



## The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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**J**ohn Steinbeck wrote in *Travels with Charley*, his paean (RIP Snake) to road trips, that each trip is “... a person in itself; no two are alike. ... We find that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.”

I recalled Mr. Steinbeck the other day when I took off for Saratoga Springs on a two-day jaunt to ferry the belongings my daughter, Addie, had stored in our basement at Right Field World Headquarters to her new apartment in the heart of Saratoga’s old neighborhood. Since both Addie and her roommate Emily work crazy hours at several jobs, I wouldn’t have much time with them. So I blasted up the DeweyThrewey at slightly over the 65 m.p.h. suggested speed limit, stopping only in Utica for gas and a cheeseburger from the cheapskate menu at my favorite Wendy’s, where I get the 10% senior discount without having to ask. Google Maps says it’s a four hour and 36-minute trip to Saratoga, and allowing some extra for the gas and cheeseburger, I wasn’t far off, arriving in time for dinner.

We shared a fun evening—I love visiting her on her turf without any hometown temptations or baggage— and we unloaded her stuff and got her place in order. The next morning, we had time for a hurried breakfast and a quick visit to one of my daughter’s other jobs as a guide at Adirondack Extreme, a high ropes course near Lake George. Great place, by the way, for the whole family. Still early in the day, I hugged her, told her I was proud, and turned my car around for the return trip on the interstate.

Then I said, wait a minute; I’m not in a hurry. Why get back on the Thruway and joust with the tandem tractor-trailers fish-tailing at 70 m.p.h., the NASCAR wannabes tailgating (“Rubbin’ is racin’” as they say) and then accelerating to 90, and the timid set hanging out in the left lane going 60. There is nothing even remotely enjoyable about it; it certainly isn’t worth the 12-buck toll. And the view? Mr. Steinbeck said this about the interstate highways in 1960, and it remains true: “It’s

now possible to go from one end of the country to the other without seeing anything.”

I recalled long ago summers when we visited Gramma and Grandpa Ohler in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Many of those trips were in the '50s, before the New York Thruway was finished, when crossing the breadth of the state meant traveling Route 20A/Route 20 from East Aurora to Rotterdam, where we'd go northeast to Schenectady, Troy and into New England, retracing our steps two weeks later. What the heck, I thought. I'd be doing everyone a service by staying off the interstate—the Slab, as bikers call it—and having some *déjà vu* on Route 20.

I dropped down from Lake George to Saratoga, onto Route 30 through towns that had international names if decidedly rural American realities—Galway, Perth, Amsterdam—and then onto Route 20 at the optimistically named Esperance.

I would love to ask Mom and Dad what it was like for them on those voyages—the four, then five of us sardined into a Nelson A. Holmes & Sons Rambler, along with all teddy bears, toothbrushes, sneakers, tennis rackets, swim suits, towels, lunches, pillows, suitcases, coloring books and crayons. I do recall that Mom had perfected the art of packing the car while Dad had perfected the art of grumbling from the driver's seat that she was taking too long and we'd never get there if we didn't leave right then. We kids, right on cue, began asking “How much longer?” by about Warsaw and pointed out every ice cream stand for all of the 275 miles of Route 20.

Route 20, back then, was not built for speed. It was two lanes for 200 miles with towns every few miles, and it carried trucks, buses, hay wagons, lumber haulers, farm tractors, slowpokes and speeder, and Ramblers full to the gunwales with kids. It must have taken forever. But Mom, who rarely drove (thankfully) had also perfected the art of keeping us happy. We played endless rounds of Gulf Trav-L-Bingo, courtesy of Woody's Gulf station at Park Place and Main. Trav-L-Bingo challenged us to find roadside items like chicken, a bank, a church, a court building, a fire station, a cat in a window, stuff you'd never see on the interstate. We played the out-of-state license plate game, imagining exotic places like Nebraska or New Mexico or California when we spotted a plate.

Route 20 welcomed the itinerant traveler in those days, passing close to several Finger Lakes, offering a short side trips to Cooperstown and Howe Caverns, and taking the Rambler on a roller coaster ride of breathtaking, undulating hills that required downshifting to get up and hot brakes to get down. The towns all bustled; when we decided to stop for lunch or a snack, we had our pick of mom & pop diners, hot dogs stands, custard shacks. Every few miles we'd see campgrounds, motels, cabins, tourist homes, fruit and vegetable stands. And roadside attractions? We'd pester Dad and Mom mercilessly, until they relented and wasted precious money on the Authentic (not!) Indian Village or the Petrified Creatures (which turned out to be cement figures of dinosaurs). The road was long, but it was intimate, a stroll among friends where you never felt alienated.

The geography of Route 20 hasn't changed a bit; The Ice Age, New York's most inspired landscape architect, created as majestic a corridor through farm and forest as you'll find anywhere. But the economy, that's a different story.

At Esperance, my eastern jumping off point, I decided I would look for a cup of coffee, but I would only patronize a non-chain diner. I rolled through Sloansville, Carlisle, Sharon, Leesville, Cherry Valley, Springfield Center—40 miles—before I found a single business open, well, unless you include the Walmart distribution center that's as big as an army base. Whole towns resembled the remnants of an unsuccessful garage sale. Petrified Creatures, the place we clamored for once upon a time was closed and falling into dilapidation. I doubted that American Pickers would find anything in the ruins of silent motels, shuttered restaurants, down on their luck antique stores.

I was thrilled to find, in Richfield Springs finally, the community market, not unlike our own co-op, open and with hot coffee ready. I asked the genial manager about the surrounding communities. "People are still getting over the Thruway coming in, and that was half a century ago. Route 20 travelers used to be our lifeblood, our cash crop. Whole towns depended on it. We get some people coming through like you're doing, but it's mostly nostalgia. That and not wanting to pay the tolls." Guilty, I told him, on both counts.

I continued westward, taking my time, amazed that on a Tuesday afternoon in May, hardly anyone else was stirring in the stunning landscape of eastern New York. Eventually, population centers appeared: Cazenovia, Skaneateles, Auburn, Seneca Falls, Waterloo, Geneva, Canandaigua—towns, like our own, that are vowing to remain relevant in an age when the interstate goes right by.

I spent seven hours on Route 20, where the Thruway might have gotten me home in four. But I dawdled, gawked at the beauty, took photos and let a simple return trip become an odyssey. I trust Mr. Steinbeck would be pleased.