

NASCAR drivers are paid millions to run flat out in the summer heat 500 miles at excessive speeds just to show off for the pretty Motor City models in the winner's circle. Ski? That's another story.

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THE ROAD

follows closely the arch of the forgotten Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha Railroad. It knives through the heart of Wisconsin northwest toward the Twin Cities before cresting and falling south to Omaha. It was called the Omaha Road in Chicago & Northwestern circles.

We have travelled the Omaha Road before on these WELH reunions. At 11 a.m. on the Friday before Labor Day Weekend 1991, I had decided that damnation work and drive to Omaha for the Eastern radio reunion. The problem was that I did not tell anyone until I was in Eastern Iowa.

So the Prz household would be alive with another reunion in August 2002. This time they knew I would be coming by car, even though the same work duties made it touch and go.



DRIVING MISS DEMEANOR

Herr Hepner was desperate for a ride to Minnesota. He would go out of his way to join up with Ski for the sojourn through Dairyland.

After much schedule conflict, teeth gnashing resolution at work, the plan was to meet at Rocky's old house at 7 a.m. on Friday. Heavy traffic on I-90 West got Ski to Belvidere doorstep at 7:10 a.m. where Hep was sitting on the front stoop like a lost dog.

Nothing against lost dogs mind you. His huge suitcase was loaded into the trunk. "Are you planning to relocate?" No audible answer.

But for the next five hours, it was nothing but non-stop conversation on a variety of topics. The radio did not have to be turned on. We were flying through Wisconsin like a hot knife through butter. One short pit stop in Augusta, and it was to the hotel, lunch, and then to the Prz estate.

TO NO WHERE

is the only way to describe Central Wisconsin on a hot, muggy road construction Friday. Outside the urban areas, the landscape is agriculture: dairy farms and a loose cannon corn field or two.

The journey bisects two state capitols, Madison and St. Paul, where old stories hang in police locker rooms yellowing with age. A 7 a.m. tee off time should mean a casual round of golf at the links, not a lock and loaded Speed Racer day along Interstate 90-94.

Having been through the barren radio landscape, I had stowed 10 CDs to cut the static of any conversation with the navigator. Fueled only by a twinkie and 12 ounce Coke at 6 a.m., I was off to Belvidere to pick up the shotgun rider, Herr Hepner.

Hep did not want to be homesick during the long trip so he brought along a sheep and a goat. It would appear that some sacrifice would be on the Saturday night agenda. Livestock between the seats on a long drive was not as

bad as a uncomfortable bison shifting his weight back and forth straining the stabilizer bars of the Olds travelling 80 mph.

Stability is what these reunion trips are all about. A chance to keep in contact the members of the WKRP-like campus radio sta-

tion. It is tougher to get a quorum together, but this year advance planning for a long trip made it easier. Easier to plan.

Hep wanted to get a ride. He did not want to drive alone. He is rural by nature, and the hour commute each day has driven him to

graybeard status. Just as the time approached, both Hep and Ski had work related issues pop up that could have compromised or killed the deal. It was a fourth quarter come from behind effort that rescued the original plan of meeting Hep in Belvidere early Friday.

The drive was Ski's initial idea that had been piled on. Rocky would fly into Minneapolis and take "taxi service" home to Illinois. He emailed Ski detailed directions to the airport for pick-up, but that was out of the question. (Good point because Ski had his arrival time an hour later than actual ETA.)

Mr. Hash was bringing his clan. He, too, had thought about teaming up to caravan north, but at the 30 day supersaver mark, he opted for plane tickets out of Midway.

Rocky would fly from Montana to Lindberg Field. He said he was in Seat 1A. We had told him that was the Captain's seat. He did not care. He had got to the airport before the brain dead tourists clogged the NW Disorient check-in line.



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EMAILS SENT TO THE OUTLAW EASTERN ALUMNI:

July 29, 2002: Good News: Business deal is not closing 8/1/02.

Bad News: I am free to meet up with Hep on 8/2/02 at 7 a.m. for the road trip through Jesse Jackson's soul.

Oh, I forgot about that Jury summons potentially ruining the whole shebang

July 30, 2002: I have been driving around a

gray 1996 Chevy Caprice with failing air conditioning for the past two days. Erin Gray was in the shop.

BUT SHE'S BACK.... new front breaks, transmission flush, all filters replaced, tires rotated... she wants to ROAD TRIP bad.... real bad.

July 31, 2002: From what I gather, there may be two construction zones in Cheezeland: in Madison and near Dells. Expect delays.

So are we meeting at Jerry's whenever we get into town? Or should we try to get into trouble (a) women (b) police (c) Blues Brothers chase (d) all of the above.

August 1, 2002: They have closed off Smith Street near the new train station; the turned Colfax at US14 into a cul de sac; tonight, they blocked Colfax at Smith so no one could get to the post office; This is like Grant at VICKSBURG gentlemen!

He had arrived at noon and went to the Mall of America with Prz. The Apple Store no doubt.

Hep and I had arrived at the hotel at noon, three hours before check-in. The cashier said that the rooms were not ready, per se, but gave us keys anyway to rooms on different floors.

We lunched at the adjoining TGIF. Jill, the overfriendly waitress was on her knees asking for our drink order. When she left, I commented on the hyperwaiting; "it's her career."

After lunch we motored to the Prz estate in Champlin. The quiet neighborhood had a Stepford Wife quality to it; almost nuclear wasted. A lone boy in a yellow Tour de France jersey came whipping down the street roller blading. A few moments later we found the

Flash was Jerry's son, Andy. His hockey equipment was drying draped over the deck furniture as we concluded the five cent house tour.

We waited for Prz to bring Rock away from the new Apple gadgets. We surmised that he needed to get an adapter in order to get to the store to spy the new Mac offerings. We were right.

Rock arrived cheerful and techno-savvy after the uneventful flight from Bozeman. We had hours before Hash's family would land so it was cocktails on the deck. The afternoon session cranked as Rock and Prz decided to do the martini thing. Shaken and poured into the appropriate glasses with olives. (Which were taken on the sly by Deb). Life was good as an oasis from the normal routine.



At a certain point in time, we had to take the keys away from Hash.

The deck overlooks a drainage pond covered in duckweed. The green scum was choking the surface and possibly the fish and turtles living in it. Deb had internet surfed and bought some chemical that Hash would have to analyze to determine what it was. She said she needed a sprayer and a boat in order to apply it; two things the transplanted Illinoisans did not have at the homestead.

The neighbors were not around to help. Minnesotans have the

ritual of bolting each weekend to travel north to go to their cabins. "Going to cabin," is a big deal as Friday afternoon husbands quickly mowed the lawns, and the wives packed the SUVs.

Hunting, fishing, boating, hiking, the outdoor life must be more ingrained here than in Cheeseland, that shuts down the entire state during deer season.

Illinois has no mass lemming weekend migration to cabin. We have enough traffic jams as it stands.

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I have these thoughts by the second South African brew of the day (Leinenkugel = Millers=South African Brewing Co.) Discussion was had at finding the headwater of the Mississippi River, but that was several hours north near Lake Itasca, a full day trip.

On the blistering trip up from Belvidere (in five hours) we crossed the Rush, St. Croix, Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. The blur of the water appeared tranquil, slow, low and unoccupied that Friday morning in early August. Suppose that everyone had already bolted to cabin.

Hash's family invaded the house. All the kids have been growing like weeds; it is only a matter of time when they reach eye level and struggle to pry the martinis from our arthritic hands.

The girls asked us where we'd be staying. The last reunion at the Prz household in Omaha, Rocky locked himself out of the house. Deb asked for the reason again, and Rock reluctantly retold the story of bunking with Hepner, being hot and snored



A group photograph at the Jesse Ventura State Capitol in St. Paul

away, so he went outside through the patio doors that locked behind him. It was late, so he decided not to wake anyone, so he got on a patio chair with his walkman and shivered for hours in the 50 degree weather until the early morning when he rang the doorbell for warmth. "So where ya stayin?" the girls asked had meaning.

We arrived back at the hotel late Friday night. Rock got his Powerbook, adapter, iPod charger and modem cord plugged into the outlets around the desk and started to technofuzz. There was no internet local number, so he entered 612 area code and connected

for his email. But he spent a half hour dodging and burning his mind with news groups and Drudge fodder.

When it was time to disconnect, he had the channel surf on high wave until he landed on a weird, badly acted coming of age teen movie on HBO. He was laughing at the premise and the lines, it kept me awake for another half hour after he fell asleep.

Deb and Beth had planned a day trip to the mall with the kids, leaving the Outlaw Eastern Alumni free range for the day. It began with a Blues Brothers road trip east to St. Paul. Two cars, two walkie-talkies. And

road construction, and skimming through lanes.

St. Paul is the state capitol. Some call it now Jesse Ventura's ruins. The entertainment anti-Establishment independent governor dropped out of another term after newspapers began to dig in on his son's partying at the executive mansion, Ozzy Osbourne Lite. The gov, with soaking line item veto pen in hand, slashed the bills before the session ended, including a temporary spending bill. The schools are in a mess; the budget in a tizzy; and the fad of the wrestler turned political power has worn thin, or boring, to the youth vote that

Another Radio Moment



“Rocky to base. Can you see me now? Over??”

“Don’t walk away from me when I am talking to you, you \$%\$Q&&%#!”*



brought him into office.

The Capitol looks like the White House with a small dome on top. The small rotunda lead to three main chambers for the house, senate and Supreme Court (where former Viking-Bear Alan Page is a justice).

There is a small bust of HHH in a hallway.

Besides Humphrey, the portraits of the governors were cereal barons like Pillsbury, who had short tenures in office. It was probably term limits of the best kind; a public servant going back to his private business.

Before leaving the Capitol, the cigar stand had a sign in book and map. There was a pushpin on Antarctica. It must have been the guy wearing the tux.

As we were

about to leave, a bust of William Windom guarded the doorway. Windom? Wasn’t he an actor?

The dark skies let loose with giant thunderbolts that hit the St. Paul skyline. The roar of thunder and the pouring rain stopped us under the roof. The cars were 200 yards down the slippery marble steps and parkway. Too far to get soaked. Hash is peering out of the archway, we tell him to go get the car to shuttle us. Another bolt hits nearby. “Smoking Shoes” is born.

We plan to go downtown toward the Xcel Center where the hockey Wild plays for food and beverage. The rain relents after a short while as violently as it began, and the churns of turns of the caravan be-

gins anew.

Prz and Hep in the lead car while Rock attempts to direct Hash in the rental car following closely behind.

We head toward an area beyond the convention center where old neighborhood has begun to turn back to yuppie-retro. We find a parking place a block from the destination and wave the other car by with the words “find a parking

place.” Parking is not as bad as Wrigleyville, but the challenge was still there. A few minutes later, they call, they are parked next to a place called Patrick McGovern’s. “Good, stay there,” commands Jerry. Its our destina-

tion. We walk up and they are looking the other way, Jerry yells, “the other way!” into



the talkie. They lucked out and parked next to the front door.

So we enter an Irish pub in a building built in the late 1890s as a warehouse/factory. We forge into the third room, a quiet area with a large round table.

Another jovial young waitress bounced into the side room for our drink orders. They have a separate drink menu, which include local concoctions like the “Stiff Woody.” It was typical trendy college town type bar. Everyone got a beer, including the local Summit brew.

Large lunch platters returned later, with mass quantum of food. The ESPN forced high school rally like football hall of fame induction ceremony was on the box, sans sound. Which is just as well since the noise of the consumption feast would have drowned it out.

Hep and I saw two domed churches as we rode into town, mirror images in St. Paul and in Minneapolis. As we left McGovern’s, the basilica was down the block on top of a hill. It was clearly visible and apparently close. We decided to walk it. We went down the street, until it dead-ended at the expressway. The church was across the roadway, and we turned the block and found the stairs to the pedway near the hospital.

There were many steps on the pedway. Hundreds. My car was just down the block, so a discussion was had about driving. Prz decided to use the stairs. The vehicles would meet him there.

Hep and I went another block down, and crossed to turn on the first street. It turned into a curvy driveway that cut back on the bluff, and lead away from the destination.

Once we found a main street, we were riding in a historic mansion district. After parallel parking a block away, we walked to the church as a wedding party exited from a side door.

But the other car was not in sight. They got themselves turned around. From the high ground, overlooking by 500 feet the downtown, we waited and waited until the rental burrowed itself up the steep slope and squealing sidewalls into the parking lot.

We were between thunderstorms as we entered the cathedral that was under reconstruction. Rocky was doing the digital camera. Instant results.

Hep was impressed by the grandness of the 3000 seat pews and ornament. I said we could get him the blueprints for his Kewanee rural church addition, if needed.

Next, we spun around toward the river and the old mill district. A new Hyatt tucked in an old warehouse was a half-block from the renovation challenged Stone Arch Bridge Park riverfront plaza.

The historic buildings were being gutted for housing and commercial redevelopment, including a Gold Medal Flour grain silo annex.

The river falls here, where a man-made lock lifts barge traffic to the upper Mississippi. The redevelopment includes the river banks, where on the brick water discharge tunnels was written a possible album cover: “You’re Boring As Sh*t”

Under threatening skies, we left the city religious icon for Minneapolis and its newest icon. Jerry said we had to go by the new statue.

With walkie talkies crackling in the electric storm static, we

headed west. Ski got well ahead of the rental pursuit vehicle. Jerry was looking for road landmarks for the exit.

The cars were back in tantrum after leaving the expressway. But the doom would return with the advent of one-way streets.

Jerry gave navigation commands as we pushed block by block down the heart of the city. We went ahead, and made two called right hand turns and parked on 7th Ave.

We parked, fed the meter again, and waited for Hash to pull up. We waited. And waited. We were on the horn. Car 54 where are you? Finally, Hash is on the line, they missed the two easy turns and were going past 2nd.

A few minutes later, Hash’s mobile communication said he was in the opposite direction, beyond 12th Avenue. Jerry told them the rendezvous point on Nicolette Mall which was two blocks from our location across from the WCCO radio station.

We went to the statue, remarked on how odd it looked, and waited. And waited.

We walked down toward their last reported spot, only to find the radio chatter that they were 15 blocks in the other direction. We head back to the statue. The batteries were going bad. People were losing their grip.

Finally, Hash comes dashing around a city bus in a funk. Rock is behind, cursing a blue streak a city block away.

They reached

the Mary Tyler Moore statue, donated by Nick at Nite, outside the Marshall Field's store. It lead to another volley of obscenities.

It was getting late, so we broke into our own rides. We get back to our car. A patrol car was parked one up, and our meter was flashing toward EXPIRED. We fired and fled for Champlin, leaving radio silence in our

wake.

Rocky geared up the Powerbook to display his pictures for the Mall crowd. He put his hand to edit the graffiti from young eyes; but marveled the crowd with stitching scenes into panoramas by software manipulation.

A late steak dinner was in the works until it began to monsoon for the fourth time that day. It let up for a

brief instance, and Jerry donned his New England whaler rain slicker, and proceeded to light the Weber on the soaked deck.

Afterward, Jerry remarked to our historian whether he had seen the live broadcast footage of the JFK assassination. We had not.

So for the next three hours, the black and white footage of NBC's broadcast was



seen in the living room. It was as dreary as the evening sky. Long lost broadcasters showed calm professionalism in closet rooms, live telephone calls from Dallas, and shuffling of papers. Technological broadcast fumbles were handled with ease and explanation.

It was the long lost blueprint of live television reporting an event without gatekeeping. But today's news-cable readers don't have the professional instincts to confirm a report (the death) until is confirmed by first hand source.

Hep was missing for 90 minutes after dinner. No one noticed until about the 89th minute. He could have had an Elvis inquest in the bathroom or gone catatonic in the basement, but we failed to notice his absence. The three hours of live footage was too engrossing.

Hepner popped in at 11:30 p.m. and said he was ready to go. He had been reading in the basement, probably Hash's recommendation, August, 1914, by that long named Russian novelist.

So we returned

to the hotel. Hep keycarded us in the front doors, and he headed off to his own room.

Rocky and I went upstairs to 207. My key did not work. Maybe it got wet, soaked or erased by the numbing driving today. Rocky put in his keycard. No response at all.

Back downstairs we went to the desk. No one was at the desk. There was no bell to ring.

Rocky shouted a few times. Finally, a guy walked out of the office, Midnight Eric, who was told the keys did not work. Huh? he shrugged. He put the cards through the machine, and it registered we were not booked in the hotel. Ever.

Telling him of his absurd observation, he got on the computer and logged in Ski's name. And the confirmation and booking came to the screen, including the second night.

It was strange he said that the card was not activated for two nights when we checked in.

Technology bit

us in the hand, then rescued us a few moments later. If the computer was down, we'd be sleeping in the lobby or drowning someone in the pool.

At checkout the next morning, the young woman behind the desk asked if everything was okay. I had no ill will to tell her of her card mistake. For good reason, since on the bill, Rocky's two evenings surfing came up as long distance calls (to another area code). However, she winked and said that she thought the charges were wrong and she would credit them off the bill.

We did not argue. Another \$20 in the gas tank, gratis.

On Sunday, brunch was served, both in foodstuff and in technofile. We learned that in season, most residents belong to the religion of Minnesota Orthodox (i.e. Sunday morning youth hockey practice.)

Afterward, Rocky gave Prz an impromptu lesson in Photopaint. Again, he weekend went digital tech.

In showing how

to retouch a picture, Jerry had an old scanned photo of his kids. On Lara's t-shirt he typed on "I Love My Brother." When Lara came by and saw the change to her clothes, she screamed "no way!"

If you have some time, digital photography and graphic manipulation is easy and fun.

Rocky went surfing on the broadband to show us a new favorite site or two, including a game called "Fluff the Kitty," a simulation of putting a kitten through a laundry wash cycle at the laundromat.

Of the game of Mumblypeg, with a knife stabbing at your fingers-- and cutting to a quick and bloody end. Not for children, but cool technology direct from the internet.

But the highlight of Sunday was Andy's launch command. He lit off three rockets in the neighborhood park, only after his dad had to walk back to the house to get proper batteries, and returning in an SUV with a showered Mr. Hash. The first rocket glided gently far away and over a fence

for a home run.

The quiet of the neighborhood was by the burst of each rocket launch, but no one was around to care, see or complain. All at cabin, ya know.

We were several hours behind schedule when we made our final farewells. Doppler radar images showed the State of Wisconsin under one massive rain cloud. Or path would be the wet and slippery slope home.

No time to refuel. The urgency was to get to the state border and outrun the massive black as hell thunderclouds forming over Jerry's deck.

Hep took the shotgun seat, and Rocky buffaloeed himself into the back seat. During the drive, it seemed like he was wrestling with a camel as he shifted his weight from side to side. At one point, during the first downpour, there was a severe rattle on the passenger side. The passengers thought that the car was breaking apart at the seams but I let up on the accelerator slightly.

The tires were Lincoln head penny sound, but original is-

sue. When the rain pelted more, Rock burst out, "Ski, you need new wipers!" So it looked like you were blading off salad oil from the windshield; I got the front brakes repaired last week, okay? Did the Bluesmobile have certified safety gear? My last vehicle, Vanna "China" White was driven for more than a year without any brakes. I rest my case.

I drained the gas gauge to the flashing panic light before pulling off into a rural community gas pit. The guys went inside to self-refuel with the typical modern convenient mart junk food and high priced soda selections.

I made a tour around the car to see if anything was falling off, the tire sidewalls ripping apart like someone in a Predator movie, or whether some road kill was clinging to the undercarriage. A pilot needs to know these things. Inspection revealed none of the vestiges of the paranormal. The air was still hot and humid; it was only a matter of time for some more fierce rain dancing at 80 mph.

Traffic was get-

ting heavier the farther south we drove. But it was still moving, even in the light drizzle.

Until it hit a dead deer stop north of Madison. These idiots must have got brain dead at the orange signage of a "detour" for a closed off-ramp five miles ahead.

One lane, dead stop. Cross over into moving lane. Dead stop, old lane crawls forward. For the first time, the radio is turned on for traffic information.

It was about as helpful as the coed driving her car with the back bumper sticker "Earl's in the Trunk."

We were still caught in the Wisconsin plate crowd. The slow Illinois weekend lake warriors were farther south clogging the border.

On the horizon, it looked like pelting downpours. The northbound lanes looked freshly drenched. But we were dry as we staggered forward toward the large double rainbows that arched across the entire field of vision.

At the last detour sign, suddenly the traffic was gone like a mirage. It was full

speed until we backrammed the storm.

Rocky said he knew of a short-cut near Janesville. But he was looking for a landmark, apparently forgetting the exit route. After a double take, we were off onto U.S. Route 14, the lowly northwestern step sister of old Route 66.

The wind and rain picked up into a fury as the road began to wind through dairy farm fields. "Ski, you need new wipers!" was heard a few more times. During a violent stretch of road, the car cellphone went off--startling the driver and gunner. I answered; it was Hep's wife. We were way behind schedule and not in Illinois, yet.

We found that Rock knew this backdoor route from high school. It suddenly clicked in: this was one the bloody border high school drinking routes!! We would be running toward the Belvidere Class of Ott Alcohol in zero visibility.

But with as much sweat as residue on the hood, we pulled into Belvidere as the rain and trip wound down to a trickle.