

Article #1

Cruising Main Street by Highway 52

A road trip from the banks of the Mississippi to the Smoky Mountains, cutting through northern Tennessee, along the Kentucky border. That is a trip through the conservative US Bible Belt, by way of Main Street.

Text and photography: Paul Robert

The two lane road leading through Tennessee from west to east is first called Highway 22, and then Highway 52; roughly 700 kms of two way road through a landscape of splendid lakes where eagles hover, and wildlife parks full of wild turkeys, deer and even bison, as well as meadows with cows and tobacco fields. Upcoming traffic is rare, and overtaking is regarded a kind of extreme sport. Nobody overtakes. Almost everybody adheres to the somniferous speed limits of 45, 50 or 55 mph.

It is late summer. The sky is gray rather than blue. Rain does not limit itself to threatening. The forests are about to explode into autumn. Autumn in the Smoky Mountains is like cherry blossom in Japan. From all over the country people go there to enjoy the colors.

The road has rhythm. Forests, farms, villages, farms, forests. B.B. King and Stevie Ray Vaughn are blasting from the speakers. I am steering with a happy grin on my face.

But there are dissonants. On highway crossings outside the towns uniform business districts are glued to the tarmac: gas stations, junk food restaurants, a Wal-Mart. They are identical, anywhere in the USA, from New York to LA. 'They pave paradise and put up a parking lot,' Joni Mitchell sang some 40 odd years ago. She had no idea how right she was going to be.

Sometimes my highway leads straight through an old village and temporarily turns into Main Street, the decaying heart of American society. Main Street, that's where life used to be. That's where the hardware store was, the movie theatre, the drugstore. At Gibson's Cafe, on the deserted village square of Lafayette (pronounced Lah-FAY-yet), they have a poster on the wall, showing the square in the forties: cars parked double, pedestrians, full shops. Miles Gibson, the owner looks at it somewhat melancholic: 'It's never going to be like that again, but we try.'

There are exceptions. There is something called the national Main Street Program, producing guidelines for the restoration of historic downtown areas. Local authorities and companies need to finance it themselves. In Union City (pop. 10,000) many shop fronts were fixed up or restored. But this is not a sustainable recovery. Many shops are part of

the leisure economy: antiques, florists, home decorations. No daily essentials. Several shops are for sale. One of the shopkeepers sounds grim. If he manages to sell his shop, he says, "there'll be someone else to try for a year or two."

The only industry here that seems to know of no crisis, recession or bad luck is religion. I'm passing through Westmoreland, a small farm village with the inevitable chains along the highway. A local grocery survives on main street. Most other shops are closed. But three churches seem to be in full swing. Like the memorial for those fallen in a whole chain of wars (from WWI to Afghanistan) they are spic and span.

As I'm zapping in my hotel room that evening, there's a documentary on local television about exorcism. The priest says that a demon has come from the Mississippi River and has taken possession of a little girl. He's serious. The poor child. This fits the image of hundreds of churches and haunted forests, houses and caves I have seen along the way.

At Dale Hollow Lake, a splendid natural resort on the Kentucky border, I'm invited to come to Byrdstown in the evening. It is Friday evening, and that means live bluegrass music at the Dixie Cafe, the ultimate white farm music with fiddles, banjo's and guitars. "It starts at 5:30. I'll keep you a seat." The Bilbreys are playing tonight, from Cookeville.

Byrdstown is on the crossing of two country roads. Young and old people from all around are seated at long tables. The light is fluorescent. "We all have identical DNA", an elderly lady jokes. There are burgers, chops and Coke on the table. Alcohol is prohibited.

The Bilbreys play cheerful classics, and the folks sing along. Between songs they make jokes. Sour remarks about Obama. They sing an anti-abortion song. I'm the only one not applauding in silent protest. At 8 pm sharp it is over. It is pitch dark outside. This place has no street lights. The cafe is empty soon. Bedtime.

The next morning I share my experience with Barbara Stagg, director of the Historic Rugby Foundation. She laughs. "This area is incredibly conservative, mixed with the Appalachian culture." An absolute faith in God, ghosts and magic are part of the people in this mountainous area, the hillbillies. "Rugby is a liberal island in this region", says Stagg. This must have been where the token Obama votes came from.

Rugby is a picturesque Victorian village in the foothills. Highway 52 cuts straight through. The village was established around 1880 by the British writer and Christian-socialist Thomas Hughes (*Tom Brown's School Days*), who envisioned a utopian society here for the younger siblings of British nobility. The colony dwindled, but Barbara Stagg's foundation promoted restoration and revival. Descendants of the original settlers are hard to find, but the local liberal elite feels at home here. Rugby is blooming again, with a population of 80 living in restored Victorian houses as well as new dwellings built on original designs. The village library, opened in 1882, boasts its original collection of 6,000 books.

When Stagg and I are talking in the community center, after our tour, an excited local employee comes running in, to report that someone just took a picture of a ghost in the library. "I just removed the shutters for this gentleman to take pictures, so it must have just been a spot of light", says Stagg as she points at me, but her employee is certain: "It really is a ghost, with arms spread." Stagg smiles and sighs as we shake hands. "That's what I meant. I'd better go and have a look."

A couple of miles down the road Highway 52 comes to an end at a T-crossing. I turn right and head further south.

Article #2

Life is a highway

Crossing Tennessee

In seven days, travel writer Paul Robert crossed Tennessee in the southern USA. He followed Highways 22 and 52 from the Mississippi in the west to the Appalachians in the east. A diary.

Monday

"See that tree? There's about 15 of 'em in there," says the man in overalls who just scooped a bucket of bait from a huge container. It is early morning. I'm at the Blue Bank Resort on the banks of Reelfoot Lake, a stone's throw from the Mississippi. I asked him where I could find eagles.

The lake, a remnant of a gigantic earthquake that changed the course of the Mississippi in 1812, is a park and reservation for America's national bird. People come here to watch birds and catch fish. The lake is full of catfish and other strong fighters.

I had in fact noticed the big birds in the tall tree on the banks, but I could hardly imagine them to actually be eagles. At home people drive hundreds of kilometers to watch that one single pair on the Oostvaardersplassen. A bit later, as I'm driving along the lake on Highway 22, I see eagles flying everywhere. There are even a couple by the side of the road. Mistake. When I pull up for a closer look, they turn out to be vultures with a dead raccoon.

The only place where I don't see birds is in the swamp, further down. I follow the boardwalk into the swamp to look at the cypress trees, odd trees growing in the water. The roots have knees above the water. The only flying things here are mosquitos.

Tuesday

The two lane highway meanders through the hills of northern Tennessee. Forests, meadows, tobacco fields. We pass villages with proud names: Paris, Dresden. These are the classic villages built around a village square with a courthouse and police station. Then there's Main Street, with the church and shops. But village life is under threat. Chain stores and restaurants have moved daily life to cheap places on the edge of town. But in many villages the locals and local shop keepers work hard to revive Main Street. The typical old building with their straight fronts are being restored and open up again. This is a part of the USA where European tourists are rare. Every time we talk to people,

we are met with surprise. "What on earth are you doing here?" And we give them the same answer every time. "We're looking for the real America." They get that.

That evening we stay at the Fishtail Lodge on Kentucky Lake. Hospitality is all around. The owner's father (94) shows us his collection of antique cars. Beautiful man. Beautiful cars. The owner sends us across the highway to the local pizza joint. Karaoke tonight. Pizza, Coke and karaoke under fluorescent lights.

Wednesday

Between the Tennessee River and the Cumberland River is the Land Between the Lakes, a huge park. I never realized that there were so many parks in America. Everybody knows Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, but there is a network of hundreds of parks around the country. The Land Between the Lakes is a park of wild turkeys, eagles, deer, moose and even bison, kept in their own fenced off area you can drive a car through, like a safari park.

Forest trails lead to splendid vistas on the rivers. There are white herons on the water. At the end of a trail we find an old cemetery between the trees. Graves date back to the 19th Century. Heading back toward the main road wild turkeys hurry away from us. Nice.

In the north, the park leads into Kentucky. We end up at Patti's Place, a wannabe pioneer village with its own wedding chapel, restaurants and shops. Decorated to the extreme, we seem to have dinner in a Christmas tree. The food is excellent. That is one of the surprises of this trip. We had planned to steer clear of chain restaurants and junk food and to eat only at privately owned diners and restaurants. There is only one single disappointment.

Thursday

At Gibson's Cafe on Lafayette's village square it is time for an all-American burger. It's a burger that makes us happy. Real bread, real meat and everything on it and with it. Miles Gibson, the owner, is from Florida. He came to this northern Tennessee village to start a new life. "I was totally fed up with the city," he says.

In different places we meet other people like him, an antiques dealer, an estate agent, hotel owner, wine farmer and organic farmer who left the city for Tennessee country. They come from San Francisco, Washington, New York. Dennis (from New York) and Debra (from Oklahoma) Emery settled in Red Boiling Springs, a town that has five hot springs bubbling from the hills. They purchased a 1920s hotel. It is a beautiful wooden building with porches at the front. The bathroom has its original tubs on legs. This is the old spa life. At night, holding a glass of wine in a rocking bench on the porch, we wonder what things were like here, 80 years ago. They can't have been much different.

Friday

We spend the day on Dale Hollow, a lake on the Kentucky border. You can rent houseboats here for your vacation. Just sail around this raggedly shaped lake in the mountains, catch fish and barbecue them. That's living.

We are invited to come to Byrdstown that evening. On Fridays they've got live bluegrass music at the Dixie Cafe. We can't miss that. Byrdstown is several miles off the highway on the crossing of two country roads. It is a true hamlet. No street lights. The Dixie Cafe is full in the late afternoon. It is 5:30. Evening starts early here. The guests from the Netherlands are extensively greeted. Foreigners don't come by here every day.

The Brimleys are on stage. Bluegrass is the traditional music of white farmers in this area. Mandolins, banjos and guitars. The band is excellent. People sing along, but the atmosphere never turns overly cheerful. Maybe that's because they don't serve beer in this cafe. Some parts of Tennessee are still completely dry. At 8 pm sharp the music is over. Night starts early also. In pitch dark night we find our way back to our cabin on Dale Hollow.

Saturday

There's a date on the glass door in golden decals: Oct. 5, 1882. Behind the door is the library of Rugby, with a collection of 6,000 19th Century books. The wooden library building is the heart of Rugby, a village of 80 people (on weekends). It was established at the time by British author Thomas Hughes who wished to start a utopian society for the young English nobility in Tennessee's wild east. The village and its Victorian, wooden houses, were kept, with its church and library.

This unique, historic village is the last town Highway 52 cuts in two. "A new road has been built that leads around the town", says Barbara Stagg, director of the foundation now controlling the village. Once that road is open, only people who really need to be here will come driving through the forest. We stay for lunch in this odd cultural oasis in the woods. After lunch we drive on to the end of Highway 52. From here, roads go further up into the mountains, to the Appalachians on the border with North Carolina, and to the Smoky Mountains. The overwhelming autumn colors are a magnet for tourists from all over the USA. But tourists usually take trips out of places like Knoxville and Chattanooga. Where we drive we see nobody. That is one of the extra advantages of a road trip through the Tennessee countryside.