

The Great River Road Trip 2015

A number of years ago, after finishing a trip to Gettysburg with my LOOTS friends (That's Lotus Owners Up To Something) and back again with my wife Ann in my Lotus 7 and Elan, when asked if I'd ever do it again I made the comment I have now come to regret; "*Would I do it again? Probably not such a big trip and probably not on such big roads. Maybe I'll take a jaunt down the Mississippi River Road from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico with lots of time and an ace Lincoln Lotus Centre riding mechanic along. Yeah, that's the ticket.*"

The fond memories of the trip left me vulnerable when the rest of the LOOTS made their plans to come to Colorado for the 35th Lotus Owners Gathering in August 2015. Geoff Cole reminded me of my comment and said we should do that trip, and then Rod Thonger immediately chimed in as he is a big blues music fan and thought it would be great to visit the home of the blues. When the last of the three who had been with me before, Brian Green (ace Lincoln Lotus Centre riding mechanic) said he, too, was in, it was "Game On!"

In searching maps, I found numerous ways of connecting disparate highways that outlined a route to and from Colorado Springs and then used the relatively well defined "Great River Road". Other than getting through several major cities such as Minneapolis, St. Louis, and Memphis as well as the end point, New Orleans, all the rest would be small towns and rural charm. The route was now clear, so all we needed to do was figure out how long it would take and when to start. Using the distances per day we were comfortable with on our last trip, we thought about three weeks should do it. So the lads made plane reservations to be here in time for LOG 35, allowed a few days of car prep after LOG plus the three weeks plus a few recovery or delay days. The return dates were set and flights booked for the British Invasion!

The preparations were thorough: Every screw and nut was checked, all fluids topped or changed and the perfect luggage rack conceived, fabricated and installed on the Seven prior to departure for a trip of over 4,400 miles in cars 47 and 50 years old. Made in Britain. By Lotus. What could possibly go wrong? The pool for the exact time and place of our complete disaster was massively subscribed at www.betonthedown.com For you cynics out there that's not a real website©

We left at 7:30, August 28th with a wave and a smile. Moving through Colorado Springs traffic with amazing civility and green lights, we were soon rolling down highway 24 at a good clip. The first stop was Limon, CO which I convinced the Brits was Li Mon which, when pronounced with an Inspector Clouseau accent, sounded very much like a famous race circuit in France. With a cup of coffee and a stretch we hit Interstate 70 to Colby Kansas. We had time to make and the I-road is where you can make it. Most of the truckers gave us a clean berth and we rolled easily to the exit at Colby, back onto our old friend US 24, and headed northeast. In a little town of no particular significance, I spotted a café one block off the road in the center of the block long "Main Street". We were hungry and this place, called *Chuck Wagon*, looked like the only food east of the Pecos, as it were. It offered "Free Beer Tomorrow" (of course, we were a day early!) and served great burgers which we all enjoyed. The owner inquired why three Brits and another old guy were in his very small and not very busy establishment in north central Kansas.

We told him our plans which he thought a bit crazy so he and his wife came out to photograph our cars and us on the empty street. It looked like the set of a movie western just before the

shootout but with two little cars and four aged bullslingers instead of gunslingers. We discovered that the place was named after the owner, Chuck, by his wife in an attempt at cleverness but never asked if their surname was Wagon. It seems that they were going to post these photos on their Facebook page to stimulate business. That's right... small town America is on Facebook!

Onward we travelled through the rest of Kansas and into Nebraska where we turned north and thus had the strong north wind in our faces rather than across the cars. This was much more comfortable for me as the crosswind comes off the top of the Seven's sidescreen right at ear level. Brian and Geoff found it far less obnoxious since they sit much lower. Then we turned east again. For miles and hours the wind ripped at my hat which I pulled back down about every 30 seconds. Since the sun was at our backs, I finally gave up and just took off my hat. Peace!

We stopped in Minden, NE at the Harold Warp Pioneer Village. I have seen the signs for this museum of Americana for over 40 years as I have traversed Nebraska on Interstate 80, always with somewhere to be. So I'd say, "Someday I will stop there and see that museum." Well here we were at Minden, so I told Rod to pull into the place. Geoff and Brian turned around, joined us and we went in to find the place set to close in 30 minutes. Told that the average visitor spends 4 to 6 hours there to see the place, we left. "Someday I will stop there and see that museum."

Hastings Nebraska has no discernable reason to be. But it is, and it has a few cheap motels, so we made it our first night stop. The cars had run perfectly and we were worn out from the sun and wind. We buttoned the cars up, took showers and went looking for food and drink. We stopped at a biker bar and had a beer but soon left as there were too few bikers and too much booming bass. We found dinner at the Hastings Keno parlor, the busiest place in town, whatever that says. Then we walked back to the motel to get a good night's rest. Day two would be another long one.

When we awoke and opened the door to meet the morning we found pea soup fog! While this might be an inconvenience to a modern car or even the Elan, it is trouble in the Seven. It has no working wipers and no meaningful method of demisting the windscreen. We wiped both the cars windcreens down with the hotel towels, saving ours for future duty, applied the Rainex and set off. After a few minutes the Elan was warm enough to maintain a clear view so I picked up the pace. Unbeknownst to me, Geoff, driving the Seven, was only able to continue by focusing on our taillights through a small strip low on the windscreen and at every light, Rod would reach over the top of the screen and give it a wipe. We stopped for fuel about an hour and a half later and found the fog was lifting. From there on, the day just kept getting better and better. And it wasn't just the weather.

We turned north into South Dakota where we were to meet Kurt Appley who is an Elan owner that posts on the elan.net forum. He had read there about our trip and volunteered to get us from Nebraska into Minnesota in a less boring and more scenic way than I had planned. Even though we had never met, he wanted us to have a fun drive and see the best of his corner of the world. It still amazes me that these little cars can bring people who would otherwise never meet together in a common bond. He instructed us to meet him at the junction of Highway 81 and 12 in the northeast corner of Nebraska. We turned off 81 and there he was sitting waiting for us in his little MG Midget since his Elan was not working. Strange...mine always works!

He then sped off going way too fast for a Midget. That was because he had modified it with a Nissan engine and 5 speed transmission. He was quick and knew the roads very well. Great

drive! We stopped at an overlook to the Missouri River near Vermillion where the river is designated as wild in one of only three locations in the state. It was beautiful and, even better, Kurt had got three Park Rangers to be there to explain the geology and history to us. I think that makes him the lone, ranger arranger. I'm not used to getting star treatment but this was surely it! Time to leave Nebraska and cross the Missouri. South Dakota has wonderful twisty roads out west in the Badlands and the Black Hills, but eastern South Dakota has only 22 miles of roads that don't go due north-south or east-west, and we drove 15 of them! Then he treated us to lunch in downtown Vermillion and drove with us on the other 7 miles of curving South Dakota roads into Iowa and finally into Minnesota where he made sure we were on the right road for the rest of our day's plan. What a wonderful gentleman and delightful host. Thanks Kurt!

We found a motel in Marshall MN called "The Deluxe Motel" and while I would not have named it that, it was the only one we could find so I guess it deserved the appellation. I would hate to see the "Regular" motel though. After scrubbing off the road, we walked about half mile to the town center and found an amazingly good Italian restaurant. It was very upscale and had great food at very small town prices. We wondered how it came to be there and how it makes it. After dinner, we walked about looking at store windows and marveling at the vacant streets. It was eerie indeed to see nobody at all walking around what seemed to be a functioning town.

Starting early on Sunday, we took off without breakfast and got some miles in on essentially deserted roads until our hunger made it clear we needed to stop. We found a fuel stop and basic convenience store which had doughnuts for Rod and OJ for me and called it good. Somehow the guys got café au lait which was too sweet by half and not the regular coffee they sought. Talked about it for hours! The interesting thing this morning was the sun rising as a red rubber ball due to the haze from western fires and the humidity. It was quite cool until the haze cleared and then it got quite hot. By then we had reached a town just west of our destination on Trout Lake called Pine River, which was holding a Bluegrass festival. So we put our regular plans on hold and partook. After parking our cars as instructed in a grass field we were picked up by a lovely lady in a golf cart. After chatting a bit we discovered that she was the Mayor of Pine River and she welcomed us to their festival. Then we bought our tickets from the president of the local bank! It is clear to see the result of this kind of civic involvement...A vibrant economy and a happy city.

After a suitable exposure to Minnesota bluegrass, which has a remarkably religious component, the idea of resting and boating at Trout Lake became a very desirable thing, so we motored over to Alex and Bunny's place. Arriving at the cabin, we were greeted by my step sister Bunny who is energy encapsulated – the Energizer Bunny. Finding beds for each of us, she served lemonade, we unloaded, and then we sat and talked about the cars and the trip. Bunny is one who thinks a car is incomplete if it hasn't a backup camera, Bluetooth and 300 horsepower so she marveled at the tiny and basic cars we were driving. I suppose she is closer to the norm than we are.

We went for a neat boat ride in my nephew's 1947 Chris Craft. Later he took us for dinner on the pontoon boat across several lakes in the chain to a place called The Wharf where portions are of huge proportion. Coming back, the setting sun dancing on the lake was priceless! I think this is one of the most idyllic places imaginable, yet it is real and I get to visit from time to time. On day two at the lake, we took a lazy rest day to just sit and watch the eagle that nested above us in a 70' pine go fishing, hear the loons and watch the lake change in the sun. Oh, and do laundry, run errands and walk the beach. It was the most, actually the ONLY, restful day of the trip.

But the highlight to the Brits was the Meat Raffle at the local bar and grill, next to the Town Hall/liquor store combination. Really. The Town Hall is combined with a liquor store. That is the progressive nature of northern Minnesota. But, what is a meat raffle you ask? It's also a northern Minnesota tradition where one buys a bunch of numbered tickets then sits and drinks beer while a barker calls out numbers one at a time. If one has the called number, one gets to choose from a huge number of packages of meat; steaks, chops, ground beef and more. Of course, some are luckier than others and the table next to ours produced eight or nine winning tickets (four by one person!) while at our table of seven we had but one. Geoff was kind enough to give the winning pork chops to Bunny. She has been known to be a big winner so tonight we brought bad karma. After the raffle and a few beers, we took A & B to dinner where everyone ordered chicken or fish...No Pork chops, nor beef. I guess we'd had enough. The next morning we said our goodbyes and started the "Official" part of the trip...going down the Mississippi River Road.

This north-south, 1,500-mile road, also known as the Great River Road or the Blues Highway, generally follows the Mississippi River from near the city of Bemidji, Minnesota, to New Orleans. It's hard to be bored traveling from nearly Lake Superior through Mark Twain country in Hannibal, Missouri, and St. Louis and through the Mississippi River Delta. Or so we thought.

Leaving quite early, we stopped halfway to Itasca for a very filling breakfast and when we returned to the cars, what should we see coming past on the main street of Walker, MN but two wind turbine blades in transit. These blades are about 100 feet long and are carried by a trailer that has articulated rear wheels like the old hook and ladder fire trucks. We didn't mind being behind these two long trailers with their escort vans fore and aft until we reached a couple of turns in the road. To navigate any turn sharper than a 500 foot radius they had to slow down to about walking speed and creep around the corner with guides on all sides. It was fascinating to watch at first, but frustrating later since we were falling farther and farther behind our planned time. And the worst was when we came to a 90 degree left followed about a hundred feet on by a 90 degree right in the town of LaPorte. Front and back ends of the trailer were going opposite directions and the guides were really running back and forth to make sure nothing got hit or scythed. Meanwhile, we waited. Then, we waited. And, then, we waited some more.

Finally, the two trucks pulled over and waved us past. Soon after that we were at "The Source" of the Mississippi. There is a fine visitors center that tells about the various "sources" over the years until general agreement was reached that Lake Itasca is the real thing. It is spring fed so one might argue yet today that the springs are the real source. Just at the outfall of the lake, the river is more like a creek, with about thirty stepping stones to step across and never get a wet foot, or roll up one's pant legs and wade through about 18 inches of water to get to the other side. It seems to amaze almost everyone that the Mighty Mississippi has such a puny start...it did me!

We took the obligatory photos of the engraved tree trunk with the message "*Here 1,475 feet above the ocean the Mighty Mississippi begins to flow on its winding way 2,552 miles to the Gulf of Mexico*". Then we began to drive on *our* winding way to the Gulf of Mexico!

Believe it or not, we drove northward about 35 miles along zig zagging roads that crossed and recrossed the river which is small and hard to track as it meanders along flat fields while the roads go straight north and east. Finally we reached the very charming town of Bemidji and stopped at the visitor's center for a photo op with Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. The story of a larger than life character of the logging camps and how he found his pet oxen starts like this: Well now,

one winter it was so cold that all the geese flew backward and all the fish moved south and even the snow turned blue. Late at night, it got so frigid that all spoken words froze solid afore they could be heard. People had to wait until sunup to find out what folks were talking about the night before. Paul Bunyan went out walking in the woods one day during that Winter of the Blue Snow. He was knee-deep in blue snow when he heard a funny sound between a bleat and a snort. Looking down, he saw a teeny-tiny baby blue ox jest a hopping about in the snow and snorting with rage on account of he was too short to see over the drifts. Paul Bunyan laughed when he saw the spunky little critter and took the little blue mite home with him. He warmed the little ox up by the fire and the little fellow fluffed up and dried out, but he remained as blue as the snow that had stained him in the first place. So Paul named him Babe the Blue Ox.

The story goes on with some important information for us since we were unsure as to how the Great River was formed: Babe the Blue Ox was a great help around Paul Bunyan's logging camp. He could pull anything that had two ends, so Paul often used him to straighten out the pesky, twisted logging roads. By the time Babe had pulled the twists and kinks out of all the roads leading to the lumber camp, there was twenty miles of extra road left flopping about with nowhere to go. So Paul rolled them up and used them to lay a new road into new timberland. Paul also used Babe the Blue Ox to pull the heavy tank wagon which was used to coat the newly-straightened lumber roads with ice in the winter, until one day the tank sprang a leak that trickled south and became the Mississippi River. After that, Babe stuck to hauling logs.

Now that we had the back story that made sense of what we were about to see, we felt fully empowered to make the journey. But before we could leave Bemidji, we had one more stop to make. My nephew, the one who had given us the Chris Craft ride, works as a radio personality in Bemidji under the name Dave Brooks, so we stopped at his station...he was on the air when we arrived. It seems a DJ has some time to visit when the songs are playing so we were able to say hello and then listen quietly while he did a live weather report and a few commercials and then started the next song. We were impressed with how he moved smoothly between things and kept everything going. Then he asked, "Would you be up for a live interview?"

Geoff and Brian demurred, but Rod and I stepped up and Dave, without notes, did a wonderful job of setting up the reason we were there and why he was interrupting the music to talk to us. Then he proceeded to get the trip story from us for about five minutes. After we left, Dave said he got lots of calls from listeners thanking him and even got a few excited "sightings" of the two little cars. Ahhh, fame!

From Bemidji, we tuned east toward the big town of Grand Rapids. Here the road runs between the chain of lakes fed by the Mississippi and is really pretty boring. But soon we came upon The Big Fish supper club. I had been anticipating this as a must do stop since I saw it in the movie "National Lampoon's Vacation" many years before. As often happens, the buildup in the mind exceeds reality. While it was sort of cool it wasn't even open for business so we walked around, took a photo of the cars in front of it and departed. I wonder if the food is any good.

After a night in Grand Rapids, we attempted to stay next to the river on the "official" GRR which meant dirt roads meandering back and forth with the river through the fields. After about 30 miles of this we decided that being next to the river was highly overrated and we would find the nice county roads that were paved instead. As was our custom, we had started early to get

some miles under our belts and then stop for breakfast. In Palisade, MN, a town of about 500, we found a café, parked right at the curb, and went in to eat. The food in these small town cafés is usually good but this was excellent and as a bonus, they had homemade fruit pies that were out of this world good. Our rationale was that pie for breakfast is a Minnesota thing and “When in Rome...” As we were eating, a fellow came over to the table and asked if we would like to see his car collection including a Triumph Spitfire. We said sure and walked with him to his warehouse about a block down Main Street. Our new “friend” Jeff was a hoarder worthy of a TV show like American Pickers. His place was stacked to the rafters with stuff and had little pathways with booby traps to catch the unwary or distracted. The Spitfire was in three places buried under boxes and lumber and other detritus. We thanked Jeff and slowly backed away. Before we left, he presented us with a rare copy of “Portraits of ‘60’s Formula 1” a lovely coffee table sized book. Later we found the mark from the Eden Valley Public Library.

We drove on to Little Falls and the welcome center to find that Charles Lindbergh’s boyhood home was not open but the Weyerhaeuser family home/museum was, so instead we stopped there for a fascinating look at nineteenth and early twentieth century life in a Minnesota river town. The drive down the west side of the river was one of the prettiest stretches so far, as the dappled sunlight through the trees splashed on the rollicking river and our little cars.

After an overnight stop in Sartell and a departure timed to get to Minneapolis well after the rush hour, we motored through farm country along two lane roads that were far from the river. We didn’t follow the river because the road that does follow the river is Interstate 94 which carries substantial commuter and truck traffic. No thanks! We’d just meander along highway 55 which runs roughly parallel but south of I-94 and matches the character of our little cars far better. The objective was to reach the Minneapolis after the major morning traffic crunch and head to the senior living facility where my 100+ year old father lived and join him for lunch. While he had been aware of my little cars, it had been years since I had brought any of them to Minneapolis and he had never met the LOUTS. A visit was mandatory.

Dad made his way slowly with his walker to the parked Seven and Elan, expressed his surprise at how small they were and how crazy we were, smiled and suggested we adjourn to lunch. After a lovely visit we bid goodbye and set off to beat the evening traffic jams. Traversing eastward through the city on surface streets, we finally reached West River Road, a winding parkway adjacent to the Mississippi that provides a very pleasant way to ease out of the big city. We stopped to hike a riverbank trail through the dense trees to a small sandy beach area. We watched several sculls on the river as well as a couple on a blanket wishing they were alone. It was an absolutely serene oasis just yards from the bustling city streets. We drove to the end of the serene parkway, but it was the bustling streets we had to use to get the rest of the way out of town.

Minutes later, things weren’t so serene. It seems Geoff and Brian, a couple of cars behind us, got caught at a traffic light that Rod and I just made. Geoff didn’t notice that we had turned left. They turned right. We stopped as soon after the light as we could find a place to get out of traffic and waited for them to come along. Rod tried Geoff’s cell and got only a message. After four or five tries and twenty minutes, he finally got an answer and found they were well past us on a different road out of town. We set off along the road we thought they were on, crossed the river and sped down the east side of the river. Finally after several miles of expectant searching we saw them waving from the frontage road alongside the highway. Reconnecting, we followed the lovely sweeping curves of Highway 61 all the way to Red Wing.

The wonderful little town of Red Wing has two main claims to fame in our minds...it is the home of Red Wing boots and the St. James hotel. The boots are world renown for durability and comfort so we thought we might find some bargain at their factory outlet. No such luck. The only interesting boot we saw was most definitely not sized for any of us. It was displayed in the museum and is the world's largest boot, nominally a size 638 1/2 that stands at over 20 feet tall. See it here: <http://solutions.redwingshoes.com/WorldsLargestBoot> Feeling quite diminished we decided we needed a proper brew and adjourned to the historic St. James Hotel. Here we toured the ornate and lovely parlor and lobby dating from the 1800's, then made our way to the dark but beautifully paneled bar on the second floor. Luxuriating in leather chairs and the ambience of an ornate, cool place, the beer was far tastier than we expected while we tried to talk over 3 women cackling loudly who had clearly been there a while and were well into their cups.

Back on the road again, we meandered in the quiet afternoon with little traffic down river to the town of Wabasha, MN and the Eagle Center. After checking into our motel and cleaning up we were ready to for dinner at a place next to the river. Unfortunately, I discovered that the Elan had developed a duff starter so from this point on we would have to bump start each time we stopped for anything like food or fuel or sleep. The latch on the driver's side door had also failed but at least in the closed and locked position so we would have to jump over the door to get in...or out! Of course, this struck on the Labor Day weekend so there was no way to order the part until Tuesday morning. I called RD Enterprises and got a starter shipped to a shop I know in Memphis and then hoped it would be there to be installed Thursday, our expected arrival. In the meantime we always looked for a downhill spot to park the Elan. We had a delightful dinner at a bar right on the river and headed back for our rest and another bump start in the morning.

The National Eagle Center is an amazing museum and we spent several hours there learning about Eagles. Some of the interactive exhibits were really amazing like the one that simulated an eagle's vision. They had placed a small stuffed rodent one floor and the length of the hall away (250 feet) that looked like a mere dot on the wall with human vision. Then through a display with a scope inside, as if one were actually an eagle, it could be clearly seen as a field mouse. They had several captive eagles who had been injured or imprinted and could not fend for themselves in the wild, that handlers displayed and fed. These are BIG birds with wingspans over six feet and talons as big as our hands. They are mighty impressive creatures yet weigh but 12-14 pounds and can carry up to their own weight in their talons. Be sure to keep your cat in at night!

We left Wabasha late morning and cruised along some lovely meandering roads along the river after crossing over to the Wisconsin side. This area, called the driftless zone because it was bypassed by the glaciers, has major bluffs that abut the river, affording spectacular views across, up and down river. We stopped at the small town of Alma for lunch in a little café that overlooks the locks and watched a huge barge be put through in two sections while we ate.

We followed Highway 35 along the Wisconsin side of the river, winding and dipping with it, on a lovely cruise to Prairie du Chien then abandoned the river and took bland farm country roads across random fields to Dubuque. We pulled into this urban area to look for a room and stopped to discuss options at the curb directly in front of the historic Hotel Julien. While dithering about where to go, the general manager of the hotel came out admiring our little cars. He got to talking with us and offered us a bargain room rate at his very special historic hotel. We were instructed to move the cars to a place of pride under the portico on the river side of the hotel and check in. We did. Then we washed the grime of the road away and went to a wonderful dinner in the hotel

restaurant where we were able to overlook our cars parked outside and watch as folks stopped and gestured as they came and went. We speculated as to the conversations about what these two dusty little cars with Colorado plates might be doing at such an elegant Iowa hotel. A few of our attempts were quite funny; most were pretty predictable.

After a coddled night's rest we started the day at the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium which features exhibits on the culture and history of America's rivers. Along with the history of commerce on the river and its flora and fauna, it also features the steamboat William M. Black, a National Historic Landmark. We explored the steamboat for nearly an hour while imagining ourselves as its crew. It was a wonderful interlude. Then down the river we went, headed for the Quad Cities. Crossing into Illinois at Clinton, we worked our way through Moline and Rock Island and back across to Iowa then onto Ft. Madison and THE ROOM.

Finding lodging in some of these small river towns is tough and after stopping at Burlington and finding all the motels filled we kept going. In Fort Madison, we stopped at the Kingsley Inn. Rod went to negotiate some rooms while we stood with the cars in the shade. After a long, hot wait he hailed us from the rooftop balcony saying he had found something quite extraordinary and wanted us to come see it. We trudged up three flights of stairs to the Presidential Suite, which was indeed quite extraordinary. With a 20 foot by 15 foot living room, floor to ceiling Palladian windows dominating the entire wall, a formal dining room with settings for 10, a fully equipped kitchen with granite slab counters and an island, and a master suite with a full spa bathroom, it was spectacular. It was also \$1,000 per night and had one King bed. We were four tired and dusty guys with limited budgets. Rod began negotiating with us (after negotiating the rate down to about \$500 with the hotel) arguing that it was the last room, they could furnish rollaway beds and the next town was another two hours away. We were hot and tired. We conceded. So, when they could only produce two rollaway beds, I slept in a \$125/night reclining chair in the middle of that palatial living room. We vowed to call ahead from then on and we mostly did.

We crossed the river again to Illinois and drove through Nauvoo where the Mormons spent a period of time before being driven out to find a new home in Utah. Since it was a Sunday, we expected to see a lot of churchgoers but what we saw was a classic car show with amazing street rods and collector cars. Of course we got lots of honks and waves and at least one invitation to join the show. On we went to Hannibal, MO where we found ourselves right smack in the middle of Tom Sawyer Days. Hannibal is best known as the boyhood home of author Samuel Langhorne Clemens (aka Mark Twain) and as the setting of his Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, with numerous historical sites related to him and his fiction. During this festival, folks dress up like his characters and in Steam Punk and there is a crowd of characters on every block. We jumped right in and enjoyed a few hours of nostalgia, then headed south to reach our planned stop in St. Louis. We even hoped to see Chuck Berry as we passed through the Wentzville area.

We were about half way and all in all, the trip was going well. Some roads were right by the river especially in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and around Dubuque Iowa. On the other hand, much of the travel between Dubuque and St. Louis was on nondescript farm road which we derogatorily named the Mythissippi River Road. The big disappointment to me was that we could be on any road through the heartland of rural America; we could only see the Mississippi about 10% of the time. The Mythissippi River - always near but rarely seen. It was hot, dry, lonely, and boring.

We also unfortunately found the clearance on an Elan and a Seven is no match for a dead skunk swollen in the summer heat. Rod, driving the Seven in the lead position, apparently thought the best course was to straddle the thing rather than take evasive action and I, of course, followed dutifully for a second strike! Dead skunk in the middle of the road is more than a song, and the stench was truly awful, perhaps the worst smell I have ever experienced in my life. At the next gas stop Geoff reenacted his response to the event...an extreme and involuntary throwing back of the head with an accompanying grimace and a loud “ewwww” then a shaking of the head to try and rid himself of the stench. Visualize that! We cleaned the underside of the Seven as best we could though without much improvement in aroma. Worse, it stayed with us throughout the day and even the next morning. It seemed to have ameliorated a bit by the end of the second day.

Our laissez-faire attitude about planning caught up with us again in St. Louis. No rooms were to be found anywhere after a half dozen tries until we reached the suburb of Arnold on the south side of the city. Why? Baseball game! It seems that when the Cardinals play, folks come from all over. Who knew that baseball was such an economic engine? I do have to say that my original quote about taking a simpler trip after the long trip across US 50 in 2010 was horribly misplaced. At St. Louis we were just over halfway and I was worn out more than the cars were. But then I am more than 20 years older than they are as well. We didn't make it to any Blues Bars. We were too tired, so we all hit the sack early for an early morning start.

Continuing down Highway 61 as we had been for much of the trip, we came to the little town of St. Genevieve – Beautiful and charming. We wandered the town for a while, got a tour of the oldest inn in the state and had the best peach crumble EVER!! Leaving town we were glad we had already eaten as we found the “roadkill zone” with seven raccoons and skunks in just over a mile. This time we swerved around every one...we already had the knack and the stink!

We crossed the river at Cape Girardeau and picked up Highway 51 our other good friend. Down we drove through Cairo, a sad dying town at the confluence of the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers that we expected to be vibrant. Crossing the river into Kentucky we were again on a big slab that could have been anywhere in the Midwest as the river was miles away while we droned on through fallow fields. It was hot, dry, lonely, and boring.

We had now gone 2,500 miles and were into Tennessee. Both cars were still running well with a few hiccups. The Elan's duff starter and the closed and locked latch on the driver's side door proved to be minor but constant irritants. It is amazing how often we stop and exit the cars. The Seven had a problem in the ignition switch that manifested itself as a very hot switch and key, as well as a power drain, but the LLC duo made it better by cleaning all the contacts and then recrimping the leads to insure good contact with the posts. We were ready to stop and break up the monotony but there was no lodging until Dyersburg, just 75 miles from Memphis. So that is where we stayed. With much skepticism, I introduced the lads to an American institution...The kitschy Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, to what they later admitted was a great dinner.

The fact that we were closer to Memphis than we had planned benefited us the next day as we got to our motel early enough to check in and get to Beale Street for lunch. For the next two days we had Blues, Rain and Sun. The blues was on Beale and the surrounding area, the rain was a big cluster of afternoon downpours that thankfully mostly happened while we were not using the cars and could stay inside. And the Sun, was Sun Records, the mecca for early Rock and Roll.

Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley were all recorded there in the same year and on December 4, 1956 they all showed up at Sun Studios and spent an afternoon in a jam session later dubbed "The Million Dollar Quartet". We spent a fabulous couple of hours soaking up the "vibe" and, since we are all old enough, remembering the roots of Rock and Roll that we heard when it was new and original. Then we turned to the blues.

We haunted every club on Beale Street from the Rum Boogie Café, Blues City, B.B. King's Blues Club, to the Blue Note and even W.C. Handy Park, where some very talented amateurs were strutting their stuff. During the days, we also toured the Memphis Rock 'n Soul Museum, the Memphis Music Hall of Fame, the Stax Recording Studio and the Gibson Guitar factory, each of which was amazing in rekindling memories of our youth. The lads took a taxi out to Graceland while I took the Elan to Memphis Motor Werks, a shop operated by a friend of Ann's and mine to whom I had shipped the new gear reduction starter. I had been to Graceland before and already knew about the Jungle Room and the eternal flame, so I decided to let them go while I went east to Cordova, TN. It was my grace land because Mike had one of his guy's install the starter which had arrived as promised. After some custom wiring and fitting, I had a new starter which positively zinged the engine to life. No more bump starts! We still had to climb in though.

Now I had to find the lads who, by now, had internalized the spirit of Elvis; thank you, thank you very much! I learned they had gone to the Pyramid, aka Bass Pro Shop down near Mud Island. Off I went looking for the nearest parking to the Mud Island Bridge. I found a parking garage and put the Elan in a safe spot then began looking for this Pyramid which was supposed to be visible from the front streets by the river. I could see no such structure. Calling Rod and Geoff, I was repeatedly told it was huge and visible from miles away and I couldn't miss it. But it wasn't and I could. Finally, walking north of the bridge which had been blocking my view, this huge silver pyramid hove into view. But there was now a set of railroad tracks and several fences between me and it. After finding route through a parking structure, a maze of roads and a path across the tracks that got me through, I finally got to the pyramid, rode the \$10 elevator to the top and found the lads on their third beer relaxing with the spectacular view over the city. They took the view of the riverfront in air conditioned comfort while I had walked a hundred miles in hundred degree heat and hundred percent humidity. Then they bought me a beer. I was just fine!

Leaving Memphis the next morning meant leaving the Midwest and going to the South. All of a sudden, when we crossed the line into Mississippi, we were in Delta Blues country. The culture, the sights and the mood all changed right away. Wanting to get out of the city traffic, we left early and stopped after an hour or so for breakfast at the famous Blue and White café, in Tunica MS, right on Highway 61. This café which is essentially unchanged since it opened in 1924, has some of the best food I've ever eaten. It was the perfect way to meet the South.

After breakfast we were getting back to the cars when we noticed a 4 X 4 for sale in the car park. Upon it was a sign which noted that it came with a wench. I could not be sure whether just the vehicle or just the wench was offered for sale, but just in case, Geoff left his cell number.

Back on Highway 61, revisited as it were, we were heading to the Crossroads, Delta Blues Museum and Ground Zero...Clarksdale. First, the crossroads. This is the junction of Highways 61 and 49, where legend says blues master Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for the ability to play the blues like no one ever had. If it isn't true, then Johnson got his gift some other way as he set the standard for how to play the blues. Now the crossroads is a cluster

of busy stores and lots of traffic with only a small monument to the event which is buried behind the signage for a dozen other things. On we went into Clarksdale to the Delta Blues Museum, a converted rail depot that has an amazing number of fascinating displays of the men and women who birthed the blues. The remains of the cabin from Stovall Farms, where Muddy Waters lived during his days as a sharecropper and tractor driver, are reassembled here. We knew many of the names like Son House, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters, but many more we did not. The majority of the people remembered in this museum were ordinary folks who used music to help them get through the struggle of life in the heat and destitution that was their lot. They lived and created and we got the music...we are the lucky ones.

We motored on to Vicksburg on Highway 61. I was leading and after passing a car, took the exit to the Vicksburg battlefield. Geoff, behind me in the Seven and still in the passing lane, didn't see me do so and continued on. Rod called him immediately but by the time he answered he had no idea where we were and we had no idea where he was. Trying to describe the location of the gas station we were waiting at took many calls and about forty minutes. Reunited after that incident, we found a motel just before a storm dumped on us and soaked the still open cars but not us as we were safe and dry inside. After cleaning up we took a taxi down to the riverfront to a delightful restaurant overlooking the river, where we learned that the union troops took the long way around to take Vicksburg from the east because the river side was so well fortified.

The next morning we saw the battlefield for ourselves. It is well preserved and well marked with several reenactors giving the story energy 150 years later. As we drove around the beautiful winding roads in the park, we discovered that the Elan had a weak spring on the left rear so we kept scraping the muffler (silencer) on the dips and over rail tracks because it was sitting too low. We transferred one bag to the rack on the Seven and moved some other stuff to the space behind the seats where the jackets and fleeces were, putting that light stuff in the boot, then exchanged a 200+ pound person for a 150 pound person and things seemed to be better. Maybe we only gained a quarter inch of clearance but it was enough. Leaving the memorial and the park, we made a slight detour eastward from Highway 61 to take in a portion of The Natchez Trace.

The Natchez Trace is a parkway, much like the Blue Ridge, that runs from Nashville, TN all the way to Natchez, MS. The gentle sloping and curving alignment of the current route harkens back to the way the original trails aligned as an ancient migratory route of the American Bison that moved between grazing the pastures of central and western Mississippi and the salt and other mineral surface deposits of the Cumberland Plateau. The route generally traverses the tops of the low hills and ridges of the watershed divides from northeast to southwest avoiding the endless, energy-taxing climbing and descending of the many hills along the way. Native Americans, following the "traces" of bison and other game, further improved this walking trail for foot-borne commerce between major villages located in middle Mississippi and central Tennessee. Now paved with limited access points and exits, once you are on it, it feels a bit like soaring. The speed is low at about 45-50 but there are no crossroads or deviations so one merely floats along as if on a river. We took only about 50 miles of the 444 that comprise the total Trace but it was the most relaxing and pleasant 50 miles of the entire trip. And, at the end, the Trace dropped us right into historic Natchez and the Melrose Plantation Historical Park.

Natchez has more antebellum mansions than almost anywhere and the Natchez Trace took us to one of the best, the Melrose House. This was a plantation that had enormous influence in the area and has been preserved with its gardens and outbuildings intact to show the way life was lived by

both the masters and the slaves. It was clear that life was very different depending on one's heritage and while the place was beautiful, it came at a very high cost.

We left Melrose and ventured down to the riverfront for lunch. There we met two young boys on bikes, cousins, who took a fancy to our little cars. Asking questions at the rate of Gatling guns, we did our best to explain something that had no place in their life experience and how we came to be in Natchez. After giving them rides around the block, they promised to become Lotus owners as soon as they got licensed to drive. Or when a Lotus dealer opens in Natchez.

On we drove to Baton Rouge, or, translated into English, Red Stick. We found a hotel right in the heart of the city. Securing our cars we walked the esplanade down to the riverfront and found a wonderful restaurant for dinner. I had the best dinner on the trip so far, mac and cheese with pulled pork. It was comfort food extraordinaire! As we walked back to our hotel we saw street musicians and buskers and folks just hanging out in the green space in the middle of the city. It was a very pleasant evening to just stroll, so for a while we did.

The next morning we began our meander to New Orleans alongside the road that hugs the river just on the other side of the huge levees that protect this low lying area. So, while we were literally next to the river, we could never see it because there was this 20 – 30 foot high berm between us and it. The other reason I called this a meander is that the road follows the river with all its twists and turns. We could have taken the direct route to New Orleans on either I-10 or the Airline Highway and been there in less than two hours, but those are most definitely not Lotus roads. So we took almost five hours and in so doing stumbled upon Oak Alley Plantation.

Oak Alley is a huge old restored sugar cane plantation with all the grace and trouble we saw in the Melrose House in Natchez only on a larger scale. We took the tour guided by a lovely southern belle and ended with a mint julep on the veranda looking down the quarter mile arch of oak trees that give the place its name. It was just the break from the road we needed and we took a commemorative photo to document our arrival in the true south. Climbing back into the cars, we meandered awhile more then found our way into the big city on a maze of streets to our hotel.

Nawlins...finally! We were ready for some music and some food that we would talk about forever. We checked in to our accommodations (we had chosen the Holiday Inn since they had a secure covered parking structure and an affordable rate) and headed down to the French Quarter, planning on some dinner and music. As we wandered, we passed the dock for the Natchez, the last steam operated sternwheeler on the Mississippi, and decided to detour and take a cruise the first evening we were in the Crescent City. Seated on the upper deck with a great Dixieland band playing we enjoyed our beer and watched the sun set over the river and the city. Then it was time to explore the boat so down to the working part we went.

There are two huge boilers but they fire only one each day alternating to keep them both in good condition. The steam generated goes to a complicated set of valves and pistons that feeds two opposing cylinders on each side of the boat so there is always a power stroke in process. Then two giant connecting rods take the back and forth motion from the cylinders to the sternwheel. Massive, powerful, and clever. Just as I got to the sternwheel, the Natchez was turning around to go back downriver so I watched the rudders swing and the paddlewheel stop, reverse, stop again, and resume from the best spot on the Natchez...on the outside lower deck by the paddlewheel and looking into the engine room!

After our river cruise we hit Bourbon Street and Frenchman Street. Of the two streets we much preferred Frenchman. It seemed to be more like the Bourbon Street I remembered from years past, not the garish, too loud and too profane version that is today's Bourbon Street. We found great music and food all along Frenchman Street and returned again the next night after a visit, mandatory of course, to the Preservation Hall. If I had but one place to go in New Orleans that would be the place. It is the essence of what New Orleans means, the character, quality of music and tradition of celebration all rolled into an hour set. Fantastic!

In the morning we went to Café du Monde for beignets. Reactions to these Crescent City crullers by my British friends were mixed. They thought them tasty but with way too much powdered sugar and not worthy of the wait for a seat nor the rude waiters attitudes. We did check another "must do" off the list, however. Wanting to get a flavor of the bayous and not having a sense of where to go, we signed up for a tour that took us through the watery geography south of the city and out to a boat ride with a genuine Cajun. When we floated and zipped through the bayous we saw egrets, hawks and lots of alligators all accompanied by a steady patois of self-deprecating humor delivered in a Cajun accent. We actually learned a lot about the flora and fauna, each of us even holding a small alligator. Now that is something you cannot do in England!

Back in the city, we found some mighty good food, especially Po' Boys at Mother's on Poydras St. We wandered the French Quarter gawking like tourists, and then headed back down to friendly Frenchman Street for more music and food. The next morning, after three memorable nights and two full days, it was time to bid New Orleans goodbye and start the long trek home.

Meandering was over; it was time for a direct road. We tried to beat the traffic with an early start to find the fast way home. Leaving town is easier than coming in during the morning rush so we took a main arterial, Airline Drive, to avoid the big trucks on I-10 and headed west back toward Baton Rouge. After a detour through an industrial park caused by a poorly detailed map, much frustration by the navigator (me!) accompanied by bad words and arm waving, we finally got through the big city and found Highway 190 headed northwest. Jumping on Interstate 49 through Alexandria and Shreveport we finally reached Texas, more Texas and still more Texas.

Avoiding the Dallas metroplex (their name for the area, not mine...I hate that word!) we stayed on the two lane roads through Greenville and Sherman until we picked up US 287 and went through Wichita Falls. I would tell you some stories about our trip through Texas except there aren't any. It was just monotonous driving through Texas, more Texas and still more Texas.

There was one thing though, somewhere along the endless highways, the Seven's generator started making howling noises. Stopping to investigate, we realized that the bushings were shot and there was nothing to be done. So when the generator goes dark, we go total loss. We used the small belt I have kept in the back of the Seven since I bought it in Eureka, NV in 2005 when the generator failed for the first time. This seems to be the weak link in the car as it is the third time I have had to employ it. Fortunately, the electrical needs in the Seven are minimal as long as there is daylight so we soldiered on through Amarillo and on to Dalhart where we spent the night.

Leaving in the morning we had a nice run through northern New Mexico reaching Raton just before lunchtime. Since we were concerned about the battery level we looked for an auto parts store and found a fellow at Advance Auto Parts who tested the Seven battery and found it still had over 80% reserve left. As I said, the electrical needs in the Seven are minimal. No worries!

After a pleasant lunch, we were on the last leg of our mighty journey. Next stop...Home! We had an uneventful and very pretty drive over Raton Pass and up I-25 through southern Colorado arriving back home at about 3:30 on September 18th, exactly as planned. After stretching and unloading our gear, we broke out the beer and reflected a bit on what was really a pretty amazing journey. We had travelled over 4,400 miles in two simple British cars that were 50 and 47 years old that did everything we asked of them and returned to home base under their own power. Not bad! And to top off the celebration, the lads presented me with a Skunk Cap that looked like a Davey Crockett coonskin cap except with a double white stripe. I thought Rod should have it.

Sunburned, weary and glad to be back to my own bed I had two Random Thoughts:

One: Wandering the decks of the Natchez while in New Orleans, I came to the inevitable gift shop where the usual kitsch was displayed but found one little gem that was worth the whole trip. They had a plaque quoting Mark Twain that read: *"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So, throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."* There are always reasons why it is hard to leave the routine and go off on an adventure but Mark Twain nails the singular reason you must do it. Brian, Geoff, Rod and I are sure glad we did.

Two: This Seven and I (along with the LOOTS and my wife Ann on several occasions) have accomplished exactly seven trips each of which was over 1,000 miles, some well over that. This symmetry of seven long trips in the Seven is too compelling to ignore. Since I purchased the car in September of 2000 I have done all I can with her. I was privileged to be her steward for 15 years and enjoyed every one of them. Now, things like air conditioning and music to accompany the journey (or, at a minimum, wind and weather protection) seem more important. So it is someone else's turn to make memories as I have. That someone is my son Josh who has promised to keep up the spirit of adventure for the foreseeable future as he takes over the stewardship of the Seven. As for me, I have added a virtual limousine to the Lotus fleet, a 1972 Elan Plus 2 with a real roof and roll up windows...electric no less!

The little Elan that made this journey is a bit more congenial in that it has a bit more room, and at least nominal wind and weather protection, thus she can escort me through a few more years before I can no longer fold myself into her. I promise I am not done with the journeys yet but I will see them a bit differently than before. So, please wave when you see a lone Lotus wandering the Blue Highways...it will probably be me.