

HISTORY ON THE ROAD

A NATIONAL PARK SYSTEM ROAD TRIP

Text and Photos by James G. Lewis



Last fall, I took a leave of absence and drove cross-country from Durham, North Carolina, to attend a writer's residency program in Point Reyes Station, California. It was truly history on the road, giving me the opportunity to see the variety of sites administered by the National Park Service. I visited national parks, drove a road nominated for National Historic Trail status, and spent three weeks just a stone's throw from national seashores. The trip also included seeing three presidents' homes, the lowest-elevation point in North America, and the oldest living trees on the planet.

Going west, I drove about eight to ten hours each day. After a night in Nashville, Tennessee, I angled northwest and went past the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area in Tennessee and waved to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis as I sped by on the interstate to Columbia, Missouri. Between there and Denver, my next destination, I visited the homes of two U.S. presidents with Smokey Bear connections. In 1952, President Harry Truman signed the Smokey Bear Act (66 Stat. 92), which

protects the Smokey Bear symbol from unauthorized use. His successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, took delivery of the first officially authorized Smokey Bear toys a year later.

I stopped in Independence, Missouri, to see Truman's house (top), which is located in a residential neighborhood. Not a bad place for a failed haberdasher! His museum and library are located nearby and are operated by the National Archives.

The modest farmhouse outside Abilene,

Kansas, where Eisenhower grew up now shares a campus with his museum and presidential library. Like with Truman, the Park Service manages Ike's home and National Archives the library and museum. I have to say that Ike looked pretty good for 126 years old, although he was a bit on the thin side.

The museum has a cross-section of the famed Eisenhower Tree, a loblolly pine at Augusta National Golf Club (home of the Masters Tournament), of which Ike was





a member. Ike hit the tree so many times while playing the seventeenth hole that he proposed having it cut down. Legend has it that instead of allowing a vote whose outcome would embarrass Ike, the club's president quickly adjourned the meeting. The tree was finally cut down in 2014, after being damaged in an ice storm.¹

From Denver I went through Salt Lake City and on to Reno, Nevada. Having

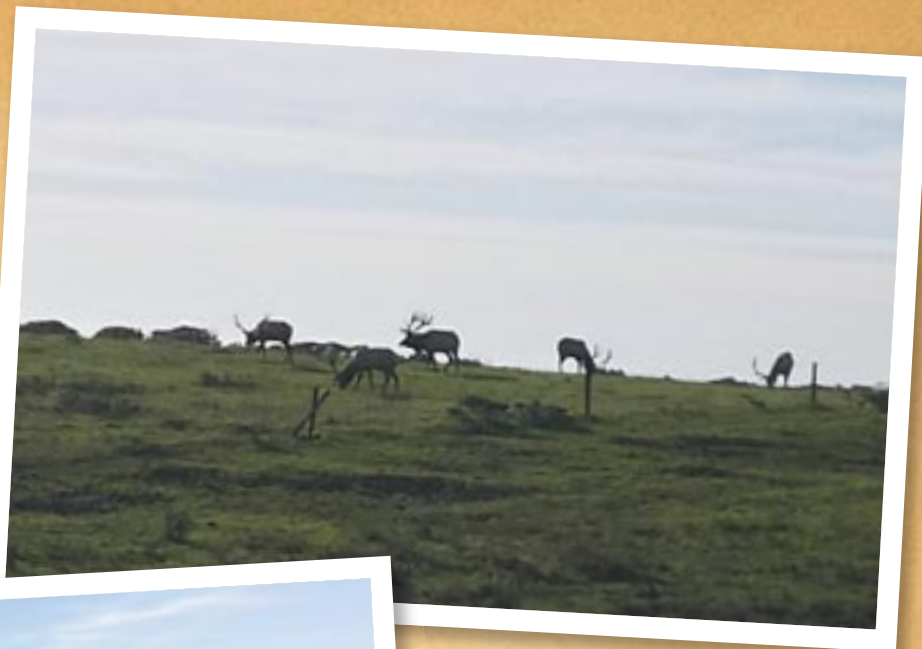
crossed Utah at night on a previous trip, I hadn't seen *Metaphor: The Tree of Utah*, a sculpture along the interstate. It stands along the roadside in the middle of the Bonneville Salt Flats, which is managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Fifteen miles west of the sculpture is a rest area. There you can walk out onto the flats and look toward where, for more than a century, the fearless and daring have come

to set land-speed records in cars and motorcycles. I found this 40-square-mile landform fascinating. "Otherworldly" doesn't begin to describe this odd bit of public land. Rimmed by distant mountains, the salt flats look like an ice-covered lake and made me think of Mars. It was so flat I'd swear I could see the curvature of the earth. Little did I know that I would see a similar view again in Death Valley.

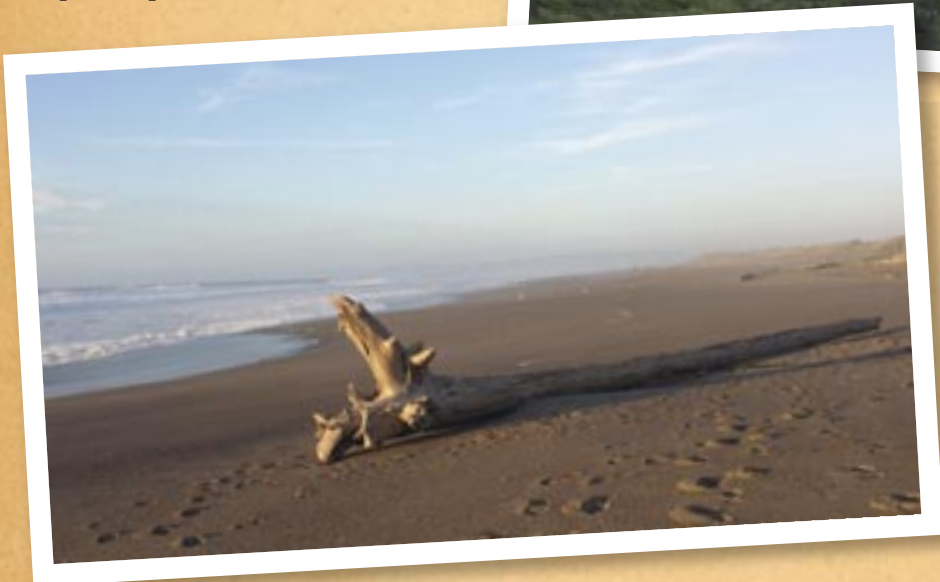


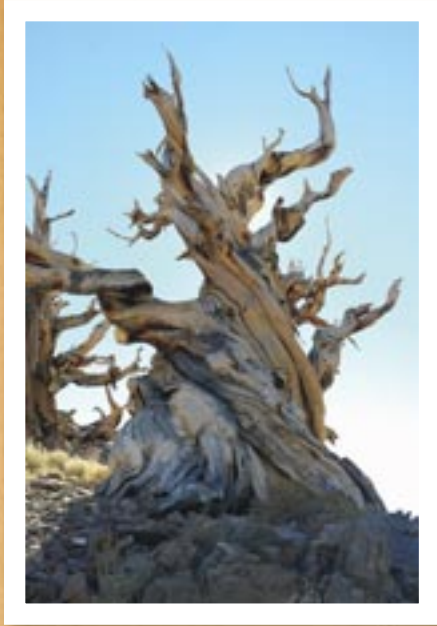
After the Salt Flats, I crossed the Great Basin (but did not visit the titular park in eastern Nevada) and on to the Bay Area. The greater San Francisco area is rich in federal public lands, including the Golden Gate Park Headlands, where I watched surfers try their luck in the cold Pacific; Muir Woods, which I had visited before; and Point Reyes National Seashore, adjacent to where I was staying in the village of Point Reyes Station. I went on several bike rides through the rolling hills of the national seashore, and twice by car went out to the picturesque lighthouse and walked the beaches, where I saw some impressive pieces of driftwood. The road



to the lighthouse goes past historic cattle ranches. But instead of grazing cows, I saw deer and, to my surprise, elk. Later I learned that at the northern end of Point Reyes is the Tule Elk Reserve. The diversity of visual offerings and magnificent beauty across Point Reyes easily explain why I've gone out of my way to visit there on two other occasions.

The other thing I learned, though the hard way, is that some of the trees near the Point Reyes lighthouse possess the ability to sneak up on unsuspecting tourists and pounce on them.



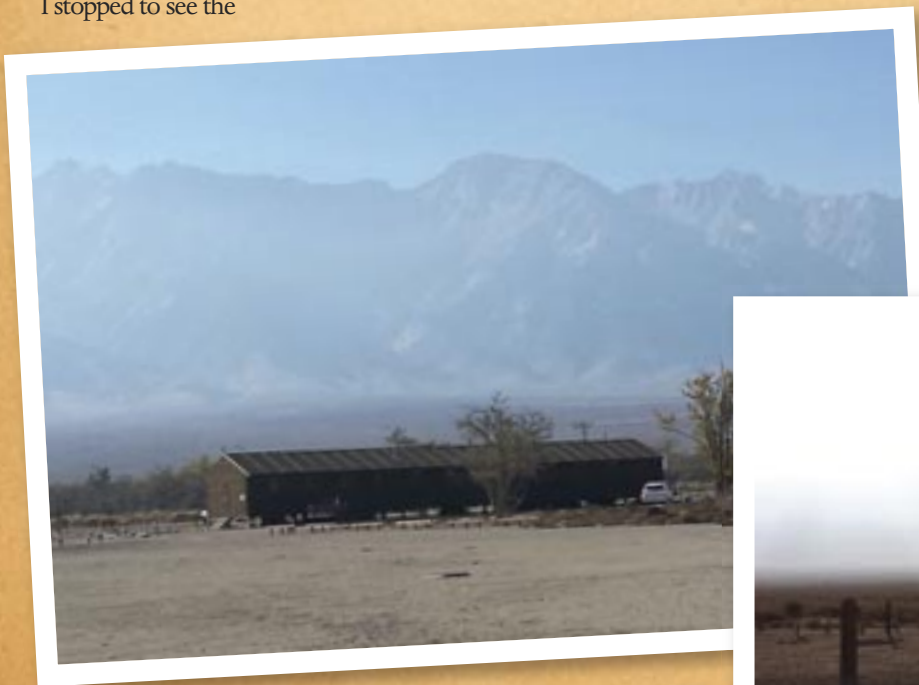


After leaving Point Reyes, I drove east to Lake Tahoe to camp and then headed south to Bishop, California, birthplace of Horace Albright, second director of the National Park Service. Over the next two days I drove up into the White Mountains to hike Schulman Grove, named for researcher Edmund Schulman², on the Inyo National Forest—home to *Pinus longaeva*, the ancient Great Basin bristlecone pine trees (other federally protected areas include Great Basin and Bryce Canyon national parks). Some of these gnarled living oddities are more than 4,000 years old. Before driving into the White Mountains, I stopped to see the



Roosevelt Tree, a century-old giant sequoia that stands at the western terminus of the road to Schulman Grove. The visual contrast between the two species could not be more striking.

I spent two days photographing trees that looked dead but somehow survive in an incredibly exacting climate at 10,000 feet, and then left for Death Valley National Park. But I could not go there without visiting Manzanar National Historic Site. It was the first of the ten World War II-era Japanese-American internment camps, or “war relocation centers,” hastily established in March 1942 by the federal government. This particular camp was situated in Owen Valley, an arid, windswept plain, located—ironically—a few miles south of the town of Independence and adjacent to the Lone



Pine Indian Reservation. Living conditions were harsh, but not harsh enough to destroy the love of America the detainees felt. During the war, landscape photographer Ansel Adams photographed the “evacuees” in the camp and the beautiful mountains and valley surrounding it, and assembled into the book *Born Free and Equal: The Story of Loyal Japanese Americans*.³ The Park Service has preserved the cemetery and reconstructed several barracks to show how people lived. The related exhibits in the interpretive center, housed in the historic high school auditorium, are moving and timely, tracing the history of the consequences of wartime hysteria for minority populations in America from the early twentieth century to the present. Facts can be a powerful weapon against bigotry.

At Death Valley, the largest national park outside Alaska, the ecological offerings seemed a pastiche of other landscapes: the sand mounds in the Mesquite Flat Dunes reminded me of both Cape Hatteras National Seashore in North Carolina and Great Sand Dunes National Park in southeastern Colorado; the salt flats at Badwater Basin—the lowest point in North America—looked like the

Bonneville Salt Flats, but even more expansive, with five times the area. Yet, where else can you crane your neck looking up to see a sign that reads SEA LEVEL?

As a historian, I feel obliged to stop at any interpretative center. Like that at Manzanar, Death Valley’s does an outstanding job of explaining the area’s natural and human histories. I highly recommend both centers.

When leaving the valley, I headed east and gained more than a mile in elevation. I stopped at Zabriskie Point and Dante’s View to watch the sun set over the far side of the valley. In the fading light, the haze made the salt flat look like a flowing river. A full day in Death Valley left me feeling alive.

After a long, dark drive that night through the desert and Las Vegas (speaking of otherworldly!), I stayed in Kingman, Arizona, along historic Route 66. Famed in song and story, the Mother Road was nominated for National Historic Trail status in February 2017, thirty-two years after it was decommissioned. Three days later, as I came back through Nashville, I did a quick pass by the Hermitage, Andrew Jackson’s home (presidential house number 3!), and then drove on to spend

Thanksgiving just north of Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

In ten days’ time, I had walked among the oldest living trees in the world, stood at the lowest point in the northern hemisphere, and visited two national seashores a continent apart. National parks: America’s best idea, indeed! □

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NOTES

1. For more on the Eisenhower Tree, see my essay “A Blogpost Unlike Any Other: The Eisenhower Tree, The Masters, and Forest History,” *Peeling Back the Bark*, April 6, 2017, <https://fhsarchives.wordpress.com/2017/04/06/the-eisenhower-tree-the-masters-and-forest-history/>.
2. In the 1950s, Edmund Schulman had conducted groundbreaking dendrochronological research in the grove. Thomas J. Straka, “Biographical Portrait: Edmund P. Schulman (1908–1958),” *Forest History Today* Spring 2008: 46–49.
3. Published in late 1944, the book provoked criticism for his sympathetic portrayal of the interned citizens. See *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography* (New York: Little, Brown, 1985), 256–64.

