about ten miles apart (where horses were changed) and each rider covered 75 to 100 miles carrying his 20 pound mail pouch. This allowed mail to travel from the Missouri to the west coast in 10-12 days, far better than the earlier overland stagecoach (25 days) and a huge leap over the "Round the Horn" sea route (six months). Unfortunately for the Pony Express business, the transcontinental telegraph provided even faster communication and the railroad soon carried the mail across country. Consequently, the Pony Express survived as a viable business for only 18 months from inception but still stands proudly as an innovative and romantic contributor to the opening of the West.

Snowshoe Thompson was one of the most intriguing heroes in California's history. From 1856 to 1876 he made legendary 90 mile treks over snowdrifts up to 50 feet high and through blizzards with up to 80 mile per hour winds, to deliver mail to those living in isolation. He was the sole link between California and the Atlantic states during the long winter months.

At the age of 10, Jon Torsteinson-Rue (later changed to John A. Thompson) came to America with his family from Norway, settling on a farm in Illinois. The family moved on to Missouri then Iowa, and eventually Jon went to stay with his brother in Wisconsin. Then gold fever struck.

In 1851 at the age of 24 Thompson drove a herd of milk cows to California and settled in Placerville. For a short while he mined in Kelsey Diggins, Coon Hollow and Georgetown. With the small amount he saved, he bought a small ranch at Putah Creek, in the Sacramento Valley.

All attempts by postmen to cross the Sierra on woven Canadian and Native American snowshoes had failed until one day in late 1855, Thompson saw an ad in the Sacramento Union : "People Lost to the World; Uncle Sam Needs a Mail Carrier." He had had personal experience with mail deprivation, having once received long delayed news of a flu epidemic which claimed his mother's life, and quickly applied for the job.

Two to four times a month for twenty winters, regardless of weather, Snowshoe Thompson set out at the appointed hour. His mail run took 3 days from Placerville to Mormon Station, Utah (Nevada's first town, later called Genoa when Nevada became a state), and two days on the return trip. The people of the pioneer settlement knew when to expect his arrival and everyone ran outdoors looking up to the top of Genoa Peak to watch as the tall blond Norseman descended, streaks of snow flying in his wake.

From Genoa we continued north via Carson City (briefly driving Route 50 again) to Reno and then a few miles East to Sparks where we planned to stay for two nights, and visit several sites of interest on and around our cross-country route. We had a pleasant dinner at Outback, less than a mile from the hotel.

Tuesday May 6

We had eaten breakfast and were on the road by 9am. We used the GPS in the rental car to get directions on the back roads to Virginia City. It was a beautiful drive, particularly for the final 10 miles or so as we climbed from the valley floor to Virginia City at an elevation of 6200 feet. The views from the twisting road were fantastic; the snow-capped mountains around Lake Tahoe to the west and several somewhat lesser peaks across Nevada to the east.

On the drive to Virginia City, snow-capped mountains to the west. Views such as this would accompany us for the next 10 days.

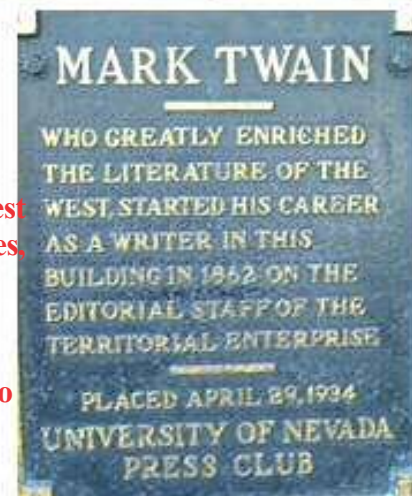


Virginia City was the site of the Comstock Lode and, in the 1850s, the city was one of the richest in the country as both gold and silver were mined deep into the mountains. We took a 20 minute trolley ride around the three main streets of the town and saw a lot of evidence of the mines as well as the large homes and civic properties that the industry had spawned. A city-wide fire in the early 1900s destroyed many of these buildings - all except a block of about a dozen buildings - but many have been rebuilt and restored so that the Old West flavor remains.

Most of the remaining buildings are now junk/antique shops or cafes and the town is perhaps a little tacky and touristy. However, it is an interesting place to visit (one that we had had on our list for several years) and clearly is of great historic significance for the country. In fact, the whole town is a National Historic Landmark.



**Virginia City:
The Old West
saloons, stores,
wooden sidewalks
and beautiful
courthouse.
And a plaque to
a favorite son.**



We then drove down the hill on the opposite side of the town to visit the very small - but equally historic - town of Dayton. This one street old town (with late 1800s buildings) is where gold was first discovered in Nevada and claims to be the oldest settlement in the state; a claim made by Genoa which we had visited yesterday. Again, the town grew as a result of the gold and silver mining and in fact was the exit point for a huge tunnel that took water from the Comstock Lode at the top of the hill in Virginia City. We drove up the main (only) street but did not stop before turning west again to drive the 15 miles to Carson City.

Carson City has been the capital of Nevada since the Territory and then the State were formed. In addition to the Capitol and other State offices, the town has several casinos and seems to sprawl for miles both north and south of the center. We walked around the Capitol grounds and briefly went inside the building, although we had done a complete tour several years ago. The capitol building is no longer used as the Senate and Assembly meeting house (a new building has been built in the area) and, although a few officials retain offices there, it is basically a museum today.



From Carson City we followed Route 50 West (the “wrong” way) to cross the range of mountains on the edge of Lake Tahoe and then followed the lake road in Nevada on the east side of the water. Again, the views were great of both the lake and the mountains to the west all the way to the northern shore of the lake. At this point we turned northeast towards Reno but first had to cross our highest pass to date at 8900 feet. In the past two days we have been over 7000 feet three times and over 6000 feet for a good deal of the drive.

Back at the hotel we relaxed for a few hours before driving into Reno to eat at “the best seafood restaurant” in the City, Rapscaillon. Indeed, we both enjoyed a very good meal.

Lake Tahoe



The Loneliest Road in America

Running coast-to-coast through the heart of America on a 3,200-mile odyssey from sea to shining sea, US-50 passes through a dozen different states and four state capitals, as well as the nation’s capital, Washington, D.C. Along the route are some of the country’s most magnificent landscapes: the Sierra Nevada and the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains, the endless farmlands of the Great Plains, and the desiccated deserts of Utah and Nevada. It follows the footsteps of pioneers, and gives a reverse time line of national development. Heading west to east, you can travel back in history from the cutting-edge high tech of contemporary Silicon Valley, across the Wild West frontier of the mid-1800s, and through lands the likes of Daniel Boone and countless others pioneered in the 1700s, before arriving at the Atlantic Ocean near some of the oldest and best-preserved colonial-era landscapes in the United States.

(From “Road Trips USA” by Jamie Jensen)

Wednesday May 7

After breakfast we drove south to Carson City to re-join US 50 for our journey east across much of Nevada. This section, particularly the road past Fallon (60 miles from Carson City), is labeled the “Loneliest Road in America” and we were anticipating a lot of nothing-ness. Indeed, after we had left the urban area around Carson City, the fifty miles to Fallon were very quiet but did have occasional hamlets and small settlements.

Once past Dayton we were on new ground and, although the road itself was relatively flat and uninteresting, the valley through which we were passing was surrounded by significant mountains. The long ribbon of straight road was how we had pictured the Loneliest Road but the hills and desert valley made for a very interesting picture as we drove east.

Fallon is a reasonably-sized town (7000+) and had a number of very new malls and shopping areas, one of which had a Starbucks. With 110 miles to go to the next town of any size, we decided to have an early “lunch” at this point.

Following our stop, we visited the County museum in town which we found to be quite fascinating. A number of the exhibits showed home life from the pioneers until well into the 20th century (not unlike a similar series of exhibits in the York Museum in

England) and there was a lot of information on the local area from the Native American tribes to the boom times of the gold and silver mines. We also were given our "I survived the loneliest road" passports which were duly stamped with the Fallon name.

Despite being the loneliest road, US 50 has dozens of historic markers and we stopped at the vast majority along the way. Most were about the mining that seems to have taken place all the way across the state from the 1850s until the early 1900s; gold, silver, lead and many more materials were mined and each wave made boom towns that are now non-existent.



Other historical markers were related to the communications and travel routes that crossed the state as pioneers and others moved west from the states beyond the Mississippi. We saw many points at which the Pony Express crossed our route and about four or five stations that had been used as exchange points for the horses and men. After a very brief period these were replaced by the Butterfield overland stage routes which used many of the same trails and facilities, although presumably the stations had to be considerably

expanded to accommodate the travelers. Finally, of course, these same stations were used by the telegraph companies until they too were replaced as other lines that paralleled the cross-country railroad tracks were put in place.



One of the many reminders of the Pioneer Trails that criss-crossed our route.

Also along the route were some quite extensive salt fields. These were nowhere near the size of the Great Salt Flats in Utah, of course, but they stretched for several hundred feet on both sides of the road for dozens of miles. To add a little extra to this white stretch there were hundreds (literally) of names formed using dark stones that were plentiful further back from the road. Most of these were of the nature "John 'heart' Mary" so it would appear that it was a high school senior project - but it was not at all obvious where a high school might exist in this large open space.

We made a couple more extensive stops along the route in addition to the markers. The first was at an **Indian petroglyph site** where we took a half mile tour on a path that passed by a number of basalt boulders and rocks on which had been carved ancient signs that were intended to ensure a good hunt. Many of the petroglyphs were as much as 7000 years old and, at that time, this area had been on the edge of a giant lake, so hunting and fishing were plentiful.

A second stop was at **Sand Mountain** which is an enormous sand dune in the middle of otherwise dry sagebrush land but next to the beginning of a high ridge. Presumably the sand had been blown across the plain and gathered here in the shadow of the mountain.

Now the area is a designated recreational area and we saw several motorcycles and four-wheel drive vehicles climbing the huge dune. It was close to here that we also saw the first of the Pony Express stations along this route.

The road generally ran at a level of 4000 feet or slightly above, but there were about six spots between Carson City and Eureka where we climbed to cross a mountain pass at over 6000 feet and a couple that exceeded 7000 feet and still had large patches of snow.





The Loneliest Road through Nevada; part of the Lincoln Highway

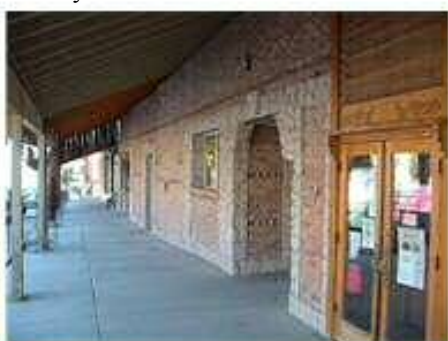
In the small town of Austin (110 miles from Fallon with NO town in between) we stopped for an afternoon snack and also got our passports stamped at the court house. Then it was a steep, twisting climb to the highest pass along the route before descending once again to cover the remaining 60 miles to Eureka on a flat, straight road. The weather throughout the day had been bright and sunny but there was a stiff breeze most of the time which made it quite chilly at some of our stops. Nevertheless, these were excellent conditions for traveling and sightseeing.

We arrived at the Eureka Best Western about 6pm and had an hour or so to clean up and change before we went to dinner at one of the two choices in town - the Owl Club or a Chinese restaurant. We selected the Owl Club and had a good fish and chip meal in rather rustic but not unpleasant surroundings.

Thursday May 8

It was a very cool morning (no more than 50F) as we checked out of the hotel in Eureka. We didn't leave town immediately, however, as we had picked up a walking tour brochure which covered the historic buildings in this town of just a handful of streets. As with most of the towns we had already visited, Eureka had been a mining town (here it was mostly lead) and at its peak had boasted a population of 10,000. Now it was down to a few hundred but it still retains a large number of its late 1800s buildings including a very fine courthouse and an opera house. We went in both of these and actually wandered around backstage in the opera house and saw many walls scrawled with the names of performers who played there in the sixteen shows that are still performed each year. Most were names we had never heard of but there were a few that rang a bell (for example The Ink-spots).

The rest of the buildings were homes and churches that had been built by the rich mine owners and supply store owners and a brief history of each was given in the brochure. Our final stop was at the museum, housed in the old newspaper printing house. The ground floor was taken up by the printing presses and associated equipment and upstairs was a collage of memorabilia from the early days until well into the 1900s. For such a small town, it really was a very impressive collection, much like the one we had seen in Fallon yesterday.



Eureka, Nevada



It was on the western edge of Eureka as we finally left town (two hours after checking out of the hotel) that we came across the “Loneliest Road in America” road sign and began the stretch that is so-labeled on our Nevada map. Why this stretch deserves the title more than the previous 180 miles is not completely clear as it was essentially more of the same. I suppose the fact that for the next 80 miles there were absolutely no hamlets (there were a number of ghost towns off the road) perhaps tipped the scales in its favor as the previous stretches to Eureka had had some evidence of habitation in a few places.



This drive to Ely was as grand and spectacular as the rest, however, and we climbed two passes at 7500 feet and had magnificent views of snow-capped mountains in virtually all directions, included directly in front of us. I don't know why I had had the impression that the stretch of US 50 through Nevada would be a long, straight, flat ribbon of road but it is anything but. Certainly there are long straight stretches and much of the road passes through huge, relatively flat valleys but there are always

views of mountains towering to 10,000 feet and beyond. The mountain ranges (about a dozen in all across the state) stretch generally north-south and the valleys are arranged like huge bowls between them. The foliage (if that's the right word) is predominantly sage brush and desert flowers, although there were a few patches of heavily wooded pine forests along the way.

We reached the town of Ely about lunchtime and our plan was to stay here the night after visiting the Great Basin National Park a little further to the east. Two things brought about a change of plan, however, when we reached Ely. First, we saw that the entrance to the Park was actually about 70 miles from town (I had not studied the map sufficiently well earlier) and, second, there was little in Ely to make us want to spend a night here.

So, over a McDonald's lunch, we re-thought our day and canceled the Ely motel. Our tentative plan for the remainder of the day was to visit the National Park and then perhaps stay just over the boarder in Utah, which would put us in easy reach of Provo where we had a reservation for Thursday night.



The Great Basin National Park

The visit to the Grand Basin National Park turned out to be well worth the drive. From the Visitor Center, a road climbed to the 10,000 feet level for some tremendous views of the mountains (Wheeler Peak was above us at 13,000+ feet) and the vast basin to

the south and east. Although the park bears the name Great Basin, it comprises only a tiny portion of an area of the same name which stretches all the way from eastern California to central Utah. This land is peculiar in that it has virtually no river drainage to the sea on either side of the Continental Divide and all the rain and snow falling on the area collects in shallow salt lakes, marshes and mud flats where it evaporates in the dry desert air. So, although we have learned that the Continental Divide is the line separating those rivers that flow to the Gulf or Atlantic from those that flow to the Pacific, there is a 200,000 square mile tub in the Western States from which nothing flows.

After the Park visit, we returned to US 50 and followed it east to the Utah boarder and on to the first town of any size, Delta. Again there was nothing that appealed to us to force a stay so we decided to head on to Provo and turn our one night stay into two. It was another 100 miles or so but the road was quiet and generally it was easy to maintain the 70 mph speed limit.

As we headed in a northeasterly direction - now on US Route 6 which is the route of the OLD US 50 (the current Route 50 heads more directly east) - we could see the huge mountains of the Wasatch Range that stretch all the way north to Salt Lake City and beyond. Within 40 miles or so of Provo, the land was much greener and much of it was cultivated and we saw a number of apple and peach orchards as well as grazing land. There were still a few passes to climb and more small towns to slow the pace but we managed to get to Provo and our hotel by 7pm - except that here it was 8pm as we had entered the Mountain Time Zone as we crossed into Utah.

The hotel restaurant was still serving, however, after we had settled in and showered so we enjoyed a quiet meal there before turning in after a day on which we covered more miles than planned (about 300) but one in which we experienced some glorious scenery and visited more examples of pioneer and mining history.

Friday May 9

We had breakfast in the hotel lounge and then set out for our day in Provo. We had seen a "Mount Nebo Loop Road" sign as we had entered town last night so thought it might be an attractive drive into the mountains. We had been given a map by the concierge but, since we were passing the Visitors' Center, we decided to see if they had more detailed information. They did: the Mt Nebo Road was still closed due to snow! They did suggest a shorter alternative up the Provo Canyon past the Sundance Ski Resort (until it too reached the snow closure level) so we thought that might suffice.

As a last minute request however, we asked if they had a walking tour of the downtown area. They did and it provided us with about a 1 ½ hour stroll along about five of the streets of the historic district. Most of the homes were very late 1800s and early 1900s but some dated back to the very early days of the Mormon settlement in this area. With a photograph and a brief description of the history of each home, the brochure provided us with a very pleasant way to spend the morning.



Downtown Provo, Utah: Grand civic buildings and residences

The weather forecast was for rain later in the morning (and we did feel just a few drops) so, after coffee, we started our drive up the Provo Canyon road. This was a masterful piece of road building and for the first 12 miles or so was a fast divided highway. At this point we turned off past Sundance and drove to the highest point that the road was open. There were no elevation markers but we guessed that we were approaching 10,000 feet once again. Certainly we were well above the current snow line and there were some very significant drifts. Back down that road, we turned back onto the divided highway to go further up the canyon from Provo. This road soon became two lanes which existed to the small town of Heber City. Here we had absolutely fantastic views (no rain and the skies were now clearer) of the Wasatch Range from the eastern side.

We also found a small coffee shop and had a good chat with the owner. He had been open for two weeks only but hoped that his dream of owning a (profitable) coffee shop would be fulfilled. He had left a successful business as a white water raft operator further south in the state and in fact gave us some very useful information about our upcoming journey in that region. He seemed fascinated with our travels and wished us luck on our journey east.

We then drove back down the canyon and spent most of the late afternoon planning our next few days through Utah and Colorado. It turned out that there was a lot we wanted to see so it would be another five days or more before we reached into the flat lands of Kansas.

At 7:30 we took the reception's recommendation of an Indian restaurant close to the hotel and had a very good meal.

Saturday May 10

We checked out of the hotel before 9 and drove a few miles to iHop for breakfast. Shortly afterwards we picked up US 6 again (recall this is also OLD US 50) and headed in a southeasterly direction. Once again the scenery was magnificent with the Wasatch Mountains on our left initially until we had crossed the first pass. Then it was a series of lower ranges and quite a lot of greenery to complement the many rock colors as we passed by miles and miles of mesas and buttes. The road cut through some very deep sections of hillside and we were able to see the many strata that made up the topography along the route. Included were some black seams of coal; we were now in the richest coal mining area of Utah, perhaps even in the whole of the US.

Despite this - and the fact that the guide book claimed that there were many working mines - we saw only one example of a mine and its processing plant. The rest of the time we were in very pleasant rolling countryside, with the occasional steep climb or descent but always with snow-capped mountains in sight in one direction or the other.

We stopped briefly in Price for coffee and then continued until Route 6 merged with Interstate 70 at Green River. At this point our guide book stated that US 6 and US 50 were contiguous with I-70 and it suggested that the freeway was the only road available. However, based on discussions we had had with a "local" yesterday we knew that there were old sections of the Loneliest Road that paralleled I-70. Indeed, we could see roads identified on the map but they had no numbering or name.



As we approached the Interstate, however, we noticed a two lane road marked "Frontage Road" that was in the right place for the old US 50, so we started out on it. It was in a poor state of repair and had no identification whatsoever but it was in the logical spot for the old road. It paralleled the freeway at a distance ranging between a couple of miles and perhaps a hundred feet so there was no doubt in our minds that we were on the right path.

The only indications that the road was used at all were a number of signs which pointed to ranches off the road and we did see a few cowboys rounding up cattle. Obviously this amount of ranch traffic and the few intrepid tourists (none of whom were out today except us) did not merit upkeep of the road and it would appear that it would soon be too rough for most drivers. Clearly the state and/or county had no intention of identifying it as Route 50 as they probably wanted to keep all but necessary farm traffic away.



We crossed I-70 several times on this old road and only got on to the freeway to allow us to call at the Colorado Welcome Center soon after crossing over from Utah. From there it was only a few miles to our destination of Grand Junction so we stuck to the Interstate for the final 10 miles to our hotel.

The weather had been glorious all day once more with temperatures in the low sixties (cooler at the higher elevations) under a clear blue sky. It was perfect for traveling and we were pleased that we had managed to stick with the old US 50 route for virtually the whole 250 miles.

For dinner tonight we went to a seafood restaurant at the other end of town (3 miles away!) and had a very pleasant meal on the first of what would be six nights in Colorado if we stuck to our plan.



Sunday May 11

We had breakfast at a local Starbucks and then visited the Colorado National Monument. We had visited here before but it had been many years so we thought we would spend an hour before heading further east. Three hours later we had completed our trip through the Park!

The area consists of a 23 mile drive along the rim of a series of canyons in which have been carved over millions of years a large number of tall (1000 feet) pillars and canyon walls. An informative video at the Visitors' Center created in animated form the various geological actions that had occurred to make the park as we see it today. Surprisingly, a major contributor to the layers we see now was the fact that this whole area (most of Colorado and parts of neighboring states) had been oceans on several occasions over the millennia. These periods had brought not only the sand and the other debris that had formed the rock layers but had also contributed to the erosion that had resulted in these amazing formations.

We drove the entire length of the rim and stopped at virtually every viewpoint and tried to capture on film not only the structures but the colors of these various huge formations. The predominant color was red although we saw almost everything from white to black through many shades of brown, orange, yellow, red, green and blue - and that was just the solid rocks. The flowering

plants added even more colors in much smaller, but equally brilliant, amounts. It really was a fascinating and beautiful place to spend a morning under a clear blue sky.



Colorado National Monument



We then drove about 60 miles on US 50 to Montrose, our destination for tonight. However, we drove through the small but attractive town to the **Black Canyon National Park**, about 15 miles beyond. This little known National Park has a 2000 feet deep canyon that stretches about 50 miles and of which about 15 has a road on both the north and the south rims. We were on the south side and climbed from US 50 at about 5000 feet to the rim of the canyon which started at about 7000 feet and ultimately climbed to over 8000 feet.



The canyon is not as wide as the Grand Canyon (it's generally only about ½ mile wide) nor is it as deep but it presents some equally impressive views. The fact that it is virtually sheer on both sides and the viewpoints are right at the edge (or, in some cases on promontories sticking out over the gorge) brings the whole canyon "up close and personal". The river flowing through it (the Gunnison) actually drops more in 50 miles than the Mississippi does in its entire length, so there are some very rapid flows and whitewater stretches a half mile below the rim.

After driving the entire south rim and back we followed a 7-8 mile road that twisted its way very steeply (16% grade) down to the river itself. The views of the roadway on the way down were spectacular and a little nerve-racking and it was somewhat of a relief to reach the rapidly flowing river and some flat land again. But, of course, we had to repeat the route in the upward direction, although somehow one felt a little more in control on the return.

So, today, we completed only an additional 60 miles on US 50 but we saw two very impressive national parks as well as evidence of the old Spanish Trails that once took early explorers from Santa Fe to the west coast and later provided major routes for commerce as the West was populated. We ended the day with an excellent Italian meal at a restaurant a few hundred yards from the hotel and had a short but pleasant conversation with a German couple who were touring the area for the fifth time in an RV.

Monday May 12

We had breakfast sitting outside at a local coffee shop before leaving Montrose. Today we made no progress on our journey east on Route 50 as we had decided to take a two day detour to Durango, in the south of the state close to the New Mexico border. We were following this 300 mile loop (back to Montrose) because we had read of a spectacular drive between Montrose and Du-

rango. To make it a little more interesting, we chose to take that particular drive on our return (Tuesday) and to follow a longer route south today.

This took us through some of the most spectacular mountain scenery so far and over a pass at just over 10,000 feet. First, however, we visited the gold mining town of Telluride, now more famous for its trendy ski resorts and a direct competitor to Vail and Aspen. The town retains much of the late 1800s feel but now the old buildings of the main streets are cafes, boutiques and souvenir shops as well as stores catering for every form of outdoor recreation. The town is virtually surrounded by high mountain peaks and there are no paved roads heading south beyond the main street.



**Telluride,
Colorado**



We found another coffee shop for our late morning snack before retreating a couple of miles north so that we could head via a west, then south, then east series of roads to Durango. It was on this stretch that we saw the highest peaks (some over 14,000 feet) and we were driving well above the snow level for much of the way. Where the rocks were exposed they were primarily a very deep red color, although this occasionally changed - rather abruptly - to sand or gray colors. When we took time out of the car at the scenic overlooks it was quite cool with a stiff breeze blowing but the skies remained clear and blue. This, fortunately, was contrary to the forecast for this area.



On the downward side of the highest pass we soon saw vast valleys to the west and the colors changed to include a lot more green, including the newly leafed aspen trees. We also noticed that a stream that formed at the crest as a foot wide trickle soon became a raging torrent of water which widened rapidly to a twenty feet wide fast flowing "creek" and finally became a ¼ mile wide river as we reached the valley floor at Cortez. Here we found yet another unusual coffee shop and indulged once more before continuing the final 50 miles to Durango. Our hotel is on the western edge of town so we got our first view of the historic center when we went to dinner. Although we didn't see much of the historic district this evening we did have an excellent meal at the Cosmopolitan restaurant on Main Street.

Tuesday May 13

As we ate breakfast at the hotel it was overcast but the sun was trying to peek through. After checking out we went to the historic downtown area of **Durango** and spent an hour admiring the old buildings of this quite prosperous town. Again, mining (smelting in particular) had been the reason the town was settled (1881) but now the tourists and skiers keep the economy going.



We left town on Highway 550 which (at least a little further north) is dubbed "The Million Dollar Highway". There are conflicting suggestions as to why it was so-called but the guidebook declared it one of the most scenic drives in America. As we began the climb towards Silverton, however, the clouds came down to meet us and we didn't have very good views of the many peaks over 13,000 feet. Also as we climbed the temperature dropped (ultimately to a low of 28F) and it started to snow a little.

Snowplows were out on the road but they appeared to be salting only, although it was clear that there had been perhaps two to three inches of snow, judging by that hanging still covering the pine trees. The roads never were anything more hazardous than a little wet but the sheer drops and poor visibility were sufficiently intimidating.

We stopped at two 11,000+ feet high summits between Durango and Silverton and had fun outside as the snow fell and provided a beautiful wintry scene. We caught occasional glimpses of the high peaks as the clouds parted from time to time and we could imagine how majestic the overall scene must be on a clear day. Nevertheless, we felt that the conditions provided a beauty all its own and we were not at all disappointed that we were experiencing what presumably would be one of the final throes of winter.

Silverton (still at 9000 feet) was the quintessential western mining town. With the exception of the main drag, the streets were unpaved and, with the snow falling, were quite muddy making it feel just like the Old West. The buildings still looked like they did in the late 1800s and the whole "movie" effect was completed by "Dave" plinking out tunes on an old piano in the lobby of the main hotel in town.



Silverton, Colorado: The Old West still lives



From Silverton we were on the Million Dollar Road proper and once again climbing to 11,000 feet through more falling snow. There were hundreds of mines along this stretch at one point and the area has recently received a Superfund grant to re-construct much of the area as it was in its heyday. Through the snow we could see a lot of evidence of the mining presence, although it wasn't clear whether these were original or recent copies. In any event the road lived up to its billing and, despite restricted visibility, we agreed that it was a stunning piece of engineering through some fantastic countryside.

Once over the major summits, the road leveled out at about the 6000 feet level and we were in farmland all the way back to Montrose. We arrived there after our 300 mile "detour" around lunchtime so we stopped at McDonalds for a bite before picking up US 50 once again and heading east.

The road went over two more smaller summits in the 60 mile stretch to Gunnison and for much of the way was alongside the Gunnison River. This has been dammed to form a long, narrow lake which is now a National Recreation Area. There wasn't much activity on or around the water today, however, as the temperatures was still around 40F and there was some heavy rain at times.



At Gunnison, we turned north for the 30 mile drive to Crested Butte (9000 feet) which is another of the trendy ski areas of Colorado where we were to spend the night. The resort area was between seasons so, while there were still large piles of snow all along the town's streets, the summer bikers and fishermen had not yet arrived. Consequently, it seemed a little sleepy as we made our way to the Elk Mountain Lodge, a place that had originally been built for the miners at the turn of the 20th century. On the lobby door of the lodge (which was locked) was an envelope with our name on it which contained instructions on how to get to our room. It turns out that we were the sole clients here tonight and had the place to ourselves - even the owner was off site! Another consequence of the "between seasons" was that many of the restaurants (for which the town has gained some acclaim) were not yet open for the summer so we didn't have the selection we were expecting. However, the restaurant we did choose that had already opened its doors for the summer was very good and we enjoyed an excellent meal before returning to our somewhat rustic but comfortable hotel.

Wednesday May 14

We couldn't find anything in Crested Butte that was open for breakfast so we dove the 30 miles to Gunnison and found a very nice coffee shop.

From Gunnison the drive on US 50 climbed slowly at first through beautiful farmland (mostly beef cattle) valleys before starting the steeper climb to the Continental Divide at 11,312 feet. This was our highest pass on this trip and is certainly the highest point on US 50. The clouds were low on the surrounding higher peaks and it was very overcast where we were; and, in addition, there were 20 feet drifts of snow at the peak!



The descent to Salida was perhaps a little less steep than the climb on the western slope but it was a ten mile ride at a 6% grade all the way. The town of Salida on the lower plain had a small but interesting historic downtown district on the banks of the Arkansas River. We spent a very pleasant 45 minutes strolling the streets in the warm sunny weather before getting back on our route.

The next 40 miles were through a narrow canyon which carried the fast flowing Arkansas River, a railroad and US 50 between towering cliffs of red sandstone on both sides. Unfortunately there were few places to stop for "Kodak moments" on the mostly two-lane highway. However, this was more than compensated for at the Royal Gorge just a few miles west of Canon City.

The Gorge (above the Arkansas River) is reached by traveling a few miles south of US 50 along a loop road that rejoins Route 50 nearer Canon City. The gorge area is privately owned and the owners have unfortunately felt it necessary to add tacky souvenir shops, fun fairs and fast food cafes (and a stiff entrance fee) to the natural beauty of the gorge. However, the suspension bridge spanning the gorge at a height of 1050 feet is a masterpiece of engineering first built in 1929. Its roadway is a series of wooden boards (2x12s?) laid on the steel structure and a little unnerving to walk across.



We did walk the entire length and then drove across (10mph limit and perhaps more scaring than the walking) to the north rim. Here we took an incline railway down to the river level to get an entirely different perspective on the bridge high above. Again the ride down and back was spectacular in which we barely missed scraping the rock face in many spots.

Our final highlight of the day came right after we rejoined US 50 and almost immediately took a three mile one way loop called the **Skyline Drive**. This was a narrow one lane road which literally rode the crest of an 800 feet high ridge and the drop-off was almost vertical on BOTH sides. Quite an end to a very exciting day of driving.

We checked into the Marriott in Pueblo about 5pm and went to the historic district for dinner - less than a mile away. The food and service were excellent but we were the only ones there the entire evening. The only other diners we saw were just leaving as we arrived at 7:30. This did give us an opportunity to chat at length with the very pleasant waitress who expressed a good deal of interest in our journey.



Thursday May 15

Today was a "rest day" on our journey east and we spent it entirely within the city of Pueblo on a cool, windy but mostly bright day.

We started by visiting the Tourist Information Center where a very helpful volunteer gave us lots of information and maps for our day in town. First we took a self-guided walking tour of the historic downtown area using a booklet which gave a brief description of the buildings, or in some cases, of the buildings that HAD been there at one time. It took about 1 ½ hours to walk the several block area after which it was of course time for coffee.

Then we went along the relatively new Riverwalk of Pueblo, which is modeled after the one in San Antonio but (so far) nowhere near as extensive or commercialized. The one mile stretch is paved on both sides and is actually the original route of the Arkansas River through town. Some years ago, the river was re-routed and in places diverted underground as the city grew but this new tourist and recreation area follows the path of the original flow. It was a pleasant walk and although the area is clearly still in the process of being completed and (we assume) lined with places to eat, etc, it is even now beautifully landscaped and contains a number of water features and statues as well as the river itself.



Historic Downtown Pueblo and the modern Riverwalk along the Arkansas River



Our final stop for the day was at the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company museum. Pueblo was (and is to some extent) a major steel producing town that started by providing the needed rails as the railroad network spread out across the west. The state has a huge supply of coal (and presumably iron ore) and huge mills were established here in the late 1800s. The museum (which is housed in what was the company dispensary) tells the story of the manufacture of steel as well as the many periods of union strife, boom and bust of the past century.

One of those periods of union strife led to the death of a number of workers and their families at the hands of the army ordered in by the government. The incident produced a company-union agreement on much better working conditions and salaries which was credited to Rockefeller who owned the company at the time. In general, however, over the years the company appears to have been very progressive with excellent medical, social and housing provisions for its workers. About one third of modern day Pueblo was owned by the company at one time.

As with most large industrial concerns, this company (with its totally vertically integrated supply system from mine to finished product) has been bought and sold a number of times and in the past year has been bought by a Russian company. It is comforting that they have sufficient respect for the history that they have inherited that they are not only maintaining the museum but have extensive plans to enlarge and improve it over the next five years.

So, as with virtually every place we visit, we found enough of interest to keep us occupied for the day and we ended our two night visit to Pueblo with another good meal at Rio Bistro, just a few blocks from the hotel. Tomorrow we will probably lose sight of the mountains that have kept us company since leaving Sacramento 11 days ago.

Friday May 16

It was bright but there were high clouds this morning so we had our final glimpse of the snow-capped mountains before we left Pueblo. On a clear day we would probably have been able to keep them in sight as far as the Kansas border but that was not to be today. We drove east on US 50 and our first stop was a little west of Las Animas at Bents Fort. This had been THE major trading post on the Santa Fe Trail at the time when the border between the US and Spain (Mexico) ran along the Arkansas River just a few hundred feet from the fort. The fort had been built by the Bent brothers and, although the US Military used it as a base during the Spanish-American War, it was always a privately owned establishment.

It had a permanent population of about sixty people who not only bartered with the Indians and Mexicans as well as the fur traders, but also performed necessary repairs on the wagons that were making their way along the Santa Fe Trail.

When Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821 the Mexicans were anxious to trade with the US and this was an ideal location to establish a far west post within the American lands. It was the only permanent settlement along the Trail west of Kansas City (almost 500 miles) so must have been a welcome sight for the thousands who made the journey in both directions.

It was used during the "annexation" of New Mexico by the US and in the Mexico War that followed and lost some of its appeal as feuding continued both with Mexico and the Indians. It was the coming of the railroad that spelled the ultimate doom for the Trail (and this fort), however, as trains finally reached Santa Fe in 1881. The fort then was used briefly as a stagecoach house but ultimately fell into ruin. It wasn't until 1960 that the National Park Service bought the land and re-built the fort based on drawings made of the original. Today it is manned by a few rangers in period costume and provides a good view of life at this outpost over 150 years ago.



Bents' Fort at the border with Mexico on the Santa Fe Trail



From the fort we traveled further east to the border with Kansas, shortly after which we passed into the Central Time Zone. Our only other stop (other than refueling) was a few miles west of Dodge City where ruts in the prairie can still be seen from the thousands of wagons that passed along this stretch of the Santa Fe Trail. The route we had been following (US 50) actually runs on top of the old trail for much of our journey in Kansas so far and will intersect it at many points on the journey east.

We had a good Kansas steak at Montana Mike's just a few blocks from the hotel; it was a little rustic but the food was good.



If you have a good imagination...

Saturday May 17

We were checked out of the hotel before 9 and went just a few blocks to the Boot Hill Museum. This is a tourist trap reconstruction of the old "Front Street" of Dodge City together with a short climb up "Boot Hill" to the place where the "baddies" were buried. It's not as tacky as the guidebook had led us to believe and the articles collected in the various Front Street businesses (saloon, barbershop, hotel, gun store, etc, etc) are actually quite interesting. We were perhaps a little early in the day (or the season) for the gunfights and the Miss Kitty can-can dancers but we weren't too disappointed in that! Overall it was worth a visit and the seniors' \$6.50 entrance fee.

Dodge City is a pure definition of the West ... a gateway to history that began with the opening of the Santa Fe Trail by William Becknell in 1821 and became a great commercial route between Franklin, Missouri and Santa Fe, New Mexico until 1880. Thousands of wagons traveled the Mountain Branch of the trail which went west from Dodge City along the north bank of the Arkansas River into Colorado. For those willing to risk the dangers of waterless sand hills, a shorter route called the Cimarron Cutoff crossed the river near Dodge City and went southwest to the Cimarron River.

In those days, safety from marauding Indians was essential. Fort Dodge was established in 1865 on the Santa Fe Trail near the present site of the city, offering protection to wagon trains, the U.S. mail service and serving as a supply base for troops engaged in the Indian Wars. Kiowa, Cheyenne and other plains tribes inhabited the area and wild game was abundant including vast herds of Buffalo.

Just six years later in 1871, five miles east of the Fort at the foot of a hill along the Trail, a rancher by the name of Henry L. Sitler constructed a three-room sod house. Built to oversee his cattle ranch, Sitler's home became a frequent stopping place for buffalo hunters and traders. Dodge City was founded the next year, 1872, just five miles west of Fort Dodge on the edge of the military reservation, with the Sitler's home as the first building. It quickly became a trade center for travelers and Buffalo hunters. By September of 1872, the shiny steel rails of the brand new Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad stretched into view. And a town was waiting. The railroad initiated a tremendous growth for many years. Already, south of the tracks, hastily built frame buildings and tents were housing two grocery and general merchandise stores, a dance hall, a restaurant, a barber shop, a blacksmith shop - even a saloon next to Sitler's original sod house. The famous Front Street legend had begun. Dodge City was already setting a record for growth.

Stacks of Buffalo hides towered along Front Street - filthy Buffalo hunters and traders filled the town's establishments - and the term "stinker" was coined. Train-masters would take their red caboose lanterns along when visiting the town's "soiled doves" - and the term "red light district" came to life.

But during those early years, Dodge City also acquired its infamous stamp of lawlessness and gun-slinging. There was no local law enforcement and the military had no jurisdiction over the town. Buffalo hunters, railroad workers, drifters and soldiers scrapped and fought, leading to the shootings where men died with their boots on. And that created a hasty need for a local burial place - Boot Hill Cemetery. The cemetery is now a part of downtown Dodge City. It was used until 1878. For six years before Boot Hill, Dodge City had no official cemetery. Persons dying who had friends, enough money or sufficient standing in the community were buried in the post cemetery at Fort Dodge. Others, penniless or unknown, were buried where it was convenient to dig a hole.

Dodge City was the Buffalo capital for three years until mass slaughter destroyed the huge herds and left the Prairie littered with decaying carcasses. An estimated 850,000 Buffalo hides were shipped from Dodge City in the years 1872-1874.

Farmers, during hard times, gathered the Buffalo bones and sold them for six to eight dollars a ton. The bones were used in the manufacture of china and fertilizer. By 1875 the Buffalo were gone as a source of revenue, but the Longhorn cattle of Texas drove the dollars into town. For ten more years, over five million head were driven up the western branch of the Chisholm and Western Trails to Dodge City. Law and order came riding into town with such respectable officers as Bat Masterson, Wyatt Earp, Bill Tilghman and Charlie Bassett. Out of these personalities evolved the famous fictional character of Marshal Matt Dillon. The town these early men knew was laid out with two Front Streets, one on either side of the railroad tracks.

The city passed an ordinance that guns could not be worn or carried north of the "deadline" which was the railroad tracks. The south side where "anything went" was wide open. In 1876 the population was 1,200 and nineteen businesses were licensed to sell liquor.

During those first years the population varied according to the season, swelling during the summer with the influx of Cowboys, Buyers, Gamblers and Prostitutes. Business houses, dance halls and saloons catered to the Texas trade. Saloon keepers renamed their places, Alamo and Lone Star and served brandies, liqueurs and the latest mixed drinks. Ice usually was available so even beer could be served cold. Some saloons advertised anchovies and Russian caviar on their cold menus. Gambling ranged from a game of five cent "Chuck-aluck" to thousand dollar poker pots. Many saloons offered some type of musical entertainment - a piano player, a singer, or as in Chalk Beeson's Long Branch, a five piece orchestra. Beeson also organized and led the famous Cowboy Band which entertained all over the west at cattlemen's conventions, concerts, dances and in Washington, D.C. at the inauguration of President Harrison.

Fort Dodge was closed in 1882 and by 1886, the cattle drives had ended. An illustrious period of history was over but the legend lives on in Dodge City's historic preservation of its romantic and internationally famous past.

As the nineteenth century ended, the bragging of the western pioneer furnished an abundance of materials for dime novels, nickelodeons, Hollywood films, radio and television. Even today, over 100,000 tourists relive the legend each year by visiting the Boot Hill Museum and historic Front Street reconstruction. "If the history of the West has been a mother lode of entertainment riches, Dodge City has been its touchstone."

Courtesy Nancy Trauer, Dodge City Convention & Visitors Bureau



Dodge City: Front Street and Boot Hill



Then we drove east about 40 miles to Kinsley which bills itself as Midway USA and supports that with a sign indicating equal mileage to both San Francisco and New York. Other than that it was merely the point at which US 50 and US 56 divide and don't re-unite until near Kansas City. Our guidebook suggested US 56 might have a little more of interest since it followed more precisely the Santa Fe Trail but, as there wasn't much in it in terms of "must sees", we decided to stick with US 50 (that was our intended route, after all).

We were glad that we made this choice as the scenery was actually very pleasant and the next 100 miles were across very green cropland and the road was often lined with trees on one side or the other. We had left the Arkansas River (although we would cross it again later) that had kept us company since Pueblo but there were many other rivers and streams that added to the scenery as we drove.

We stopped in the relatively large town of Hutchinson and found a coffee shop for our "lunch" which we enjoyed outside in the very warm sun; it was now in the low eighties and much warmer than anything we had felt since leaving Sacramento. On our way out of town we got lost for a while and meandered through a huge city park which provided a lot of greenery and streams as well as other recreation sites for the residents - and visitors.

Despite having left the main Santa Fe Trail route, we still found many historic markers which referenced the trails and its successor, the ATSF railroad as well as the settlements and businesses (mostly farming) that were spawned by these two transportation giants of the 1800s. It was amazing to see how far the pioneers and frontier people were prepared to travel to find their



new homes and what had motivated them in the first place. As just one example, this part of Kansas has a relatively large Mennonite community which originally came from Eastern Europe as their religious beliefs (specifically as conscientious objectors) were taken away. It turned out that several counties in Kansas passed laws that allowed a man to avoid military duty if his religion would not allow it.

As another example of finding something of interest virtually everywhere, we came across a very small village (Peabody) with a small but intact 1880's main street. We didn't stop but it was a very pleasant detour just to drive along the street. Further east we also visited the small town of Cottonwood Falls which also had a quaint main street and an absolutely gorgeous courthouse which looked a lot like a French château. The architect also had his hand in the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka so we may detour to see that tomorrow.



Our final stop was about 4 miles from Cottonwood Falls and was a National Park which is dedicated to preserving the Prairie grasses that once filled the whole of central America from Mexico to Canada but of which only about 4% now remains. The park had been an enormous ranch, complete with mansion, barns, coach houses, etc as well as a nature walk into the prairie grassland. We arrived only 30 minutes before closing time so we only had a brief look around but we thought it would be interesting to take the full walk someday. Clearly at this time of year the grasses are still green and quite short and not the tall dry waves that one pictures filled with buffalo but it was fascinating to see this effort at conserving a piece of history that was almost wiped out by over-zealous farming.

Then it was on to Emporia and our stop for the night. Our chosen ethnic food for tonight was Mexican and we had a very good meal at Casa Ramos in the downtown area. We followed that with espresso at the Starbucks right next door to the hotel.

Sunday May 18

It was another beautiful sunny morning as we sat outside at Starbucks again before setting out for the day. We drove north of Emporia to join US 56 (The Santa Fe Trail) and did a series of right hand turns east and north until we got to the town of Burlingame. This was a very small town but had two very wide brick-paved streets and a number of buildings from the late 1800s; not enough doing on a Sunday morning to cause us to stop but a nice drive through.

Then we drove due north along US 75

into the center of Topeka, the capital of Kansas. Although this was a little off our route, we always like to see the Capitols when we can. This one was not a disappointment, although a good deal of it was undergoing some major renovations. The dome has a statue of a Kansa Indian on top (a little ironic as all the Indians were deposed from Kansas to Oklahoma) and it is actually a little higher than the National Capitol in DC. We spent about 45 minutes



walking around the outside of the building (closed on Sundays) and the pleasant grounds surrounding it.

Then we drove east on I-70 a few miles before heading south again to pick up US 56. This was marked as Old US 50 in places but eventually both 56 and 50 faded into Interstate 35 as we approached Kansas City. Before that, however, we passed through another old town (Baldwin City) which had established a college there in 1858 - not too many years after the pioneers started out

on their trek west. Closer to Kansas City was the point at which the Santa Fe Trail and the Oregon Trail split, four days from their common starting point of Independence. Actually, this was also the route of the California Trail and all three were marked by road signs on the roads we followed today.

We were forced onto Interstates around the south side of Kansas City (KS and MO) until US 50 regained its unique path east. Here we stopped for a late "lunch" before covering the remaining 140 miles to Jefferson City. The countryside was particularly attractive in this western end of Missouri (rolling hills, rocky crags and beautiful farms) but the whole



drive from Emporia had been through very green and lush cattle grazing and crop land.

We arrived in Jefferson City about 5:30 and relaxed until dinner. Tonight it was a chain Garfields where the food was good but the waiter seemed in too much of a hurry to get home!

Monday May 19

We started our day by visiting the Capitol and the area surrounding it which included a very impressive Governor's Mansion. We went inside the Capitol for a while but it was the outside (modeled on DC again) that was the most impressive and very photogenic from almost every angle. The site is also right above the Missouri River at a spot where Lewis and Clark visited, so we were reminded of the two trips we had taken along that Trail.



The Illinois Capitol and the Governor's Mansion



We left Jefferson City on Route 50 which also contained many markers commemorating the Voyage of Discovery. In fact, after about 40 miles we left US 50 to head a few miles north to the River to see a couple of towns that had been settled only about 30 years after Lewis and Clark had first passed by. The first was Hermann, settled by a small band of Germans from Philadelphia who saw this as

an area similar to the Rhineland and who set up a wine industry that still exists today. There are a number of mid 1800 buildings in town as well as the river and the railroad to admire. We also found a rather nice coffee shop for lunch.

The next town we visited was Washington which had also been settled by German immigrants a little earlier even than Hermann. It too sat on the river and had several streets of very fine buildings. It also had Lewis and Clark attractions.



Then it was onto the freeway system around the south side of St Louis before re-joining US 50 in Illinois. We followed this east as far as Salem (after passing a couple of pleasant small towns as well as an 1860 suspension bridge that has been re-constructed recently over a tributary of the Missouri) and then took I-57 south for 20 miles to Mount Vernon. We selected this spot for its greater variety of hotels and restaurants, although this may have been a little misguided. As it turns out, however, we went to Willy's and we both enjoyed our meals and great service.

Tuesday May 20

After a Bob Evans breakfast, we re-traced our route up I-57 to re-join US 50 at Salem where we drove through the town but didn't make a stop. Perhaps 20 miles further east we

did leave the main road to visit the small town of Olney which has some very nice homes on tree-lined residential streets but is perhaps more famous for its Albino squirrels. These were first spotted here over a hundred years ago and there are still some that frequent the city park. We drove around this small park a couple of times and did manage to see a couple of the white squirrels but didn't get particularly good photographs. As these are simply a white version of the gray squirrel and are recessive, it is perhaps surprising that any exist after a 100 years of in-breeding.

As we approached the Indiana border we were on the Abraham Lincoln Trail and drove for about 10 miles on an old section of US 50 (now replaced by a four lane highway) into the town of Vincennes. Right on the Illinois side of the bridge that crosses the Wabash River between Illinois and Indiana was a memorial to Abraham Lincoln; a huge stone carved mural which depicted the first steps of Lincoln into "his" state of Illinois.



On the other side of the bridge was an even more impressive memorial. This was a huge structure surrounded by enormous pillars dedicated to the memory of George Rogers Clark, older brother of Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He had won a decisive battle in the War of Independence despite the fact that it was three years after 1776. It turns out that the British protection of this part of the country was left to a relatively small unit at the fort in Vincennes and Clark saw an opportunity to take his almost equally small army and take the fort after a long march east across a flooded plain during which his troops had to wade up to shoulder height in places.



As in so many instances in history, this victory depended heavily on the element of surprise and a good deal of luck (or error in judgment on the part of the British) and the ultimate progress of the United States westward might have been severely curtailed had things gone the other way.

From Vincennes we followed US 50 east for another 30 miles and then headed southeast on US 150 to our destination of Louisville. This drive was through some very pretty countryside which went up and down significantly through a very heavily forested area (The Hoosier National Forest).

While in Louisville we had dinner at Ruth's Chris, a very good restaurant that we have visited on a number of occasions and have even made special trips to this town from Cincinnati for our evening meal.

Wednesday May 21

It was a beautiful cool morning as we left Louisville and drove north for a few miles on I-65 before taking Route 60 in a northwesterly direction to the town of Salem and then north to Brownstown on US 50. We spent a short while walking around the courthouse in the central square of the small town before heading east to Seymour. This was a much larger town and we were able to find a Starbucks for our late morning coffee.

The drive was very pleasant the whole way; rolling hills for the most part and quite densely forested in parts. This continued to North Vernon and then we were in what is more like the Indiana that we think of - generally flat and full of cornfields or a few cattle.

We made our final stop on US 50 at Aurora and once again we were impressed with the many magnificent buildings in this pleasant river town.

Then we picked up I-275 to get around the west and north side of Cincinnati to reach home about 2:30pm after a 3600 mile trip from Sacramento. We had calculated our route as a little shy of 2400 miles so we ended up doing our usual thing of covering about 50% more miles than the "direct" route.

With the trip we made from Cincinnati to the east coast a few years back, we had now covered the entire length of US Highway 50, "The Loneliest Road in America". We had seen some stunning scenery, major shifts in weather conditions, and many, many historical and cultural aspects of the country. Along the way we had not only traveled one of the major highways of the first half of the 20th century but had also touched on many 19th century trails that had helped open up the western half of the United States. Included in these were:

- The Lincoln Highway
- The Pony Express Trail
- The California Trail
- The Oregon Trail
- The Santa Fe Trail
- The Lewis and Clark Trail
- The Lincoln Trail
- The Old Iron Road

The Grand Army of the Republic Highway (US Route 6)

In addition, during our 3650 mile drive, we stopped at probably close to 100 Historic markers! A fascinating trip.



Aurora, Indiana