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My Last Long Road Trip

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At least I hope it is my last one. I have made a few long-distance trips by car in my life. The first few were a lot of fun. I was seeing the country for the first time. But after crisscrossing Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma a few times, I would honestly rather have a root canal than have to do it again - especially when it means 25 hours on the road with three impatient kids in the car.

Things have changed quite a bit since my last trip, though. When I was in college, my first long distance road trip took me from College Station, Texas to Gaspé, Quebec (2,600 miles) and back. My most recent long-distance trip, in 2005, had taken me 1,150 miles from Northern Oklahoma to Montana (twice). This time, I drove from Montana to North Texas (1430 miles). For reference, New York to Los Angeles is about 2,800 miles. Here are my observations.

When we left Montana, I noticed that traffic was very light. That is unusual for Montana in the summer, because a lot of traffic passes through Billings on I-90 headed to Yellowstone National Park. The road is usually packed with RVs, but I was well into Wyoming before I saw the first RV. In fact, in the first 300 miles of driving, I saw only one RV on the road. This theme was consistent throughout the trip: Light traffic, and very few RVs. My wife commented that high gas prices had really done a number on the traffic. I told her that I thought an era had passed and that going forward we would start looking at personal mobility in a different manner.

I was towing a packed 4' x 8' U-Haul Cargo Trailer behind a Ford Escape, and I was pretty concerned about the impact on fuel efficiency. So I started out driving about 60 miles an hour, both to conserve fuel and because the trailer behind me was fairly heavy. I maintained my discipline throughout the first day, and I kept track of my gas mileage. With the trailer, and driving up and down some fairly steep hills, I managed about 22 mpg on that first day. According to the EPA, that particular model should get about 24 mpg on the highway. So, I figured that wasn't too bad, considering there were five people in the car, and a heavy trailer behind me. I don't know what fuel efficiency the vehicle normally gets, as this was my first time to drive it. This is my wife's car. (As for me, since I will be in Europe half of the time, I don't intend to get a car.)

I couldn't help but reflect upon how desolate most of Wyoming is. We drove down a very empty I-25, which runs well east of the Rocky Mountains. It is scenic, but towns are few and far between. The soil is thin, and there isn't a lot of water. Life there is probably going to become very hard as energy prices continue to escalate. In fact, a recent story in the New York Times identified rural Wyoming as one of the areas hardest hit by high gasoline prices. It made me think of Jim Kunstler's prediction that areas like this are likely to be abandoned in a peak oil world.

I noticed as I made my way down Wyoming that my fuel efficiency was dropping. I wasn't quite sure why, unless my elevation was changing and that was having an impact. I had started out at

about 23 mpg, but then by the time I got into southern Wyoming, it had dropped to 21 mpg. It would drop further to 20 mpg as we turned east and traveled across Nebraska. It struck me that I could be getting some ethanol, but I tried to avoid the pumps that indicated that there was ethanol in the gasoline.

As I entered Nebraska, my thoughts turned to corn and ethanol. You enter Ogallala country right away when you enter Nebraska on I-80 from the west, and of course the depletion of the Ogallala aquifer has long been cited as a threat to agriculture in large parts of the Midwest. As I passed acre upon acre of corn being irrigated by drawing down the aquifer - now being spurred by misguided ethanol mandates - I couldn't help but think about what the future holds for the area if the aquifer continues to deplete. I talked to my daughter a little bit about this, explaining to her the role of the aquifer in making corn production possible in that part of Nebraska. This would be one of those normally unaddressed negative externalities we talk about when discussing ethanol production from corn.

Regardless of your opinion on ethanol, Nebraska is one of the most energy intensive states in which to produce ethanol due to the irrigation requirements. In fact, in the USDA's various analyses of corn ethanol energy inputs, Nebraska has consistently had the highest energy inputs of the nine Midwest states they examined. For a relative comparison, see The Energy Balance of Corn Ethanol; Table 4. (Note that while the energy inputs themselves may have declined over time, Nebraska will remain as the high energy producer).

Further, the USDA averaged all of the energy inputs across the nine states when they reported the energy balance. So the next time someone tells you about the energy balance of corn ethanol, remember - Nebraska is worse. From that report, the energy inputs for Nebraska corn were 54% higher than those of Wisconsin. It is certainly not out of the question that the net energy from ethanol produced in a typical Nebraska ethanol plant and shipped to Texas or California may be negative.

We finally got to our stopping point for the night in Lexington, Nebraska. We were staying at a hotel right off of I-80, and there were few cars in the parking lot. We had smelled the hog farms for quite a while, and we could smell them from there as well. If you have never smelled a large hog operation, let's just say it isn't pleasant. In fact, I doubt you could get away with building a factory anywhere with that kind of smell coming out of it.

Day 2, we were up early and off. I made a strategic decision on this day that is contrary to my typical obsessive desire to conserve energy. We had spent 13 hours in the car the previous day. Google Maps had indicated 10 hours and 39 minutes. While my wife and I can deal with that OK, that's cruel and unusual punishment for three kids. So I decided to bump the speed up to 70 mph for the drive today. I estimated that this would get us to our new home in Texas in 11 hours. After driving for the day, I calculated that it also had the impact of dropping our fuel efficiency down to 18 mpg.

The second strategic decision was to take a shortcut. We did not have a map, but at the hotel I had calculated that I could save about 20 miles by leaving I-80 at its most southerly point in Nebraska and cutting across to Kansas on U.S. 183. At first this seemed like a great decision. Traffic was very light, and the road was pretty straight. However, after entering Kansas, we suddenly encountered a construction worker standing in the road with a stop sign.

Twenty minutes later, my short cut wasn't looking like such a good idea. We were just parked in the middle of nowhere - no traffic in sight. I told the family that maybe some joker was pulling a prank to see how long he could hold up traffic. But after 20 minutes, we were allowed to go. And

the part that I could never understand is that we drove 4 miles before coming up on any signs whatsoever of construction - and then it was a spot of less than 100 feet. Why they had to back up traffic four miles away from that spot was lost on me.

But that wasn't the end of our delays on the shortcut. I remembered the town of Phillipsburg, Kansas from one of my previous trips. It stood out in my mind for three reasons. First, when I was driving from Oklahoma, it had the first gas station I had encountered for many miles. I was in danger of running out of gas when I finally pulled in there. Second, there is a train track that crosses Highway 183, and my previous time through the train had blocked traffic for 15 minutes. Third, there is a rusting refinery on the north end of town that had been owned by a farmer's co-op until it was shut down in the 80's.

So, as we pulled into town, there were the rusting remnants of the refinery. And up ahead, I could see the crossing barrier on the train tracks descending. So we pulled up, parked, and watched car after car of (ADM) ethanol go past. And just as the train was about to clear the tracks, it reversed direction. We went through this routine several times. The train would pull up, almost clear the tracks, and reverse direction. I kidded that the ethanol producers must have known I was coming. Finally, after another 20 minutes of delays, the tracks were cleared and we proceeded toward I-70. I had always heard that a train could only delay traffic for five minutes in case there was a medical emergency and an ambulance had to get through. Given our 20 minute delay, this may be just urban legend. But I won't voluntarily travel through Phillipsburg, Kansas again.

Finally, we got to I-70 in Kansas. Wouldn't you know it? The interstate was down to one lane, and traffic was creeping along at 40 mph. This ended up costing us another 15 minutes or so, and my shortcut ultimately ended up costing us almost an hour.

Traveling along I-70 toward Salina, Kansas, I started to see a lot of wind turbines. I mean a lot. There may have been more wind turbines concentrated together than I have ever seen before. I looked it up when I got a chance, and it turns out that this was the Smoky Hills Wind Farm, which is ultimately a 250 megawatt project. You can see a map of the various wind projects in Kansas here; there are a lot.

At Salina, we finally turned south toward Wichita. I had chosen our route to avoid cities, and the only ones we would pass through were Wichita and Oklahoma City. Wichita was actually a breeze, although we did encounter our only road tolls of the trip south of Wichita. The trip across the rest of Kansas and Oklahoma down I-35 was uneventful, although I did have one close call in traffic outside of Oklahoma City when a semi tried to move over on top of us. One thing I did note in Oklahoma is that I saw fields that had been planted in nothing but wheat as far back as I can remember, but they were now planted in corn as far as the eye could see.

We arrived pretty late - about 9:30 p.m. - at our new home in North Texas. It had taken us 12 hours on the second day (thanks to my "shortcut") for a total of 25 hours in two days. It was a long grind, and I hope to never have to repeat it. Despite traveling without a map or a navigation system, we never got lost, nor took any wrong turns.

Gas prices had varied during the trip. The most we paid for gasoline was $4.08/gal at a truck stop in Nebraska. Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska tended to all have gasoline above $4.00. Gasoline in Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas was generally below $4. The cheapest price we paid for gas was $3.78 at a Flying J station in Ardmore, Oklahoma.

Reflecting back on the trip, I firmly believe that we are undergoing a permanent shift in traffic patterns. Those summer RV trips are going to become increasingly reserved for the wealthy, and

people are going to think twice about taking long road trips to vacation destinations. The roads are going to be less crowded, and the cars on them will be smaller. The world is going to seem a little bit bigger to future generations.