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Deep in the Heart of Texas Road Trip (T21A)

I traveled pretty directly to Texas to see my brother and his family. On the way home, I took my last ever “county road trip”, finishing off the last of the counties in Texas that I hadn’t been to before. And, technically, the last of the counties in the whole country that I hadn’t been to before. Technically. More on that in a bit.

For one of my “county road trips”, I first plot out a route through the targeted counties, and then look for potentially interesting sightseeing destinations along the way, making some adjustments to the route as needed. I hit a generally interesting mix of sites on this trip, mostly in the Texas Hill Country and the west Texas areas around San Angelo and Midland-Odessa.

I had hoped to have enough time to make a return visit to White Sands National Park in New Mexico before starting the two-day drive home. However, I finished up in Texas a day early. That gave me two days to get across New Mexico. Unfortunately, I didn’t bring my detailed New Mexico atlas with me – just a standard road map – so I spent the two days revisiting a handful of places, some for the first time in years, and a couple where it had been raining on past visits, but sunny this time.

I had only planned on one sightseeing stop on the drive out to Texas, saving my sightseeing for the return home. That stop was to be at a remote spot in east central New Mexico.

In June 1947, a civilian pilot reported seeing “flying saucers” in this area, which made the nationwide news. On July 5, rancher W.W. Brazell made a trip from his remote ranch to the small town of Corona, New Mexico. The ranch did not have a phone or radio, so it wasn’t until he was in Corona that Brazell heard about the sighting. It was then that he connected some strange debris he found on his ranch a few weeks earlier to the flying disks that were in the news. So, on July 7, he brought the debris he found to the sheriff’s office in Roswell, New Mexico, some 100 miles drive away. The sheriff brought it to the Roswell Army Air Field, which forwarded it to their Fort Worth counterparts. On July 8, 1947, the Roswell Army Air Field issued a press release reporting that they had recovered a “flying disc” from a ranch near Roswell. But the military “corrected” the story within a day. The UFO debris was really a weather balloon. The story then faded away. However, by the late 1970s conspiracy theorists had seen through the military’s now decades-long coverup, and Roswell’s UFO-related tourist industry was born.

I found the road to the crash site. I was a bit surprised that there were no historical markers along the highway. I was disappointed to find a pair of No Trespassing signs.

No doubt that the secretive military agency that first covered up the UFO weather balloon crash concocted the rather dubious current tale that the site is on private property and the owners got tired of dealing with all the looky-loos showing up all the time. Obviously, the government still thinks it has something to hide out there.



Here's as close as I got to the UFO weather balloon crash site.



Meanwhile, other space aliens who have arrived in the Roswell area without crashing their UFOs weather balloons are doing their best to blend in with American society, at least until they're ready to make their move on us. Just try finding a copy of To Serve Man in the Roswell Public Library.



Starting on my sightseeing drive back home, my first target was Heart of Texas Park along Highway 377. It provides a view towards the geographic center of Texas, which is not directly accessible as it is on private land. A roadside marker provides additional information. There are actually a few different ways to determine the geographic center of Texas, but all three put the center not far from Brady, Texas, which hypes itself as the heart of Texas.



Later that afternoon, I passed through Lampasas, Texas, where I saw the world's largest spur. As this was unplanned, I suppose you could call this a "spur of the moment" photo stop.



I spent the night in Mason, Texas, positioning myself for the next day's sightseeing plans. Mason was the site of Fort Mason, with a partial reconstruction/museum shown here. The old frontier fort was originally established in 1851 as a defense against the Kiowa, Lipan Apache and Comanche. Confederate General Robert E. Lee held his last command here while serving with the US Army before the Civil War. The Confederates occupied the fort in early 1861.



They say that everything's bigger in Texas. When it comes to pink granite monadnocks, that's certainly true. Enchanted Rock State Natural Area is home to this, the country's largest pink granite monadnock. Enchanted Rock is actually just the top of a large intrusive dome of granite – not unlike those in Yosemite – that has been exposed when surrounding rock and earth eroded away over millions of years. There's a short trail to the summit from which you reportedly have outstanding views of the surrounding Texas Hill Country. Alas, my ongoing foot problems prevented me from taking the hike.



My next stops were at the Lyndon B. Johnson National Historical Park, home to LBJ's ranch, which served as the Texas White House when Johnson was president, and the adjacent Lyndon B. Johnson State Historical Park, which provided some Texas Hill Country historical context for the LBJ ranch, both east of Fredericksburg, Texas. This is a picture of LBJ's ranch house.



The cars owned by LBJ's widow, Lady Bird, at the time of her death remain at the ranch house.



A reconstruction of LBJ's birthplace.



The graves of Lady Bird (left) and LBJ (right) at the Johnson Family Cemetery on the grounds of the park.

I had visited the national park unit back in 1998, but Lady Bird was still living at the ranch, so that part of the grounds was off-limits to tourists at the time.



The state park includes half of the Official Texas Longhorn Cattle Herd.



Back in Fredericksburg, I stopped at the Texas Rangers Heritage Center, which includes the Ranger Tower and the Ranger Ring of Honor. The Rangers were originally established in 1823, and over the years have served in defensive, paramilitary, investigative and law enforcement roles. Today's Texas Rangers function as the state's bureau of investigation. The Ring of Honor records the names of those Texas Rangers who died in the line of duty, including the "Immortal 32" who were killed in the Battle of the Alamo in 1836.



Next door is Fort Martin Scott, what's left of another Texas frontier fort, like Fort Mason.



I headed west to position myself for the next day's sightseeing plans. Along the way, I stopped at Lost Maples State Natural Area, which is also a national natural landmark. Alas, it was a very short stop, as the park had met its quota for visitors for the day. The park gets its name from an isolated stand of Uvalde bigtooth maples, but also has hills and canyons, a couple small lakes, several miles of hiking trails, and limited camping. The trees are known for their fall color, but it seemed like I was a bit early for that, even though it was already the second week of November.



Presidio San Luis de las Amarillas, now known as Presidio of San Sabá, was built near present-day Menard, Texas, in 1757 to protect the nearby Mission Santa Cruz de San Sabá. These represented Spain's deepest push into what is now Texas. Native Americans attacked and destroyed the mission a year later. The Spanish permanently abandoned this fort after 1770. Nothing remains of the mission. Much of what can be seen at the Presidio site is reconstruction.



Several names have been carved into one of the stones that flank the entrance into the Presidio, including "Bouie". Jim Bowie, a Texas folk hero who died at the Battle of the Alamo, and his men were in this area in 1831, so it is possible that either he or one of his men carved this ("Bouie" is the historical spelling of "Bowie").



Try not to imagine what it would feel like if these Texas ants were to crawl up your leg or on your back under your shirt.



Fort McKavett was another Texas frontier fort, and was built in 1852. It closed in 1859, but the Confederate army occupied it for a few years early in the Civil War. After the war, it became a base for the Buffalo Soldiers, a couple all-Black army regiments. After the fort was abandoned, it essentially became the town of Fort McKavett, which itself faded away over time. Today, Fort McKavett State Historic Site preserves several of the fort's restored buildings over about 82 acres. The visitor center includes a small museum.



In downtown San Angelo, you can tour Miss Hattie's Bordello Museum. I skipped it, but having previously toured the Oasis Bordello Museum in Wallace, Idaho, I had an idea of what I missed.



I did want to see the Railway Museum of San Angelo, but it's only open on Saturdays, so I had to content myself with checking out the train depot that houses it and the train cars outside.



I did tour San Angelo's Fort Concho Museum. Fort Concho was established in 1867, much later than the other frontier forts I saw on this trip, this time to protect westward migration which resumed in the south after the end of the Civil War. It later became a principal base of the Buffalo Soldiers. The fort was abandoned in 1889, and the buildings were repurposed for town use, although efforts to preserve the fort started fairly early. As a result, it is now one of the best-preserved examples of a US Army fort built in Texas.



Soldiers' quarters at the fort.



A Texas Toilet in the fort's hospital. Everything you like about an outhouse, only in-house.



This is the Concho River, just north of the town of Painted Rock. And unfortunately, it was as close as I could get to the Painted Rock Pictograph Site, the largest Native American rock art site in Texas. I found a number of Native American archaeological sites on my detailed maps, but most of those in Texas seem to be on private lands, unlike in the Southwest, making them generally inaccessible to casual visits. I found out that it was possible to set up a paid tour of this site, but not one that fit my travel schedule for this trip.



Cotton harvesting was getting underway in this part of Texas. I saw a number of cotton fields still waiting to be harvested as well as fields where the harvest was completed. Harvested cotton was sometimes stored in giant cotton rolls, like the ones above.



I also saw a number of these cotton “loaves” along the road waiting to be picked up.



The Odessa Meteor Crater is estimated to have been created over 63,000 years ago, and is the largest of several craters created in the area at that time. It may be the second largest meteor crater in the US, and sixth largest in the world, according to a sign at the site, but other sources differ (possibly based on what can be observed today). That said, it doesn't look like much. Blowing sand and dust over the years and erosion have filled in much of the crater, so at most it is generally no more than 15 feet deep today.



The Barringer Crater in Arizona hasn't had the same level of infilling, so this is closer to what I expected to see at Odessa.



A variety of facilities associated with the production of oil and natural gas are common sights in west Texas.



But electricity-generating windmills are also common. Texas actually produces more wind power than any other state in the country.



It's the petroleum industry that has its own museum, though. I toured the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum in Midland, Texas. Indoor displays showed a lot about the petroleum industry and its positive impacts on American life. It was generally good, although I would have liked a bit more emphasis on education than propaganda.



Outside displays focused more on equipment related to the drilling and capture of oil and natural gas.



The museum is also home to the Petroleum Hall of Fame.

My next stop was a visit to the 1950s home of some of my cousins.



After getting off to a successful start in the oil industry, George H.W. Bush, my 8th cousin once removed, and his wife Barbara moved into this home on Ohio Street with my 9th cousins, son George and daughter Robin. Another son, Jeb, was born here. The Bushes moved to a larger home in 1956.



Both George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush have also been inducted into the Petroleum Hall of Fame.



My last sightseeing stop in the Midland-Odessa area (and in Texas itself) was this replica of Stonehenge on the Odessa campus of the University of Texas Permian Basin.

After finishing up in Midland-Odessa, I headed north to pick off my last two of Texas' 254 counties. And with that, I had finished off all the counties in the country. Technically, like I said above.

Two states don't have counties. Louisiana has traditional county-like parishes, and I finished those off some years ago.

Alaska has 20 boroughs. Other than being the next administrative unit down below the state level, boroughs are a lot less county-like than parishes are. Most boroughs are larger than at least one state, and for some a number of states. One is bigger than every state in the country except for Alaska itself.

But, if you define "county" broadly to include the next administrative unit down below state level no matter what it's called, then I have been to every one of the country's approximately 3100 "counties" except for six of Alaska's 20 boroughs. There won't be a "borough road trip" in my future, however. None of these are accessible by road. I have been to a number of Alaska's boroughs by plane or by boat, though, so I need to see what my options are for visiting the final six some day.

Anyway, now for something completely different. New Mexico. The part of New Mexico that I passed through between the Texas border and Roswell and Artesia, New Mexico, actually looks more like west Texas than it does other parts of New Mexico, both in terms of landscape and the countless oil and gas operations I saw there. But after crossing through the Sacramento Mountains into central New Mexico, my sightseeing changed a lot. I visited White Sands National Park, and then made my way north and then west, returning to a number of Puebloan and colonial Spanish archeological sites along the way.



Passing through the Sacramento Mountains, I stopped at a turnout for what I assumed was a scenic lookout. Instead, I found a sign telling me about the Fresnel Shelter, a rock overhang that provided a seasonal shelter for Archaic hunter-gatherer Native Americans. Archaeological analysis suggests that the shelter was typically used in early autumn months for thousands of years starting about 6000BC. But which overhang in the photo? Who knows? The sign didn't say, I didn't see any telltale signs of soot buildup on overhang "ceilings", and I haven't found any clarification online yet.



The Fresnel stop did provide me with a distant view of White Sands, my target for some afternoon sightseeing.



Not everything is bigger in Texas. The world's largest pistachio is in Tularosa, New Mexico.

White Sands National Park includes the southern portion of a dunefield of white sand made up of gypsum crystals, the largest gypsum dunefield in the world. The tallest of the dunes are as much as 60 feet tall. Although the dunes move with the wind, often covering the main park road, they are relatively stable due to the high water table underneath – wet sand is generally more stable sand.



White Sands National Park



With limits on my ability to walk, it was a bit disappointing trying to find areas of pristine sand. Almost everywhere along the park road, the dunes were covered with footprints, making for less-than-ideal photos.

White Sands is surrounded by the White Sands Missile Range, home to the Trinity Site, where the first atomic bomb was detonated, and for you Twin Peaks fans, where Evil BOB may have first appeared. However, when I was there, I did not come across any of those “frog-moth” creatures like the one that crawled into the mouth of a sleeping young Sarah Palmer. Frankly, I think those “frog-moth” creatures are a figment of David Lynch’s imagination.

Without my detailed maps to go by – and no useful internet service at hotels for two nights in a row – I repeated some past sites found on my ordinary highway map.

My first stop the next morning was at the Three Rivers Petroglyph Site, north of Tularosa. It has a short trail through a petroglyphs field, but the trail immediately proved to be too much for my feet. It also has a trail through a ruins site, this one where the trail was short and flat.



Some of the sites many petroglyphs, seen with the help of 30x optical zoom.



The Jornada Mogollon people built pit houses similar to this reconstruction here about 1000 years ago.

Further north, in the area around today's Mountainair, Spanish Catholic colonists built a number of mission churches in an area where established Puebloan peoples traded locally gathered salt and other goods with tribes ranging from the Pacific coast to the Great Plains and as far south as Central America. Excavated ruins and unexcavated areas survive at three locations that comprise the Salinas Pueblo Missions National Monument ("Salinas" means "salt" or "saline").

The Natives eventually found themselves caught in the middle between Spanish colonial civil leaders and church leaders, creating a lot of tensions in the pueblos. By 1680, most of the Puebloan tribes of northern New Mexico had enough. In what is called the Pueblo Revolt, they revolted and managed to kick the Spanish out of New Mexico, killing 400 Spaniards and driving the remaining 2,000 settlers and some supportive tribes out of the region, generally down to the El Paso area. The Spanish reconquered New Mexico twelve years later, although some of the Natives that had moved to El Paso remained there, including those who once lived at the Salinas pueblos. The pueblos were abandoned.



Ruins of the church and convent at Gran Quivira. Gran Quivira was the largest of the Salinas pueblos, and at one point was home to as many as 2,000 people. This church was the second to be built at this site, although it was never completed.



Ruins of the church and convent at Abó. Abó was located along a major trade route between the Rio Grande valley and the Great Plains. The Spanish originally built a modest church here, but in the 1640s, the church was enlarged and a convent was added.



Church and convent ruins at Quarai. A Spanish missionary arrived at Quarai, a Tiwa pueblo, in 1627. Tiwa women built the church and convent. In the foreground is the outline of the foundation of a new church that was started in 1830, but was never completed. To the left of the mission ruins is an unexcavated rubble pile, the remains of the Tiwa pueblo.



For my last stop of the day, I returned to the partially unexcavated rubble site of Tijeras Pueblo, just east of Albuquerque. I had a good first visit some years ago, other than it was raining the whole time, and I wanted some sunny day photos of the site. Tijeras Pueblo is believed to have been a U-shaped structure consisting of about 200 rooms, and was originally built in the 1300s, likely by people who migrated here from the drought-stricken Four Corners area. The pueblo was abandoned in about 1425, again due to persistent drought.

How can we determine the age of such sites? Dendrochronology – tree-ring dating – is the scientific method of dating tree growth rings to the exact year they were formed by comparing and aligning ring patterns across a number of trees that grew in the same area. Align enough rings across enough pieces of wood, and scientists can line up enough rings to cover several centuries of tree growth. Trees and branches were used extensively in the construction of pueblos, and many survived for centuries due to the region’s dry weather conditions.

After spending the night in Albuquerque, I figured on two sightseeing stops in New Mexico before heading to Seligman, Arizona for the night.

I first visited Coronado Historic Site, north of Albuquerque, several years ago, and thought I’d see it again. But I got there at 8AM and found that it didn’t open until 10AM, something I had tried to check the night before on my hotel’s worthless internet connection. My second planned stop, the ruins at Pueblo Pintado, a Chaco Culture outlier site in northwest New Mexico, didn’t go much better, as I couldn’t get the local road details I wanted online at my hotel. I had visited the site a few years ago, but a lightning storm was moving into the area just as I got there, so I wanted to see it with nice weather.



Here are the ruins at Pueblo Pintado from a distance along the highway. I didn't find any signage, but I found six candidate dirt roads that might lead out to it, although one had a mail box, so I figured it was the road to someone's home. None of the other five roads led to the site, however. That night, my Seligman motel's internet access let me confirm that it was the mailbox road that I wanted. A bit too late at that point.

It's actually a rather sizeable site with impressive ruins comparable to some of the "Great House" ruins found at Chaco Culture National Historical Park's main site. But at least now I know that when I head east on I-40 again, I should hit Pueblo Pintado and then Coronado en route to Albuquerque.



I did spot this small, unnamed ruin nearby from the highway. Notice the patches of black soot to the left of the ruin on the alcove's ceiling. These suggest that there once had been additional rooms here.

This was the last of my photo stops on the trip. Seligman is known as the Birthplace of Historic Route 66 after locals pushed the state of Arizona to designate the old Route 66 in the state as a state historic highway, and the town has preserved a lot of original Route 66 kitsch. But I've stayed in Seligman before, and I have stopped there a handful of times, so I didn't take any photos this time.

From Seligman it was about a three-hour drive back to Las Vegas the next morning.