



Revised History

Oklahoma Gypsies

By Al Benson May 30th, 2022

The first time I ever saw Oklahoma was in 1960. A friend and I were on our way to Mexico City, travelling by car, and we camped at a couple places in Oklahoma. One was a state park, and the other was some sort of national park at the time—Platte National Park, which is now no longer a national park but has been changed into some sort of a recreation area. I fell in love with Oklahoma and have, over the years, been back there nine times that I can recall.

One of those times was in 1967 when I spent part of that year living in Oklahoma. In that year my dad sold his home back east and bought a trailer and he, my mom and I traveled west. We were, in a sense, like gypsies. Wherever we parked the trailer on any given night was “home.”

We traveled across the country as far west as Santa Fe, New Mexico, which had been another of my favorite spots. We had been there before. We were checking on work opportunities in northern New Mexico and it was also an area with lots of artists, particularly around Santa Fe and Taos. I was trying to find someplace I could display my oil paintings. If there was any work available in that area it hid itself admirably. 1967 was not a good year for the middle of the country. Much of the South and West seemed to be in recession—the price of independent thinking not approved of in Washington possibly. There was no work available, particularly if you were from out of state. Folks in New Mexico were plainspoken. They said if any work ever did turn up, they gave it to their own first. I can understand that. We had crossed all of Oklahoma on the way out there—and now we crossed part of it on the way back.

We travelled back as far as the southeastern corner of Osage County, Oklahoma and spent the rest of our time in Oklahoma that year in that spot. We were kind of located between Pawhuska and Bartlesville, Oklahoma, about midway between the two. Everyone just called that whole area “the Osage.”

I had been trying to break into making a living as an artist—something I never quite managed to do, but while in Oklahoma I did manage to get some painting done, and I even managed to sell a few. Not enough to live on, but some.

Regarding work, my dad and I went down to Oklahoma City one time to check out the possibility of getting work somewhere in the state park system. That didn't work out, but while there we visited the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, which at the time was hosting an art exhibition by some of the country's well-known cowboy artists. I spent a good part of that afternoon studying their work, techniques, etc.

We eventually did have to leave Oklahoma and go back further east because there was no work to be had. But then, if we had not done that, I would not have ended up marrying my wife of almost 53 years now. So, the Lord had other plans for me, and I have no complaints. What the Lord had for me to do I could not have done without my wife.

Yet I have many fond remembrances of Oklahoma. Most of the western half of the state is open country—prairie and some high plains. It wasn't much for trees, but lots of sagebrush, yucca, and cactus. We camped a couple times out at Black Mesa State Park, way out in the Oklahoma panhandle. I used to tell folks you could spit from there into New Mexico if the wind was out of the east—only a slight exaggeration.

The old Cimmaron Cutoff part of the Santa Fe Trail ran right next to the park, and it was fun to walk on that and to remember the pioneers who did it before I did. A large part of western Oklahoma had been part of the dust bowl in the 1930s. I read a book about that a few years ago that had pictures of Boise City, Oklahoma in it. Those photos of Boise City looked almost exactly like Boise City did in 1967.

As I said, there are many fond memories of Oklahoma. We were last there in 2001. With my present state of health, I doubt I will ever get back there again, but the fond memories of my time in Oklahoma are something I will always carry with me.