

This Land: Tracy, California

My red Miata versus Woody Guthrie on the road. As I confessed, the irony isn't lost on me.

His hard traveling: hitchhiking, walking, riding the rail.

Me? I can trust my tracphone in the event of an emergency (except no service in Canada). I've got my iPod and my Allman Brothers and my Frank Zappa (Going to Montana soon...). I can turn the dial and listen to a comedy radio station out of Calgary. I've got good radial tires not requiring a flimsy inner tube. Boy is it hot today -- let's turn up the air-conditioning. If I need to, I can quickly find my way back onto the incredible interstates and make up time. Me and my Miata, well, we sure have plenty of gas stations. I've got my Visa card. Motel 6's. Wifi to check out motels for the next motel and directions. Rand McNally map. Welcome Centers and their bathrooms and pick up their brochures. I can stop at the bar down the road for some wings and long neck cool one. Thank goodness for the efficient roadway signs. By the way, who is making a fortune producing all these road signs? I'd like that contract, especially since they added markers for each tenth of a mile. Ca-ching, ca--ching goes the cash register.

The Dust Bowl refugees driving their jalopies and thin rubber tires a thousand miles to California had none of what I have.

Considering I ignore using GPS I've been very grateful for efficient signage. There were other signs quite peculiar:

- Report Shooting From Highway
- Report Drunk Drivers
- All Vehicles With Livestock Must Stop
- All Watercraft Must Be Inspected
- Speed Enforced by Aircraft (which, given how few cars there are on the road must be a terrible return on investment unless the speeding ticket is at least \$2,000)
- When Flashing: Chains Or Snow Tires Required
- Drowsy Drivers Next Exit
- Adopt A Highway (I applaud the optimism, the nearest town was an hour away).
- Prison Area No Hitchhikers (how ironic: this region was called Independence Valley)

Hitchhikers? When was the last time you saw one? I've seen four in the last 5,000 miles. I saw them sitting at intersections with cardboard signs. Couldn't pick them up in my Miata even I wanted to. My passenger seat is filled with my laptop, night bag, and 'go' bag.

Woody hitched about the country. He rode the rails. He walked a lot. He carried his music on his back.

*As I go a ramblin' 'round boys,
As I go a ramblin' 'round.
Sometimes the fruit gets rotten
And falls upon the ground,*

*There's a hungry mouth for every peach
As I go a ramblin' 'round boys,
As I go a ramblin' 'round.
I wish that I could marry,*

*So I could settle down,
But I caint save a penny
As I go a ramblin' 'round boys,
As I go a ramblin' 'round.*

I'm guessing Woody Guthrie really is singing on behalf of some other fellows on the road, for Woody never could settle down even after he married. And married. And married. Bless him though, Woody was a restless man who needed to feel what the poor felt. He worked his way through the Dust Bowl as sign painter, fruit picker, beggar, street corner musician for nickels. My friend John once met Pete Seeger, who shared with John the trick that Woody shared with Pete. You go into a bar with your guitar on your back and pull up a stool. You sip the only drink you can afford. After a while the other fellows at the bar will ask if you're going to play that thing. You stall until they offer you a drink. Then you play a favorite tune. After a while, you'll have all the free drinks you could want along with a few extra dimes.

Hard travelin'.

Twice I felt vulnerable on this trip. Once was when I was driving the isolated highline in North Dakota. I swallowed panic as I began to think about what would happen if I suffered engine trouble. The second time was when I realized how alone I have been visiting obscure and back-country sites. What if I were robbed, attacked? In both instances, I put on Bruce Springsteen to stop me from thinking about such things. 'The Rising' or 'Rosalita' will surely buck up your courage and stop you from feeling alone. Bruce, after all, is today's Woody Guthrie without Woody's personal baggage. Plus, he's from Jersey.

Imagine Woody when he arrived in Tracy, California, a flat valley town surrounded by acres of orchards.

Woody and the other fellows riding the railway car beat it fast when the train stopped. The railway bulls were tough and the fellows wanted to avoid a beating. Woody sold his soggy sweater for a bowl of chili. He joined up with seven others to sleep in a railway sandhouse and keep out of the rain. There is solidarity in shared adversity. The railroad deputies roused

them in the night and told them to get out of there. They left only to return to the warmth of the shed.

The police showed up next and interrogated them to discover who among them might be labor organizers. Agitators would be arrested. The police forced them to walk in front of the police cars, rained on from above and shined on by headlights, toward the city limits. The cops walked them out of town, assisted by the paid vigilantes. Well, walking was better than being arrested for vagrancy. A vagrancy rap meant ninety day of hard labor.

*Oh, why does a vigilante man,
Why does a vigilante man
Carry that sawed-off shot-gun in his hand?
Would he shoot his brother and sister down?*

You're Not Welcome. Tough words to hear.

Tough to have no place to call home.

*I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' 'round,
Just a wandrin' worker, I go from town to town.
And the police make it hard wherever I may go
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.*

*Now as I look around, it's mighty plain to see
This world is such a great and a funny place to be;
Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor,
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.*

Makes me proud to think of my friend Father Jim and his Episcopal church in Salinas housing a grandma and her twin sons for three years because they had no place to call home.

Of course, when we kick the unwanted out beyond our city limits we're also closing ourselves up inside those same city limits

Yes, my other advantage in my Miata traveling is that I have places to go to. I have places to go where I'm wanted.