

The conduit for adventure: Highway 50

By Max McCoy
Kansas Reflector

Highway 50 is calling. From home on Constitution Street in Emporia, I am within walking distance of the route Time magazine called the “backbone of America.” Three blocks to the south, the highway eddies and swirls with local traffic, those headed to work or coming back from a grocery run or, after dark, young people cruising the Sonic to show off. The highway doesn’t carry as much traffic as it used to — the interstate on the north end of town is faster if you’re bound for Wichita or Kansas City — but if you’re in no hurry and have a sense of adventure, U.S. Highway 50 is your path.

I’ve followed the highway there and back for most of my life. It unwinds in my imagination like a rattler dodging grain trucks on a strip of baking asphalt. The highway has been the conduit for every true adventure I’ve had in the West, and when my wheels have been too long in one spot I become restless, thinking of scorching summers on the high plains and Rocky Mountain passes cloaked with snow.

Highway 50 doesn’t have the charisma of Route 66, a bygone road synonymous with American kitsch, but 50 remains the hard-traveled street of truckers, laborers, and journey-men poets. Its two lanes stretch about 3,000 miles from Ocean City, Md., to Sacramento, Calif. It takes 12 days to travel all of it, one-way, according to a website by somebody who has done it. I’ve traversed most of 50, except for the first bit in Maryland, but I reckon I’ll get to that eventually. Portions of the highway, especially the lonely stretch out in Nevada, have been traveled by Jack Kerouac and William Least Heat-Moon. I’ve driven that route as well, when Kim and I returned from Sacramento one summer, and I remember watching the fuel gauge and worrying if the Jeep would make it to the next gas station. It did, but barely. Out West, poor planning is punished with inconvenience or worse.

Don’t take plastic

When I was a kid, my dad would plan meticulously for summer vacation, carefully hiding a couple of hundred dollars in cash and traveler’s checks in the trunk of our old Ford and stocking the cooler with bologna. In those days — say, 1970 — average people didn’t have credit cards and most places wouldn’t take plastic anyway. I was reminded of this when I tried to pay for parking at a motel in the Texas panhandle last week and was told I’d have to use an app on my phone, as the establishment had gone cashless. This did not prevent the staff from accepting actual dollars in tips.

In those early trips with my father at the wheel it became a habit to leave Baxter Springs about dawn, pick up Highway 50 around Pratt, and drive with only the most necessary of stops until we reached western Kansas. Then we’d stop for gas someplace near Dodge City and get orange sodas from a big red change-gobbling dispensing machine. By that time it was approaching midday, and if



Gracie’s Cafe on Highway 50 at Coolidge, about a mile east of the Colorado state line. Max McCoy/Kansas Reflector photo

it wasn’t yet 100 degrees in the shade, it soon would be. We didn’t drink orange sodas much at home, but on these westbound odysseys the ice-cold bottles of orange stuff became the thirst quencher of choice, abetted no doubt by the sugar jolt. If we were ahead of schedule, we’d do some tourist thing. I remember a stop at Dodge City and a quick tour of Boot Hill, a stop at the wax museum across the street, and a youthful obsession with gunfighters. Decades later, I would set a novel in Dodge City.

There isn’t the space here to list all of the locations along Highway 50 that have influenced me, but I can cite a few.

In Kansas, they include Holcomb, where the 1959 murder of the Clutter family was the germ for one of the first modern true-crime books, “In Cold Blood.” Author Truman Capote, with research help from his friend Nell, rendered the “village” of Holcomb in painful and painstaking detail.

“The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive,” Capote writes. “Horses, herds of cattle, and a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.”

Now, phalanxes of wind turbines would have to be added to that description.

Near time travel

Highway 50 follows the Arkansas River upstream across the western third of Kansas and into Colorado. At Granada, you can see Camp Amache, a World War 2 concentration camp for Japanese Americans that is now a National Park Service historic site. Most of those imprisoned were from urban areas in California, and the relocation to the harsh plains of Colorado must have felt like a special punishment.

Between Las Animas and La Junta, the highway comes near Bent’s Old Fort National Historic Site. Located on the Santa Fe Trail, the 1833 fort was built for trade in buffalo robes with trappers and the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho nations. The site is a recreation, but so expertly done it’s the next best thing to time travel. My favorite part? The historically accurate peacocks roaming the courtyard.

At Canon City, the highway swings around the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility, where the gas chamber was used to kill 32 inmates from 1934 to 1967. It’s a working prison, and some years ago I was briefly detained by grim-faced officers who didn’t like me taking photos of the guard towers from a public

street. Leaving Canon City, the highway threads spectacular gorges as the Arkansas plunges down from the headwaters, a journey I wrote about in my book, “Elevations.” At Salida, 50 leaves the river and proceeds west to Utah and Nevada. At Carson City, the Nevada State Railroad Museum offers an impressive collection of locomotives and rolling stock. Carson City also has close historical ties to Mark Twain, who recounted his arrival from Missouri in “Roughing It.”

“Visibly our new home was a desert, walled in by barren, snow-clad mountains,” Twain wrote. “We were plowing through great deeps of powdery alkali dust that rose in thick clouds and floated across the plain like smoke from a burning house.”

Twain knew the appeal of adventure for the American soul, and he was drawn to the West because of his older brother, Orion, who had been named secretary to the territorial governor.

“I coveted his distinction and his financial splendor,” Twain recalled, “but particularly and especially the long, strange journey he was going to make (to Nevada), and the curious new worlds he was going to explore. He was going to travel! I never had been away from home, and that word ‘travel’ had a seductive charm for me. Pretty soon (Orion) would be hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West, and would see buffaloes and Indians, and prairie-dogs, and antelopes, and have all kinds of adventures, and maybe get hanged or scalped, and have ever such a fine time, and write home and tell us all about it.”

Twain’s racism aside, he makes a point. It is the ambition of many writers to have adventures and write home about them, I suppose. Most of the tight spots I’ve encountered while adventuring were those of my own making, while hiking or paddling, but the incident with perhaps the greatest potential for violence came on the return leg of one of those summer trips with Dad.

Danger in mind

We were crossing western Kansas on Highway 50 at about 1 in the morning, on the way back from our first and only trip to Disneyland, and we were somewhere near Garden City. My father was driving, my mother was sitting beside him, and I was in the back. My parents had been talking about the Clutter murders, as my mother had read “In Cold

Blood,” and they were pondering the nature of evil. The Hell’s Angels also scared them, probably because people were still talking about Hunter S. Thompson’s 1967 book. Also, my father — a carpet salesman for Sears — had been briefly kidnapped, at the point of a cheap pistol, a couple of years prior by a hitchhiking young man he gave a ride to on Route 66 between Riverton and Baxter Springs. So, the anxiety in our old Ford as it sliced through the western Kansas darkness was thick.

Gradually, a car came up from the darkness behind us with its brights on and followed too closely for several miles. Then it passed recklessly, swerving and honking. I don’t know what kind of car it was, but I remember it being dark and loud. After it passed, my father slowed to allow more distance between us and the dark car.

Gun talk

Years have passed, and my memory of the incident is likely imperfect, but I recall us watching as the dark car swung over to the side of the road, did a U-turn, and came racing back at us. It zoomed by. Then it did another 180, accelerated, and stayed on our bumper for several miles. My father didn’t know what to do. Whatever my parents said at the time has been lost in memory. But I do remember my father mentioning the gun. He had packed a rifle in the trunk.

It was a .22, a semi-automatic with a tubular magazine, the kind of rifle you used for plinking or for small game. My father didn’t own a pistol, having been frightened by them all of his life, but there were a couple of shotguns at the house in Baxter, used mostly for quail hunting. The 12-gauge pump would have been a better self-defense weapon, but the .22 is what he had grabbed, and like most things in our house — guitars, tennis rackets, runs — it was a Sears-exclusive model.

But there was little chance to park, pop the trunk, and dig the .22 from beneath the cooler and luggage and clothes. My father had asked my advice before the trip on whether he should bring the gun. He had this habit of sometimes asking me adult questions, even though I wasn’t yet a teenager. Influenced by my gunfighter worship, I had declared nobody should go anywhere without a gun.

Now his face was illuminated by the glare of the headlights reflecting from the rearview mirror, and I could see that he was disappointed by the decision. What good was a squirrel

gun in this situation? It was one of the first times I remember being ashamed of advice I’d given.

I’ve written briefly about this encounter before, but because that column was about angry drivers, I left out the part about the .22 rifle. I also omitted it because of the conflicted feelings the gun still evokes.

The occupants of the other car — and there was more than the driver, we could see that when they passed — may have been drunk or “doped up” or just plain crazy. But my father didn’t intend to find out what their problem was. The next time they did a U-turn and came back at us, fainting over the center line, my father stomped on the accelerator and the V-8 Ford lurched forward. The distance between us and the interlopers increased. They did another 180 to pursue us, but they had difficulty closing the gap.

The next town was only a few miles ahead. The darkness whistled by at 100 mph.

Flying down Main

It seemed for a moment the dark car would overtake us, and then when we reached the city limits they broke off, turned, and went the other direction. We fairly flew through the Main Street of the deserted town, and my father said he hoped it would attract the attention of any local cops who might be patrolling. There was no calling 911 on your cell.

The police had all turned in for the night. At the other side of town, my father slowed the Ford down, and we made the rest of the journey home without incident. For years, we would talk about that early morning in western Kansas, but we could never make much sense of it. Had it been a real threat? Did my mother’s reading of “In Cold Blood” create an unreasonable fear? And the question I still ask myself: Why had my father asked my advice on the gun?

My parents only lasted as a couple for another few years. After that, they led separate lives but oddly remained married. That complicated things when my mother died of untreated breast cancer another decade on.

I don’t know what that

menacing dark car before dawn on a western Kansas highway had to do with any of what happened later. I just know in some way it did. I could feel the gulf between them widen. They avoided each other’s gaze, smoked cigarettes in separate rooms, spoke to one another in whispered sentence fragments or anguished shouts.

Some nights I ponder the incident on that dark highway of so long ago and conclude it was just an example of how inherently dangerous the world can be. At other times, I believe it has to do with the consequences of bad choices, of asking children to behave as adults, of carrying impossible burdens. My parents are both dead now, so I can speak with candor.

But perhaps it’s really a lesson in my conflicted relationship with my parents. Travel doesn’t just mean adventure, it means escape. I remember riding in the back seat of the Ford and thinking that someday my real parents would show up to claim me.

The incident on Highway 50 was so long ago now that it feels like nothing more than a bad dream. I have little insight, other than to say it remains an indigestible chunk in the soup of memory.

It did not make me fear travel. I’ve always been comfortable driving at night. But blinding headlights coming up from behind can still induce sweating, anxiety, and near panic.

When Kim and I were on our way to the Texas panhandle recently, we stopped in Pratt. I found an old-fashioned glass bottle of orange soda at a grocery store, Kim got a bottle of imported cane sugar Coke, and we drank them in the car. We looked each other in the eye, spoke in normal tones, and laughed.

The orange soda tasted sweeter than ever.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Published in the Lindsborg Gypsum Advocate on three consecutive Thursdays, commencing on July 3, 2025.

IN THE DISTRICT COURT OF SALINE COUNTY, KANSAS IN THE MATTER OF THE ESTATE OF Case No. SA-2025-PR-000098 ROBERT E. HAZEN, deceased. (Petition Pursuant to K.S.A. Chapter 59)

NOTICE OF HEARING

THE STATE OF KANSAS TO ALL PERSONS CONCERNED: You are notified that a Petition has been filed in this Court by Marla Hazen, spouse and one of the heirs of Robert E. Hazen, deceased, requesting: Descent be determined of the following described real estate situated in Saline County, Kansas: The South Forty-eight (48) feet of Lot Nine (9), and the North Twelve (12) feet of Lot Ten (10), Block Six (6), Circle Addition to the City of Salina, Saline County, Kansas and all personal property and other Kansas real estate owned by decedent at the time of death. And that such property and all personal property and other Kansas real estate owned by the decedent at the time of death be assigned pursuant to the laws of intestate succession. You are required to file your written defenses to the Petition on or before July 28, 2025, at 9:00 o'clock a.m. in the City of Salina, in Saline County, Kansas, at which time and place the cause will be heard. Should you fail to file your written defenses, judgment and decree will be entered in due course upon the Petition.

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SOUTHEAST OF SALINE MENU

HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!

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