

Across the High Sierra

Contributed by Sandin Phillipson
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I have always enjoyed long road trips across the country, perhaps because they have all the elements of a Homeric adventure. After completing basic training for the Army, I was ready for assignment to my permanent duty station. I was directed to travel from Norfolk, Virginia to Monterrey, California, so I flew home to Wisconsin and prepared to drive the rest of the way. My 1964 Dodge Polara had been purchased for \$125 during my last year in high school, and I naively anticipated the adventure of driving nearly 2,500 miles across the continent. As I crossed the Minnesota border early on the first morning out, it occurred to me that I had just driven the farthest distance of my entire life. This was also to be my first time completely alone, and I savored the thought of the next week spent on the open road.

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I picked up the small state highway to Northfield, reportedly the scene of Jesse James' last, abortive raid, and then left the winding, picturesque Minnesota country roads behind in favor of I-35 South. The Slant-6 engine rattled along, and the speedometer needle floated near 55. I wanted to avoid placing too great a burden on the 23-year old car, which had compiled an indeterminate number of miles during its lifetime. It was the month of March, and as I rolled south through Minnesota and into Iowa, the snow banks shrank and the gray, lowering clouds threatened rain rather than snow. Finally turning west at Des Moines onto I-80, the stiff north wind buffeted the Dodge sideways, and a motorcycle passed, canted nearly 30 degrees into the wind to maintain equilibrium. It felt like a point of no return, and my only course was west toward an unknown shore. All across the brown, late Winter, windblown prairie I gripped the wide, heavy plastic steering wheel, fighting the wind and an out-of-balance front wheel that set up a harmonic shaking throughout the car. I anxiously scrutinized the instrument cluster until reaching Lincoln, Nebraska, where I decided to stop for the day after successfully entering yet another state for the first time in my life. Due to my lack of firsthand knowledge of the country's geography, I imagined that as I approached central Nebraska, I would soon descend into a vast desert. This thought prompted me to stop in Kearney to have the increasingly maddening vibration repaired, and after having the wheel balanced, I was off again. Nebraska seemed like such a long state, and I had taken to peering at my instrument cluster again, worriedly watching the alternator needle as it leaned slightly over to "discharge". Tapwater from the motel near the outskirts of Cheyenne seemed to rejuvenate the battery.

It felt as though I rolled endlessly across the plains of Nebraska, and had plenty of time to marvel at the early pioneers who encountered the vast expanses of rolling grasslands for weeks on end. Wyoming was different from anything that I had ever seen, and I was excited to cross even the low, rugged hills that represent the beginning of the Rocky Mountains in this area. The low hills were soon gone, and I was on a scrub desert. Gradually, through the thickening gloom, I discerned a more prominent range of the Rockies, and felt a thrill to have

reached tangible evidence that I was actually Out West! Black, snow-filled clouds released flurries of stinging white crystals until it became difficult to see. I crept through the deepening gloom, now at only 40 mph, peering just beyond the dim circle of light cast by my weakened headlights. Nervous glances at the worrisome alternator gauge revealed no information, and I crept on until the glowing oasis of the Little America truck stop came in view. I opened the driver's door into a biting gale of wet, swirling snow that turned the bright parking lot lamps of the gas station into hazy sundogs. A glance at my headlights revealed that two inches of frozen snow had accumulated over the lenses, diffusing the bulbs' rays into a feeble orange glow. The work of ten minutes chipping ice with a screwdriver was sufficient to restore them to their former brilliance, and reduce my hands to numbness. After a late dinner of hot roast beef and mashed potatoes, smothered in thick, rich gravy, I was prepared to resume driving, my spirits buoyed by a good meal and the restoration of my headlights. The dashboard instrument lights fluoresced a soft green through the hollow push button controls, as I followed the dual beam headlights through the slackening storm. I stopped in Bridger for the night, and was struck by the sharp cold and clear, prairie quiet in which the calls of coyotes drifted across the darkness.

The next day, at last I encountered the long-expected desert, with the descent into Utah and the Great Salt Lake basin. What an amazing site from this ribbon of blacktop, where salt and white mud stretch off into the distance, an apparent sea of white in which the hazy images of distant mountain peaks floated and bobbed. Whirling storms of salt danced across the road, and I noted the custom of passersby to spell their initials with cobbles tossed in the salt mud. I hoped that the end of this day would see me in California at last, and toward the late afternoon, I passed Reno, dominated by the brightly colored Circus-Circus. Although exhausted, I sensed that I was close to the day's goal as the grade of the road increased and jagged shoulders of rock encroached on the interstate. Past the last of the garishly flashing State Line casinos, a gorgeous, knife-edged valley came into view, with steep slopes nearly obscured by snow-covered, majestic pines. The interstate clung to the side of the valley, and the narrow lanes allowed only momentary lapses in concentration to enjoy the postcard view of the opposite slope.

The narrow lanes, sharp curves, and momentary night-blindness from the continuous glare of oncoming headlights began to tax my tired nerves. I pulled off the interstate at Truckee, which seemed as exciting as a Swiss playground in a Roger Moore-era James Bond movie due to the heavy fall of snow and abundance of ski rack-equipped vehicles. I found a motel, and rented a cabin, falling asleep satisfied that I had at least reached California. The following morning, the bottom half of the front fender succumbed to two thousand miles of vibration, as it collapsed in a crumble of rust and Bond-o. I proceeded west on I-80, over the summit of the Sierras, and began the gradual descent though snow-covered firs and past large warning signs apparently written in trucker language, advising them to "better let 'er drift". The snow disappeared, as did the firs, to be replaced by lush fields and humid warmth of the fertile valley. I had successfully crossed the Great Plains, salt desert, and Nevada wasteland, and my object was finally in reach.

After spending the night in Monterrey, I headed for Fort Ord where I would report for duty. This epic journey across the Sierras represented a significant

step away from my small home-town, which to me was nothing but a dead end where I could expect only to become an obscure loser. But here was a chance for a new beginning, following the same route as others who came west to improve their fortunes. As I passed beneath the arched sign that boldly proclaimed "Fort Ord, 7th Infantry Division (Light)", I sensed the freedom that I had enjoyed on the open road slip away. However, the self- direction and sense of adventure that I had experienced while crossing the continent would reassert themselves in time.

About The Author

I am a geologist, and have been to many interesting places, and had what I considered to be interesting experiences. I thought it would be fun to write about some of my experiences.

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