

Days 39-44

Took off from Madison mid Monday morning, after getting my stuff repacked into Cobra configuration following two weeks of dissolution into disorganized house and Camry piles. The weather was perfect; blue sky with some puffy white clouds, in the 70s during the morning and evening, into the 80s mid-day. This would continue for four days, before getting slightly cooler. One couldn't ask for better travelling weather, especially this time of year. Headed northwest towards my friend Rick's place in Hatton, North Dakota.

Around lunch time, approached the town of Sparta, WI, and saw billboards advertising it as "The Bicycling Capital of America". Huh?-never heard of it. Also saw signs to "The Deke Slayton Museum", in reference to the local boy longtime head of NASA's astronaut corps, so headed there. The latter was located on the second floor of the county museum. The curator explained the bicycling connection as a function of Sparta being the first place in America to convert former railroad beds into bicycle paths. However, it turns out that there's some "controversy" to the claim, as in California they had converted old railroad beds to horse paths prior to Sparta's conversion, but those horse paths didn't get modified into bicycle paths until after Sparta's were in place. Oh, the humanity! The helpful curator suggested that I would enjoy the county museum, so I coughed up the requisite 3\$. Several exhibits were kind of cool. One local gentleman had gotten interested in 3D photography in the 50's, and they had set up a rotating drum with 5 sets of stereo viewfinders on each row, with the drum containing about 5 rows around the drum's circumference. This was just like those plastic viewfinders we had back in the 60s, where you could buy different discs containing various types of 3D scenes. Anyway, this gentleman took a lot of real life pictures-guys welding, families sitting around Christmas trees and fireplaces, vacations.....It was just interesting to see these long ago 'slices of life', and how much has changed-everything seems so primitive then. Another exhibit had a wall representing a map of the county, with a number of 8 ½ x 11 pictures of various towns from up to 100 years ago. If you pivoted up the top picture, you'd see the same scene in modern times. Lots of change going on there!

The Bicycle/Deke Slayton museum upstairs was interesting in that it focused primarily on just one astronaut, instead of trying to skim over all of them. He was a pretty accomplished fellow and was a test pilot in the days where they got to fly numerous new machines (as in "The Right Stuff"). I did find a WWII model display that had a several errors in the identifying placards. I called the young lady at the info desk over to show her. She assured me that the donator of the models was very specific about the labeling, and I assured her that something was lost in translation and suggested she contact said donator to get his concurrence with my corrections. Fixing the world one little bit at a time.

At my request for input, the downstairs curator recommended that I stroll over to "Ginny's Cupboard" café for lunch, by way of a covered wooden bridge walkway. Had a sandwich on freshly homemade bread, along with a cup of homemade tomato bisque soup. Very tasty food and homey environment. As I was walking back to my car, noticed that I had a PM from forum member Mike (Mhcobra), who had read my prior evening's update to my travel thread, and figured I might need a place to stay in between Madison and Hatton. I called him to make sure it was OK, and was all set to stay at his place in Cold Spring Minnesota. Sweet! Following the curator's suggestion (once again-he hadn't steered me wrong yet), headed directly west to cross the Mississippi at La Crosse to pick up route 61 north running alongside the river up to Minneapolis. This was a fairly scenic road, although it had some slow speed limits in the towns.

There was a sign near Wabasha MN advertising "The National Eagle Center", so diverted off the highway to check it out. The town turned out to be in the midst of a massive road tear-up/repair program, and my fillings were loose by time I pulled up to the Eagle Center, situated right on the banks of the Mississippi (where a huge barge was just going by). I walked into the museum to find out that the entry fee was 8\$. Perhaps because I was slightly irritated by the horrid roads in town, and the slow speed limits I'd just experienced, but I just didn't feel like coughing up another fee. I'm a taxpayer, aren't I? So, I asked the woman at the desk how they got appointed to be "The National Eagle Center". She informed me that they just gave themselves that name, and are a non-profit organization without any government affiliation. I guess that "The National Motorcycle Museum" was the same type of thing. Oh, so that's how it works. Ok, as of this writing, I am now "The National Tour de USA Exploration Center-Mobile unit". Operators are standing by in anticipation of a rush of donations.

Anyhow, had to endure a rush hour/construction mother of all traffic jams getting through Minneapolis-St. Paul, before settling into a high speed cruise on into Cold Spring. Mike lives in a really nice tree covered bedroom community neighborhood. More importantly, he has a large two car garage with attached work room. He and his twin sons do a lot of RC flying, as well as snowmobiling, and there are various examples of different scale models and sleds all over the place, along with the associated tools and equipment. Mike's Mk 3 is screaming yellow, beautifully finished, fast, and solid as a rock (absolutely no rattles or things shaking that shouldn't). He took me for a great drive out in the country to a nice bar & grill on a lake, where we had some finger licking good food and beverage. Upon our arrival back at the ranch, Mike's wife Val showed up, having been out late doing rehearsals for a community play that she's directing. We looked at the cars, had a nice chat, and then hit the sack. Brief chat over coffee in the morning, then we all hit the road to our respective assignments (mine was the best). It was quite nice to experience a slice of normal clean civilization after two weeks in Wisconsin traipsing around all over the place, when not ensconced in my brother's bachelor pad (you have no idea-trust me). Thanks Mike and Val! Oh, and by the way, Mike has these sweet little spring loaded rods which gently hold the doors open during ingress and egress. No more banging your knees against them to keep the doors out of your way. Mike's going to talk to his buddy who designed them to get permission to post descriptions and pics. If you don't see it on the forum soon, start blasting him with PMs until we bring him to his knees and get him to do it. This is once again proof that no good deed goes unpunished! LOL.

Decided to head north before heading west in order to avoid the interstate somewhat. Stopped in Little Falls to see the Charles Lindbergh State Park (nice) and museum (closed until the weekend), and then checked out the dam in town. Here the Mighty Mississippi is only about 100 yards wide (and is fully spanned by the low dam), whereas in other spots it's a mile wide. Further down the road, stopped at the military museum located on Camp Ripley and did the tour. Later on, stopped to take a look at Brainerd International Raceway, but nothing was going on other than set up for the forthcoming weekend's RV show. Literally hundreds of RVs being put on display, including multiples of the same model. Why not? No use leaving them on the lot where it is unlikely that anyone is buying them due to the economy. Must be a buyer's market.

Upon entering North Dakota, instant change. Flat as a pancake and farming on a heretofore unseen industrial scale, although many are privately owned. 75 mph speed limits on straight as an arrow roads in good condition, with horizon-to-horizon views of waving corn stalks and massive collections of humungous silos. By the way, as one drives around the country you can see the evolution of silo

technology. Early silos are tall concrete/rebar cylinders with hemispherical tops. These were superseded by predominantly navy blue metal cylinders with barely conical white tops. The current tech appears to be corrugated aluminum cylinders of varying scale, but are far wider and squatter than previous types. Back to the driving-it is such a pleasure to be able to cruise at a sustained 80-85 mph (and not be passing anyone). Given my Tremec 3650 gearbox's high 5th gear and 3.55 rear end, it's only at this speed that the engine enters its sweet spot, purring rather than rumbling.

Spent a day and a half in Rick's tiny little town of Hatton (population 800). We had dinner at his local diner hang-out the first night, and he BBQ'd a mean set of NY strip steaks the next, with corn on the cob and baked beans. Total yum. While he was at work, did my morning jog around the neighborhood before doing a bunch of errands in town. While I idled around the place going to lunch, the tiny non-super market, the post office, the Laundromat, and a gas station for a window clean and fill up, I noticed that I was being stalked by a white pickup. When I pulled up to the bank, he parked up next to me to tell me how cool the car was, like some kind of apparition in this desert of pickup country. After our 15 minute conversation during which he was shocked at how reasonably cheaply you can put a car together if you're somewhat frugal (and stay off the forums!), I'm pretty sure he'll be placing an order with Factory Five, and he and his son plan on building it (at the plant, along with fellow workers during down time) during next winter's slow time at the area bean processing plant. What a friendly, folksy, cheap, neighborly place to live this town is. Everyone knows everybody-this is basically Mayberry, version 2013.

Said my goodbye to Rick on Thursday morning, and headed off under absolutely perfect driving conditions. Cloudless blue skies and temps in the 70s. Later on, puffy white clouds appeared to give just the right level of relief from the sun. Spent all day, whether on interstate or back roads, cruising at the aforementioned 80-85 mph, with occasional blasts over 100 mph out in the middle of nowhere. By the way, if you live in a city and are getting tired of crowds, come to the Dakotas. Trust me, they've got room for you! Stopped in Cooperstown to see a minuteman strategic missile silo site and took a subterranean tour of the nearby local launch control center, both decommissioned as a consequence of the START treaty with the Soviet Union. Pretty fascinating, and takes your breath away given how much money and effort were expended on deterrence during the cold war. They built ginormous complicated stuff in huge quantities over just a few years for billions; which now days would take decades to complete for trillions.

Stopped in Jamestown to see "The National Buffalo Museum" (same "National" deal), the world famous albino buffalo out in the field, and got a photo op under the world's biggest model of a buffalo. Had to get management authorization to drive the car out on the sidewalk to where the big buffalo is, and in so doing ended up causing an octogenarian using a walker to scurry off into the dirt. Wasn't my doing, but her own panicky behavior. Nevertheless, her eyes lit up and she smiled and waved as I passed her and then stood happily by waiting while the manager took my pic. Went further down the road, crossing the Missouri River, to see "Salem Sue", the world's largest model cow, in New Salem ND, hometown of forum member Garry Bopp (who lives in Atlanta now). Shouldn't Sue be "The National Museum of Large Cow" or something? Approaching New Salem on the scenic byway recommended by Garry, finally started to see some hills (first in ND). The countryside actually looked a little like the central California coast, being slightly arid compared to the rest of the state that I'd seen. Based on a recommendation received from some folks at the Salem Sue parking lot, headed down interstate 94 for a bit before cutting south on the "Enchanted Highway". This was a virtually empty two lane (taken at speed) with periodic roadside large metal sculptures. Pretty neat.

After that, headed south into SD via back roads and onto the rolling route 85 where sizeable hills started to appear and cattle were grazing all over the place. Settled for the night in the one horse town of Buffalo, SD in a cheap seedy motel fully occupied by petroleum industry workers and their work trucks. Feigned discomfort over the cheap room's asking price, and inquired about local campsites. Immediate 10\$ discount. Once again, SCHWING!

Morning brought another beautiful blue sky with white puffy clouds, albeit down into the high 60s. Headed off to the Black Hills via empty route 85 for some mountains and twisty roads. As I approached Spearfish, saw a Ford dealership and decided to get my oil changed, just to be on the safe side. They gave me a great discount and let me drive the car onto the lift. I came back into the bay as they were finishing up and found a technician checking my tire pressure and thinking they were low, raising them to 35 psi. Whoa nelly! Had them return the pressures to the 25 psi that I've been running on this trip.

Drove through the very sweet Spearfish Canyon Highway, which is similar to a lot of California canyon roads. The speed limit is a low 35 mph, and there were lots of pickups and Buicks that seemed to have a hard time maintaining even that. Eventually, I started passing all the slow pokers, but resisted resorting to motorcycle tactics wherein double solid lines are only a suggestion. Made my way into Deadwood, where I stopped for a walk and lunch. Total tourist town. No doubt fun for the kids, but like several of the towns I was about to see, festooned with signage and billboards pushing fake this and simulated that. Not my cup of tea. Then headed off to Sturgis, where they're setting up for this weekend's motorcycle event. Already, Harleys were there in abundance and there are more T-shirt and other cruiser paraphernalia booths being set up than grains of sand on a beach. Again, not my cup of tea.

Got out of there ASAP and headed to the Ellsworth AFB Air and Space Museum outside of Rapid City. This is mostly located outdoors, with an excellent collection of WWII to 1970s fighters, bombers, and transports. Easy to stroll around in, and concisely and informatively labeled.

Decided to head for Mt. Rushmore while the light was still good, by way of some back roads before joining the main drag. As I got closer, had to pass through Keystone. Same as the other towns-every cubic inch filled with hotels and attractions (?) and signage. Just plain "wow" is all I can say. Perhaps it's just that after several weeks in the bucolic hinterlands of Michigan, Kansas, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota; I just wasn't ready to face ugly commercialism and the associated teeming masses. Out of Keystone it all got better in the approach to and aftermath of Mt. Rushmore. The monument is awesome and inspiring, and located in a beautiful setting. The scale and artistry are just amazing.

Leaving the monument, drove a wonderfully curvy and mountainous road to the Crazy Horse monument under construction. Decided not to pay yet another fee to enter the actual park, but a good view was available from the road. Due to the dropping temperatures as the sun was going down, ended up in Custer SD at the cheapest hotel in town, getting a further discount with my AAA card. Strolled downtown for a late spaghetti dinner, then watched a very kid friendly outdoor country music concert/dance, where lots of children were dancing while wearing those multihued fluorescent light pipes.

Got up early and spent the morning driving the several mountain loops in the area (just wonderful!) before returning to Custer for a late breakfast, before setting off for Devil's Tower. It appeared a parade was just breaking up as the street side was packed with an audience, many sitting on beach chairs. If I

could have a nickel for every kid or adult who pointed at me and nudged their neighbor as I passed, I could retire. Oh wait a minute, I already did. Turns out there was a car show going on as part of the festivities. Drove up to it, but passed on paying 20\$ to park inside a police taped off area, so parked just outside it for free and walked in to take a look. Saw a couple of cobras there. One was Chevy powered and had a 12" decal on the nose to make sure we knew it (hissssss). The other was a sweet Mk 3.1 with a nicely done stained wooden dash and tunnel top. Talked to the owner, a Custer resident, and found out he's forum member Chuck Sloggett, and has a 347 with a T-5 putting out in the mid 400s bhp. He told me that he had posted earlier on my thread, which I just looked up and found. Damn-a potential mooching opportunity lost!

Headed off to Devil's Tower under dark skies, caused by a narrow tendril of cloud front that exactly chased the road I was traveling, ultimately letting loose a few drops just before I escaped out into the clear sky and sunshine. Beautiful sky and roads for the last 70 miles to the park. This appears to be alfalfa country, as there were thousands of the modern rolled bales stacked or just sitting on the land. The Devil's Tower monument is the one that was featured in Spielberg's "Close Encounters of the Third Kind", and is magnificent in real life. After a short stay, headed off in the direction of Grand Teton National Park, the next stop on my itinerary and a two day trip. After an hour or so, the sky turned leaden to the south and my route skirted the edge of the front which was clearly dumping rain on large areas. Eventually, had to turn south into a region where the overcast extended as far as the eye could see. After about a half hour of driving through virtually empty land, occupied by the occasional arid ranch, huge pits in the ground where stuff had been dug up, or lonely oil wells, the wind started howling and the rain started falling. Fortunately, a gas station with portico appeared, and I was able to pull under it (well actually about 10 feet to the leeward side of it under the dry spot, given the high wind level and slanting rain) and put my rain jacket on and apply a fresh coat of Rain-x. Decided to go a final 100 miles for the day, aiming at Casper Wyoming. At that point the skies really opened up, and had 60 miles of horrific rain and wind. The wind wings and sun visor earned their keep on this leg, as they saved me from being totally doused by the spray blast emitted by huge trucks passing from the opposite direction. When the rain stopped about 40 miles from Casper, the car was completely filthy from mud spray and other detritus blasted off the road by these behemoths. Slightly sodden and tired and just a little cool, found the cheapest hotel on Expedia and showed up at the desk. The asking price was significantly higher at the hotel, so had to use my iPhone to book it on Expedia, and after about 10 minutes the reservation showed up at the desk. Hooray for technology!

Have accrued about 7000 miles on the Cobra so far this trip, and about another 1000 miles in the Camry roaming around Wisconsin. Still not nearly halfway. Yikes!! Tomorrow the weather is supposed to be thunderstorms on the way towards and into Grand Teton National Park. Will probably be a challenging couple of days. I'll let you know the next time. Until then.....