



# MarkHitsTheRoad

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## Great Plains Road Trip (P21A-1) Texas, Kansas and the Dakotas

Well into the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I had only taken road trips to low case areas in the region. Eight good trips, to be sure, but I was ready for a change of scenery. Once I was fully vaccinated, I began planning a road trip out to the Midwest to see family, and to do some sightseeing across the northern Great Plains that had been snowed out on past road trips of this type.

I had planned to take this trip in August. But on the first of the eight pandemic road trips, I broke a bone in my foot, and dealt with lingering aftereffects for the next year. At some point, I broke the same bone, only more severely. A customized medical boot was supposed to arrive by the start of August, but it ended up being three weeks late. So, I rescheduled the trip for October.

The break was still healing, though, so I wore a medical boot for the whole trip. Unlike many of my trips, there were no hikes on this trip. It really was a road trip, because I never got very far from a road.

Still, it was a good trip. For the most part. After watching one nice weather forecast after another, suddenly a winter storm was brewing. I ended up being east of it one day, north of it the next, and west of it the day after. I once again canceled plans to visit Yellowstone – 20-degree temperatures and falling snow would have not helped the sightseeing. So, I spent more time in Idaho and less time in Wyoming than I had planned on.

Although I cut south through Utah, I didn't plan on much sightseeing there. I made a few photo stops, but for the most part Utah was just a drive-through state on this trip.



I headed east through Texas, picking up a band of counties that I hadn't been to before. With a Texas trip planned for later this year, I might finally finish off the rest of the counties in Texas.



I like this west Texas view better.



Near Independence, Kansas, I stopped at the Little House on the Prairie House and Museum, which features this reconstruction of the cabin where the Charles Ingalls family once lived, made famous in the Little House on the Prairie book written by his daughter Laura Ingalls Wilder. Their farm site was identified once archaeologists found the family well nearby.

Over the years, I've visited other sites associated with "Little House..." and Laura Ingalls Wilder in my travels, including...



... what had been a small hotel that the Ingalls ran in Burr Oak, Iowa for a year (I actually stopped here briefly on this trip, too), ...



...this reconstructed cabin at the site of the Little House in the Big Woods, near Pepin, Wisconsin, ...



...the site of the sod house On the Banks of Plum Creek, near Walnut Grove, Minnesota, ...



...and where Charles "Pa" Ingalls was laid to rest in Culver City, California.



An outhouse plunger, on display in the Ingalls cabin. You don't want your outhouse to get backed up.



An ass. And a nice illustration of ambiguity.

The Ingalls farm site in Kansas is now owned by the family of newsman Bill Kurtis.



“Big Brutus” is one of the largest electric shovels ever built, and was used in coal strip mining operations before being donated to the Big Brutus Museum in West Mineral, Kansas.



For a time, western pioneer settlement stopped with the line of states from Louisiana north to Minnesota, with the territory west of that being designated as Indian Country. Fort Scott, now a National Park System unit, was one of a line of forts built along that frontier. At one point it had been abandoned, but it was put back into military use during the Civil War.



This is the Marais de Cygnes Massacre State Historic Site in Kansas near the Missouri border. In pre-Civil War days, there was debate as to whether Kansas would enter the union as a slave state or free state. Pro-slavery Missourians often moved into Kansas to push for slave state status. In 1858, a group of pro-slavery Missourians seized 11 Kansas Free-State men near here and marched them to the edge of this ravine, lined them up and shot them, killing five. John Brown later built a “fort” near here, and used it as a base for a raid into Missouri to free some slaves.

It's nice to see that our politics have become much more civilized since then.



A key goal for this trip was to go to northeast Iowa to see my dad. When I head north on Highway 150, I usually stop at this park that sits on a bluff above the town of Eldorado, Iowa, because of its views.



Heading west through South Dakota on my way back home, I could tell that I had returned to the Great Plains when I looked out my car window and exclaimed, “Those are some really great plains!”



Another sign that I had reached the northern Great Plains. If you haven't heard of Wall Drug, it is a drug store/tourist trap in Wall, South Dakota, that originally rose to fame when the owners put up lots of signs across the region promoting free ice water to tourists heading for then-newly opened Mount Rushmore. It now draws about 2 million visitors a year.



I've been to all 50 state capitols, but it was night when I visited South Dakota's state capitol the last time that I was in Pierre.



Lemmon, South Dakota is famous for its Petrified Wood Park.



With Halloween approaching, several downtown Lemmon businesses got into the spirit by putting up frightening displays. Like this one.



My sixth visit to North Dakota began with a stop along Highway 12 with this view of Hiddenwood Cliff. An 1874 George Custer Expedition camped here en route to the Black Hills of South Dakota. The stated reason of the expedition was to explore the Black Hills territory, then part of the Great Sioux Reservation, in order to identify a site for a fort. More importantly, the goal was to determine whether or not gold had been discovered in the Black Hills.

In later years, the last great herd of 50,000 (out of what once had been tens of millions) free ranging buffalo had migrated to this area. In June 1882, the last great buffalo hunts began here. In just the first three days, a group of Teton Lakota killed 5,000 buffalo. Within 16 months, this herd was gone. The buffalo had been hunted to near extinction.

When I moved to Seattle in 2002, I drove out there with minor sightseeing plans along the way. Cutting through North Dakota, I had plans to stop at the boyhood home of Lawrence Welk, but a blizzard was approaching, and my back highways route was soon covered with snow. I made it to I-94 and then to Bismarck, North Dakota, where I spent the night.

The next morning, the sun was out, but it was quite cold, with wind chills of 30 below zero. Fortunately, my route would take me south towards I-90. I planned on a route along the “Enchanted Highway”, which connects I-94 to the small town of Regent, North Dakota. I had read that the Enchanted Highway was lined with a handful of large metal sculptures.

It was, with even more planned. This was my first time back in almost 20 years. The temperatures were much nicer, too. Here are some of the sculptures along the Enchanted Highway today.



Pheasants on the Prairie



Fisherman's Dream



Grasshoppers in the Field



Geese in Flight

At 110 feet tall and 154 feet wide, the Guinness Book of World Records in 2002 recognized Geese in Flight as the largest scrap metal sculpture in the world.



With all the tourist traffic along the Enchanted Highway, the locals have developed a highway rest area.



Tradition holds that a long-ago soldier buried gold on Black Butte, but no one has found it yet. Black Butte is a pretty big butte. Not so big that it could be a mesa, but a big butte nonetheless. I agree with rapper-geologist Sir Mix-A-Lot when he sings, "I like big buttes, and I cannot lie."

Montana has a nice Butte.

Western North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park is one of those parks that I bet most people have never heard of. Millions of years ago it was a flat, swampy area, where several layers of sediment built up. Rivers, streams and rivulets started eroding through the layers, including – about a million years ago – the Little Missouri River. The result is the rugged landscape known as the North Dakota badlands. The park includes two large units that preserve sections of these badlands. Theodore Roosevelt came to the region on a hunting trip, fell in love with the landscape, and bought a ranch out here, hence the name of the park. Park wildlife includes prairie dog towns and wild bison herds.







The Little Missouri River



“Cannonball” concretions develop underground when mineral-rich water starts binding sediments together. Concretions can form into any of a number of shapes, with spherical ones called cannonballs. To date, scientists have not yet figured out why some develop as spheres.



The ancient swampland has resulted in some thin layers of lignite coal, including a vein here that has burned for years. Occasional wildfires routinely ignite exposed lignite in several areas of the park.



Prairie dog towns are popular with visitors to the park.

But visitors really love to see the bison.





My first visit to Theodore Roosevelt National Park was in 1991. I was on my first great western road trip and wanted to make sure I visited all the western states that I hadn't been to before then, including North Dakota. The park became my targeted sight to see in North Dakota. This picture of the park's Buck Hill remains one of my favorites from that trip. Just a simple scene with near-perfect lighting for a pretty basic film camera.



I took this photo of Buck Hill on this trip, just over 30 years later. I'd say that "something is missing" in the 2021 version of this photo, but pretty much everything I liked about the original photo is missing.



Fort Union Trading Post is a partial reconstruction of what was arguably the most important fur trading post along the upper Missouri River in the mid-1800s. Its location, right on the North Dakota-Montana border, allowed it to take advantage of the centuries-old trading routes of the northern Plains tribes.

I first visited this National Park System unit when driving from Dayton to Minneapolis in 1995, but I got there too late in the day, so the fort itself was closed. It took me 26 years to finally get back here.



As I finished up at the trading post, I observed a flock of geese flying south.



A porcupine strolled past me near the start of the park's nature trail.



My last North Dakota stop was at its Indian Rocks State Historical Site in the northwest corner of the state, which protects two boulders covered with petroglyphs that may be up to 1000 years old. The larger of the two boulders features a thunderbird, a common motif in northern Plains petroglyphs.





For those of you who like to bring metal detectors with you into outhouses, keep in mind that's not allowed in North Dakota state parks.



Autumn on the Great Plains