

TUCSON AND THE DESERT - APRIL 1993

The general concept was to go to a meeting in Tucson, the main part for me being Sunday afternoon. But I also thought the Monday and Tuesday sessions would be worthwhile. Given that April is good desert time and Kristina lives in Tucson we decided to drive down in the *Toy* and take the rest of the week off to do some desert camping and exploring.

Friday - Left work about 2 PM and was gone from Cupertino by a bit after 3. Quite a lot of traffic leading out of the Bay Area for the weekend already, but not too bad. Stopped in Bakersfield for an uninteresting fast food diner at Carl Jr's and then on to San Bernadino where we had made motel reservations. Over 400 miles from home but got to bed before midnight.

Saturday - Didn't start super early since hadn't gone to bed really early. Coffee at the hotel and then over to Joshua Trees National Monument. Being able to spend some time there was a reward for driving so far the night before. Once we got away from the LA smog things got nice what with spectacular mountains and green/colored desert. A bush (tumbleweed?) had lot of yellow flowers on it, for example. Stopped at a visitor center in JTNM to get some literature and ask what was especially nice. Actually the Joshua trees there were about the best bloomers we saw anywhere in the park. Also nice were the blooming Yucca plants. (When we got home a week later we noted that ours looked as good as any of "their's.") Looked at all this and then drove slowly throughout the Park from the NW corner to the SE corner stopping at places of interest - so sort of on our way to Arizona. The rocks there are really spectacular but we didn't have time to go for a hike. Saw some very nicely blooming Ocotillo plants near the SE exit. There was lots of color across much of the desert floor and when we stopped at one rather arbitrary place and walked a little bit we saw more than a couple of dozen different wild flowers. Most of these you don't see until you slowly walk along staring down. Then got into more serious driving to Tucson. Only goof off time was to do a back road outing just after we crossed into Arizona - fun but not spectacular; and to have dinner in Phoenix. The latter was at a good Mexican restaurant and we enjoyed it. Onward to Tucson. Turned out Mrs. L was there since she had gotten to go to Phoenix as part of an Allstate gift to employees. So the five of us chatted and then we hit the sack; rather tired from the driving in bright sun.

Sunday - Mrs. L left fairly early to drive to Phoenix and catch her plane back to San Jose. The rest of us took it easy and eventually I cooked eggs for everyone. Sunday afternoon was my major meeting - *SOI-MDI Co-Investigators Meeting*. It went fine. Meanwhile Dawna and K did some running around. They took the air-conditioned/fun *Toy* and I used K's old Volkswagen Beetle. Then Dawna cooked the smoked turkey we had brought with us. K invited a couple of her long time girl friends over and the 6 of us had a nice meal. Fun to sit around with the young.....

Monday - I spent the day at the meeting. Did manage to take an hour walk over the noon hour - getting mighty hot out for such an activity, however. Dawna and K went to some of second hand stores, then K went to her classes, and Dawna continued shopping. Lots of good finds and she really enjoyed the (low) Tucson prices. That night was the Meeting Banquet, which we went to. It

was 10 miles north of town at what used to be a stagecoach stop but is now a western style restaurant. Probably a reasonable place to go on your own but wasn't great at all for this group of nearly 100 person. Service was poor and the steak was a small fillet that was over cooked. We were eating outside under a tent and the desert air was initially nice and then eventually cold. John Leibacher made a point of sitting with us/Dawna and it was nice to chat with him. Lise wasn't there unfortunately - she hasn't got a lot of energy says John even though officially the cancer hasn't returned.

Tuesday - More meetings for me, again with a noon walk. More junk-store shopping for Dawna and K. Again successful. Also Dawna did the necessary things for our rolling out the next day; like buying food, making ice, etc. That night we took the kids to dinner at Sanchez's. A not fancy but excellent Mexican restaurant. Large and very good burritos are their specialty. Played some cards (contract rummy) and then to bed. Actually we had played cards two or three times during the visit and K won darn near every game!

Wednesday - Didn't go to the remaining half day of the meeting. Instead got up relatively early, ate a little breakfast and headed towards California ... through Phoenix and started towards Kingman along the Joshua Tree Parkway. Various wild flowers. Before we got into Joshua tree country we took a wrong turn and by the time we realized it we said "what the heck" we've been on the Parkway before but not these roads so we saw some new landscapes and left Arizona at Parker and drove up to Needles - spectacular country. Saw lots of blooming ocotillo along the way. Filled up with gas and then drove into our destination area - East Mojave National Scenic Area. Went to Hole-in-the-Wall campground and set up camp. Not many people, fine views - especially of the interesting rock formation filled with holes, not hot or cold, and a bit windy. Took out the good old black box, started the charcoal, and had steak for dinner; plus red wine of course. Peaceful and nice although the steaks were a bit tough. Walked around a bit and then early to bed. Some heavy winds kept us a wake for an hour or two during the night but other than that we had a fine night's rest with it cooling off nicely but not too cold.

Thursday - Let the sun on the tent warm us up and then up for breakfast. We had forgotten to bring the instant coffee but had brought some regular so learned how to put it in the tea kettle, bring the whole thing to a boil, then turn down the fire and let the grounds settle down, and then drink it - basically camp coffee but without throwing in an egg shell. Worked fine and the standard coffee cake made for a fine breakfast. Went for an hour or so hike/climb around the neat rock area, "discovering" cactus amongst the rocks as we hiked. By the time we finished that the new/small visitor center was opened; it hadn't been the prior afternoon. A volunteer lady was running it and she didn't really know much about the area but we chatted, looked at all sorts of literature, and bought a useful map. Drove one of the many back roads - gravel but really didn't require 4 wheel drive - through some fine scenery stopping to look at various outstanding cacti as we found them. Checked out the other camp grounds (Midhills) which was at a higher elevation and thus had trees and large camp sites but would have been too cold. Then made a driving loop - in case anyone is looking at a map this amounted to Cedar Canyon Road to Kelso-Cima Road, past the Kelso Depot where they are restoring an old train station, basically to the Kelso Dunes (large sand dunes) and then cut back east taking a true 4 wheel drive road, but not a difficult one. Lots of fine scenery and views. Goal was to make it to Mitchell Caverns for the daily tour at 1:30

and by racing the last few miles we did. The ranger who was conducting the tour was enjoyable as he had lived there conducting tours for a couple of years several years ago but hadn't been back for 3 years or so and was filling in for someone who was sick. He really enjoyed his home coming with us and kept commenting on the changes. One was that after walking a half mile or so to the entrance to the caverns he found out the lights weren't on, so he had to go back and turn them on while the rest of us waited. Well we had seen a couple of large Chuckwalla lizards (like 16 inches) during the walk and felt lucky; now one was sunning himself 50 feet from the cave entrance. Dawna managed to approach it slowly enough to catch it and then let the couple of cute kids on the tour (and me) feel it before she released it. The tour of the caverns was good but not great compared to some. The caverns are up on the side of the Providence Mountains with a fantastic view so we decided to have dinner at the picnic area there. We had brought everything with us ... but the charcoal lighter. Eventually got the fire going using little twigs. Cooked a different type of steak than the night before, continued to work on the relatively large bottle of red wine, and enjoyed the view. After dinner we did a short nature trail walk. The descriptive text didn't always match what we saw but we did see plenty and the area had many cacti. Oh, yes, when we had gone walking in the rocks that morning we had spied some left over firewood at an outback "campsite" and when we did our back road driving we had put it in the car. Plan was to have a camp fire that night. However, by the time we got back to camp we were relatively tired and it was pretty windy; so we didn't go for that one. Thank goodness - as the wind got worse and worse. It got so bad we couldn't even come close to getting to sleep but based on our experience of the night before we figured it would get better soon. It never did. Instead it managed to blow things so much and especially to flap the rainfly up and down until eventual it broke tent poles and nearly blew the entire tent over. We laid inside feeling rather helpless, but out of harms way. Did go out into the gale once but couldn't think of anything constructive to do - it probably would have helped to have undone the rain fly which by now had a couple of tent poles sticking through it. Anyway, not much sleep was obtained but eventually the wind died down somewhat.

Friday - Looking over the situation assured us that too much was broken to reassemble things in any reasonable amount of time so we had our coffee and coffee cake, packed up the camp, and headed out to enjoy the day anyway. South and southeast to Essex where we thought we might find gas - but didn't. However along the way we did see a Desert Tortoise in the road and stopped and looked him over, played with him a bit, and then put him down on the desert floor rather than the road. A neat find, as they are rather rare now days. Took famous old Route 66 from Essex to Amboy the goal being to explore the Amboy Crater (and to get some gas). Four-wheeled to fairly close to the crater and then hiked to it and up it. Hot but not terrible and a nice looking crater. Back to town and filled up with gas and then headed due north. Took off on a four wheel road towards the Marble Mountains but they didn't look great and the road was awfully sandy so we stopped, had some lunch, and then returned to the main hiway. Then stopped at the Granite Mountains. Spectacular rocks. Hiked around them, lots of cacti (even took a neat barrel with red spines but don't tell anyone as it was certainly illegal), and a generally very neat area. Then pretty much drove straight to Baker - through various pieces of fine country side. Checked into a motel where the people assured Dawna she could cook on the little patio outside the room and there was a table in the room we could eat dinner on. I took a swim - cold and nice. We both got cleaned up, and then did chicken on the black box. Didn't have any BBQ sauce but used V8 juice and it turned out fine.

Really windy and we sat inside our sturdy motel room, eating our chicken, drinking white wine, and remembering the wind of the night before.

Saturday - Went to the Mad Greek's for breakfast as the motel lady had recommended this local place for dinner or breakfast rather than Denny's across the street. Nice waitress, plenty of coffee, and way too much food. Dawna had a chorizo omelet and I had scrambled eggs with chorizo mixed in. Quite tasty. Filled up with gas and then back into the midst of the Scenic Area to see the largest forest of Joshua trees in the world. Amazing. Stopped and did a couple mile easy hike in the midst of them. Not only all sizes of Joshua trees but also blooming desert flowers and cacti. Neat and the weather was sunny but cool. Drove through Cima and then the Cedar Canyon Road again, to the east this time. Then north on the Ivanpah Road. Tried to 4-wheel to the Castle Peaks area but never found the right road plus it didn't look great so gave up on it. Amazing quantity of yellow flowers along the Ivanpah Valley road and great vistas. Started to explore the Clark Mountain area north of I-15 but didn't seem great and it was getting late so we headed home with several stops planned along the way. First stop was the Barstow with three objectives - go to the Desert Information Office for general literature, get an ice cream cone for me, and visit the Rainbow Nat'l Natural Landmark area north of town. Did two (the latter) of the three but took more time than planned. The Rainbow area was neat but can't compete with areas in Utah and Colorado. Dawna did fine (maybe) a fossil, which had to be left there - we do follow the rules most of the time. Onward to Tehachapi for dinner. Wasted a bit of time trying to find Old Town where we had seen adds for a pizza place and a Mexican place. Had a OK Mexican dinner; not nearly as good as Sanchez's in Tucson but a lot better than a fast food place. Then continued towards home. Sun was setting, countryside is beautiful, and sorta by accident we drove a bit of back road before getting to the freeway. It is the road that has the views of the unique Tehachapi Loop of train track, which we had deliberately gone to see once before and that time we waited for a train to make the loop; this time we just drive by. Then drove on and on and got home a bit before 1 AM. The idea had been that since we were no longer camping we'd spend Saturday sightseeing as planned but then drive home that evening rather than stay at a motel. Worked out fine.

Sunday - Home, of course. Unpacked and put most things away, but didn't start to deal with the tent and broken poles yet. Did do a long job of cleaning the *Toy*, however. And also wrote much of this trip letter. **Very** unusual to do so the first day back but that was part of the "reward" for coming home early. Had taken my palmtop computer with me to Phoenix and figured I'd write much of the trip letter en route but turned out I only type on it a few minutes at Kristina's. Too busy enjoying her to spend time typing.

Summary - Need to get some new tent poles and a new rainfly - or repair the old one; and next time we'll try removing the rainfly if it is super windy. Desert was beautiful and the *Toy* is the right vehicle for us to run around in.