

Monahans Texas

by
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A thunderous explosion of metal permeated the still night air. I quickly looked in my side rear review mirror trying to see what I ran over to cause such a raucous sound. To my bewilderment, I could see in the moonlight, the freeway filling with broken metal engine fragments flying from under my truck. My pickup had exploded!

My motor seized, and I immediately jammed in my clutch and threw the shifter into neutral. I managed to coast safely to the highway's dirt shoulder before stopping. My Mardi gras trip was over.

After completing my second semester at Grossmont Community College, I took the next semester off and went on a road trip to Mardi gras in New Orleans. I put out the word to my community of friends that I was leaving the first week in February and was looking for a traveling companion.

No takers came forward.

A few months earlier, I had equipped my eleven-year-old truck with a homemade camper shell. I found it in the local newspaper's classified ads and bought it for fifty bucks. The windowless unpainted steel shell completely rusted leaving it masked in a dirty red-brown color. It constructed for a short bed compact pickup, just not my style of truck.

I pounded hard with a small sledgehammer on top of the shell forcing it onto my truck bed until it sort of fit. Still, it did not seat tight on top of the bed walls leaving gaps around. The setup looked as though it came straight out of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. I could not have been prouder!

To the living area inside the camper, I added an acquired hand-me-down single-sized stained mattress and two low single-shelved plywood cabinets, which I salvaged from my parents' old worn out tent trailer.

The cab didn't have a working heater. I installed a cheap Kraco eight-track tape deck and had three tapes, John Mayall, Steppenwolf, and Cream. Much to the disgust of my friends, I listened to the blues of John Mayall most of the time.

I took a two-week leave of absence from my part-time Longs' job. By the time my last work shift ended at nine-thirty Tuesday evening I was loaded with my inexpensive sleeping bag, a propane-fueled camping heater, a Coleman lantern, and a hard-plastic red ice chest filled with Coke, a loaf of bread, mayonnaise, cans tuna-fish, and other finger-food treats.

I hit the road a little after ten o'clock that evening traveling east away from El Cajon. I drove the slow winding, up and down the narrow highway, through the mountains of San Diego's backcountry and eventually down the steep In Ko Pah grade into the desert.

I continued on the heat-destroyed asphalt for seventy miles; driving through different small desert towns to the western edge of the Algodones Dunes.

This six-mile-wide sand-dune field extended from the Mexican Border northwest forty-five miles through the California side of the Sonoran Desert. The towering mountains of sand depicted the famed African Sahara.

It was a clear starry, crisp winter night. I wore my standard uniform consisting of a white tee shirt, Levis 501's, white socks, and lightweight suede desert boots. It was after midnight, and I was getting cold.

I pulled into the all-too-familiar rest stop in the dunes and went to bed.

The sun woke me up early around six o'clock that morning. Cold from my poorly insulated sleeping bag, I climbed out of my icebox camper anxious to drive the remaining twenty miles to Yuma and get a piping hot cup of coffee. As I walked to the blue colored outhouse styled port-a-potty to urinate, I silently vowed to use my propane heater every night for the remainder of my trip.

I fired up my old truck and dropped the gear shifter into second. I stepped on the accelerator, and my right rear drive wheel spun in the soft fine desert sand. I switched to the granny-low first gear and tried again with no better results. Cursing to myself, I got out inspecting the situation.

I've been to this rest area before, and the weather-beaten old asphalt is always covered with a layer of sand from the frequent winds. In daylight, it's hard to find a safe place to park; in the middle of the night, all but impossible. I inadvertently parked in the previous Cadillac's sand trap.

Retrieving my small puke-green army surplus folding shovel and a three-foot plank from behind the front bench seat I got to work. Both these items were standard equipment in my truck, as I frequently needed them for just such situations. I dug the sand out from in front of the afflicting wheel and shoved the plank as far under it as I could.

The truck easily drove forward. From experience, I keep it moving until I maneuvered onto the safety of the asphalt. I retrieved my equipment and headed for Yuma.

I drove across the old wooden border bridge spanning the Colorado River into Arizona and into the Border Patrol inspection station. When questioned by the officer, I lied stating I was an American citizen and immediately waved through without having to produce my green card or answer any further questions.

Yuma was a highway city. The main East-West thoroughfare was a city street continuum of the highway and ran five or six miles through the business district. Though I was on a sightseeing vacation, I had been there many times and didn't bother touring the historic Yuma Territorial Prison.

I pulled into an independent gas station with a Seven-Eleven convenience store located next door. After filling my gas tank with Ethel, I walked to the Seven-Eleven for the desperately needed caffeine and a package of Hostess Ding Dongs; two small chocolate-covered crème filled cakes. I liked breakfast.

Leaving Yuma, I picked up a man hitchhiking from the side of the road. This stretch of desert from here to Tucson was flat, straight and visually unappealing unless you like Saguaro Cactus and dusty green sagebrush. I looked forward to breaking up this mundane leg of the trip with some idle chat.

The first point of interest was Dateland; a highway bus stop and public rest area featuring mostly date-shakes and other date-fruit products in its small store and soda fountain. I disdained the small odd tasting fruit and drove past without stopping.

The other point of interest was the Space Age Lodge and Restaurant built in Gila Bend during the early sixty's space race. It featured a magnificent lighted flying saucer sign and an extra-large pseudo flying saucer on its roof. The highway passed by it and I slowed to admire it but again did not stop.

The underweight hitchhiker was a little dirty and looked hungry. I pulled over on a wide spot on the shoulder of the highway, being extra careful not to park in the sand, somewhere past Gila Bend and made us tuna and mayonnaise sandwiches on the tailgate of my truck. I opened the steel can of fish and added heaped spoonfuls of the white condiment before mixing. I learned this recipe the previous summer.

He was grateful and quickly devoured two of the soggy sandwiches and two Cokes.

My truck developed a familiar loud grinding noise just as we were arriving in Tucson. I quickly pulled into the first service station I came to. The homeless hitchhiker profusely thanked me for the ride and lunch. He bade me farewell, and he headed off to find a local hostel.

The on-duty mechanic analyzed my engine problem and concluded the noise was coming from a worn out main bearing holding my crankshaft and not a wheel bearing as I had thought.

I didn't have an extra two-hundred dollars in my budget for the repair and phoned my banker for a short-term loan. I promised my father I could afford to repay him as soon as I got home and went back to work. He wired me the money.

I spent a second cold night in my camper on the station's parking lot with my propane heater inches from my face. I was naïve of the dangers of propane fumes. It was a predetermined destiny that my ill-fitting camper shell had so much airflow.

The next afternoon, my truck repaired, I was heading towards Las Cruces, New Mexico.

I picked up another hitchhiker for the continuing boring desert drive. He taught me how to flick my headlights when semi-trucks, dragging large trailers, were passing me, signaling they had room to move back in my lane. The truck drivers always blinked "thank-you" back. The highway was plagued with semis, and it helped break up the boredom.

After dropping my guest off in Deming, New Mexico, I stopped a few times to gas up; consume assorted finger foods coupled with cold drinks from my ice chest. Or pee along the roadside behind scattered cacti.

Las Cruces' night-lights sparkled in the clear air as I drove down the grade into the small city late that evening. The day's mundane drive not over. I continued navigating the hodgepodge of city and country roads for more than an hour looking for a suitable place to spend the night. At the end of a long desolate dirt road, on the east side of town, I pulled over and went to bed. I spent another restless cold night snuggled to my heater.

Early the next morning, again after digging myself out of the sand, I desperately wanted out of the desert. I located a rural highway leading north-northeast and continued.

After visiting White Sands National Monument late that morning, I turned east and drove through the traffic-free beautiful mountains and valleys leading to Roswell, New Mexico.

Roswell is famous for its unconfirmed nineteen-forties extraterrestrial spaceship crash-landing, complete with alien occupants. Everything in town centered on this event. There are flying-saucer, spacemen, and spaceship icons everywhere. I did not believe a word of their Fantasyland advertising.

For many blocks in the old downtown section, the streets lined with bookstores and private storefront museums capitalizing on the occurrence. I spent hours perusing the tourist trap area; still unconvinced.

Late in the afternoon I made the two-hour trip south through the Guadeloupe Mountains to Carlsbad Caverns and spent another cold night hugged to my heater in the Cavern's parking lot.

I browsed the gift shop, drinking coffee, for a half-hour the following morning waiting for the caverns to open. There were few mid-winter visitors, and the caverns void except for two other couples.

At eight-thirty, I followed the rock-bordered dirt path to the cave's entrance. I climbed down the cavern's vertical natural opening leading to the Main Corridor. The steep, sometimes narrow, winding Main Corridor descended one and a quarter mile to more than seven-hundred fifty-feet into the earth. It's a constant chilly fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit.

The path leads you through bat filled rooms dripping with water. Stalactites and stalagmites protruded up and down everywhere. After three hours plus, sauntering alone through the halls, I encountered the Big Room containing a snack bar, restrooms, and more importantly, elevators; saving me from the long, tedious return hike.

I left the area shortly after noon and kept traveling south stopping about two-and-a-half hours later in the small desert town of Pecos, Texas. I could not believe I was back in the desert.

The only exciting landmark in the tiny town was an old cemetery. I strolled through the grounds and located the gravesite of Clay Allison, "The Gentleman Gunfighter." The old weathered and cracked wooded headstone decried, "He never shot a man who didn't deserve to die." I thought about this and wondered what the deserving standards were between living and dying by Allison's gun.

Leaving Pecos, I headed east on a rural highway to what would be the end of my Maris Gras run.

After the annihilation of my truck's engine, two miles from Monahans, Texas, on the side of the divided highway, I opened the hood. I used a flashlight and sought out the damage. A piston protruded through the top left engine head.

I hadn't seen another car, traveling in my direction, since getting on the highway and only a few passing me in the opposite direction. Rather than walking in the dark for two miles into town, I decided to spend the night where I was and figure out my next move in the morning light. In disgust I slammed the truck's hood and when to bed.

I dozed off and on throughout the cold night, again with my arms wrapped around the propane heater. Every so often large trucks swished by me and rattled my camper shell.

It was seven o'clock on Saturday morning, and I had just finished a full examination of the damage. All my engine oil had drained out creating a long stained and wet path from the incident site to my final resting spot. I was eternally grateful no semi had slid in my oil slick and crashed into my truck in a fiery ball.

I discovered besides having a piston sticking through the top of my motor; there was a second piston lodged through the bottom. The engine was unsalvageable.

I stood behind my open hood, positive the Tucson mechanic had botched my crankshaft-bearing job when a white Cadillac pulled over. It quickly stopped in a cloud of sand a few hundred yards ahead of me.

The driver put his caddy in reverse and slammed on the gas. I never saw anyone drive in reverse at such a high speed and terrified he wouldn't be able to stop on the loose shoulder before completely finishing off my truck and me. I stood there frozen in disbelief!

It was after he actually made the stop, I noticed his oversized set of steer horns attached to the top front of the long hood. I stared at them mystified because I thought Long-Horn Steer

adornments were only for movies. I glanced around for the *Candid Camera* crew. Apparently, this was Texas and films reflect reality.

Ralph introduced himself and vigorously shook my hand for an unusually prolonged period.

Has to be a salesman or a preacher.

He stated he had a mechanic friend in town who owned a repair shop.

Finally releasing his grip on my hand, he quickly pulled a rope from his car trunk and offered to tow me into Monahans. I could not believe his willingness to drag me behind his Cadillac. Having no other current options, I agreed to the much-needed help.

We tied the vehicles together and proceeded to drive into town. He led in his Caddy, and I followed, controlling my trunk's steering and braking at a mere six-foot rope length behind him. To my relief, the rescue ride turned out a lot slower than I was worried about after witnessing his previous lead foot.

After safely reaching the station and introductions made, his mechanic friend let me park my truck in the unpaved area beside his shop. We untied the vehicles and hand-pushed my pickup into the allocated space.

Ralph told me he was the preacher at a local church and invited me to the following morning's Sunday worship service.

I was using the trip as a personal crusade to find direction in my life and spent time, every night on the road, reading the Bible under the light of my Coleman lantern before falling asleep. I struggled with Christianity for the last five years and for a brief period, I thought I wanted to become a pastor. By the time I left Monahans, I had finished reading the New Testament and a large portion of the old.

Grateful for Ralph's help and unable to fabricate other plans, besides feeling duty-bound, I told him I would see him in the morning.

Ralph met me at the door of his Episcopal Church's Sunday service. I believe he prayed I showed up. What else did I have to do in a one-horse town on a Sunday?

He asked me, "Do you know what an altar call is?"

I responded, "Yes," and explained I participated in one before.

Dennis and I attended a special showing of the Christian movie *For Pete's Sake* at our local theater a year earlier and we had both gone forward at the altar call. Ralph told me that he was planning to end his morning sermon with one. I responded with, "I better find a seat," and entered the church. He either hadn't heard me or felt my previous conversion hadn't counted.

I was thankful the front pews were packed and found a seat in on a sparsely filled bench at the back of the worship hall. All Bible-belt towns' churches are full on any given Sunday. I sat there looking over the congregation happily talking and chuckling amongst themselves. I concluded the church was filled with regularly saved devotees and the altar call was designed solely for my benefit. My suspicions were confirmed when he called for first-time visitors to stand. I was the only one stared at.

When I hadn't responded to his altar call, Ralph must have thought I needed more persuasion and set me up with Sunday dinner at his second-in-command's home.

I rode with the family to their lovely middle-class home directly after the service. They were nice people, mother, father, and two young preteens; a girl and her younger brother.

While waiting for dinner to cook and be served, the father, and I sat on the living room couch. He brought up the subject of rock 'n roll music. He wasn't a fan and didn't think I should be either

though he never said it outright. He expected me to interpret the lyrics to Three Dog Night's popular hit *Never Been to Spain* and other songs they had written or performed. His list also included a few Beatle's songs. I uncomfortably struggled to try to appease him and assign Christian values to all the words. Dinner could not be served soon enough.

The Texas pot roast and vegetables were delicious. I craved a decent meal.

After dinner and dishes finished, I anxiously looked for an exit opportunity. I wanted quiet relief alone at my truck. The father announced, "We only have five minutes to get to the Sunday night service." The trap sprung, and I was the unsuspecting prey.

The church was considerably less crowded, and I'll be damned if there wasn't another altar call. No one took part.

As I was escaping towards the door, Ralph stopped me and mentioned that that if I was still in town Wednesday evening, there was a bible study.

I walked back to my truck.

The winter nights in West Texas were freezing. Every morning I woke up with my camper shell covered in frost and water condensation dripping on me. All week long I hugged my propane heater and even burned my nose and forehead a couple of times. I shivered myself to sleep every night.

I woke up Monday morning knowing I had to take care of business. First, I talked to the mechanic about my options. After he explained the estimated costs for a used engine, if he could even find one, and the unacceptable period to install it, I decided I would have to sell my truck for parts or call a junkyard to see if I could get anything for it. He said he would make a couple of calls for me to see if anyone was interested.

Ralph's friend was on the phone when a customer walked in. While waiting for the mechanic, the new arrival and I got to talking. He owned the local milk delivery business, and upon hearing, my predicament immediately offered me a job delivering white bottled liquid. I declined and explained that I was obligated to return to my current position in San Diego. I refrained from telling the man I wasn't enthralled with the white Good Humor uniform he was wearing. I had an image to uphold.

Anxious to get started, I couldn't wait for the mechanic to get off the phone. I left walking on the dirt path beside the roadway to downtown Monahans. The business region consisted of one short block of conjoined shops on the south side of the street and a few separated businesses on the opposite side. I won't even call it a town. I entered every shop and explained my situation and the condition of my "for sale" truck. This was thirty years before networking became vogue.

In the small market, a customer overheard me and said he was interested and wanted to stop by to take-a-look. We arranged a time for that afternoon.

Another overhearing customer approached me and suggested I go with him and work in the oil fields scattered around the surrounding desert. Again, I declined. I was a big-city boy, and Monahans could not have been further from it.

I felt less pressured due to my upcoming appointment and knew I would close my sale one way or another.

I returned to the small jewelry store that was going out of business and heavily discounting their inventory. I purchased a thirteen-dollar pearl necklace for my girlfriend; patiently waiting for me back home.

I return to the service station that afternoon, and the mechanic called me over saying he had found a potential buyer for my truck. I spent the next two days conducting a bidding war between the two interested parties and settled on a one-hundred-ten dollar final price. I sold my old piece of junk!

The winning bidder agreed I could keep my father's two wooden cabinet units and he would pick up the truck Thursday morning.

With no other pressing engagements, I attended Wednesday's evening Bible study. I shouldn't have been shocked at the last ditch effort for my conversion. Once again, I passed on Ralph's final altar call.

Thursday morning I stuffed all my belongings into the two plywood box units and plastic ice chest. I struggled to carry the first heavy cabinet topped with the ice chest a short distance towards town and then followed up by moving the second heavy unit a little further past the primary. I used this leapfrog method, with a needed rest between each carry. The five-block trudge to the bus station took two hours.

I had a choice to make. I could get a ticket to New Orleans or back to my waiting job in San Diego. I bought a ticket home. There weren't any express buses, and I purchased a regular ticket. This meant stopping at every station between Monahans and San Diego including dreaded Dateland.

I sat on top of my cabinets on the sidewalk for eight hours until the bus's departure at six o'clock late that afternoon.

The nine-hundred fifty-mile bus trip took twenty-five hours. I hate buses! I disembarked at the El Cajon Greyhound station at seven o'clock on Friday evening on February eighteenth.

We lived a short distance from the El Cajon depot and not wanting to relive my leapfrog ordeal; I phoned my father. He picked his cabinets and me up and drove home.

It was my birthday, and I was excited to be home in time to celebrate with my girlfriend. I borrowed my mother's older Chrysler New Yorker with a push-button transmission and drove to my girlfriend's house. I stuffed my pearl surprise into the glove box.

I knocked on her front door. Her parents and I never had the best relationship and as soon as her mother opened the door and before I could sputter a word, she glared at me and stated, "She's out for the evening."

SLAM!

I drove all over El Cajon checking places her girlfriends, and she usually hung out to no avail and finally ended my search sitting across the street from her house for two hours. Around eleven o'clock she and a friend of mine pulled into her driveway ending their date.

They hadn't expected me back or recognized my mother's car. I drove home unnoticed and went to bed. I had to be at work at eight o'clock the next morning.