

A LITTLE PATCH OF BLUE

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Why don't you just fly? It would be so much quicker...

The persistent “ding, ding, ding” was an annoying reminder that my species, *Homo timidus vagrantis gypsiana*, was now journeying outside of its natural habitat and should forthwith return to the safety of the sheet metal cocoon. South Pass, Wyoming was windswept and inhospitable indeed—a place that only goat ranchers and geologists could find interesting. So what was I doing here?

I had come to experience the Mormon Trail. It was my pathway back to the East Coast—to New England—a land of beauty, civility, and history. The selfsame land abandoned by the very people for whom the trail was named. I caught the irony of my situation. Doing things backwards and the hard way had become second nature to me. But, I thought if nothing else, my present surroundings would at least provide a fitting point of comparison and contrast. I had cobbled together a plan to trace the trail (in reverse) and produce a series of paintings in exchange for gas money. Once back East, my leave of absence would include visits to museums and hours of painting and photographing the New England countryside. But first I had to get there, and after fifty years of knowing myself I had a sense that there would be more to this adventure than I was letting myself in on.

Heraclitus said “You can't step twice into the same river...” but how about the same cow pie?

I had caught some news footage a few years back of gangs of Mormon youth “re-creating” the trek of the handcart companies that labored across the plains in the 1850s. It was part of the 150-year anniversary of the pioneers entering the Salt Lake Valley. I remembered that at the time I had reacted with disdain to this activity. My experience and my nature inform me that comparison in general is frail and comparison with the past—futile. The simple fact is that change defies repetition because, well, things are different. And things here were *different*. The Merrell's, Teva's, Oakley's, and Bauer's weren't exactly pioneer names... if you get my drift. Everyone looked well-clad and well-fed. There was little threat of dis-ease and none of disease. No danger, death, or attack was possible. The ambiguity of an unknown destination was not present. So—what were they trying to prove? Well, perhaps they were searching for the same thing I was—some connection to the event and the place. They were just doing it in a little more literal way. A false comparison to

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Looking toward Montrose, Iowa

OIL ON CANVAS 28 1/2" x 14"



Shady Grove, Mount Pisgah, Iowa

OIL ON CANVAS 28 1/2" x 24"

be sure—but maybe that’s about as good as it gets these days. After all, I had to decide what form my tribute would take—and I could not in good conscience ridicule theirs.

The Beatles Meet Orson Pratt

My rented 2005 Toyota Camry was the wonder of its age—so silent and deceptively efficient that it allowed me to glide to the accompaniment of stereophonic music and conditioned air at speeds beyond pioneer dreaming. For me the Mormon Trail was becoming a yellow stripe four inches wide and 1300 miles long. The twelve-foot “dotted” lines flickered past like a kinescope reel and prompted the thought that each was four or five paces for the pioneer—not to mention the forty feet of unpainted interval from each to each. As I tracked across the vast land I experienced a foreboding sense of ennui—familiar artistic frustration. How do you convey this to people? The modern age seems to demand insight without immersion and depth without dedication. Okay—I was cut out for this, but—I wanted something more. The expectation would be to flit along the trail and produce a body of work with some degree of accuracy and sense of place. But I knew that the immutable laws of conscience required chunks of flesh in exchange for glimmers of insight. Again...the fifty years. I realized at some point I would indeed have to forsake the cocoon and scrape mud and cockle burrs. Maybe driving across four states would count as a modern equivalent for pioneering. I took another gulp of my Slurpee and thought about it.

The Rockies and South Pass ultimately gave way to a landscape with a variety of new names and new places—Ice Spring Slough, Split Rock, Devil’s Gate, Heber Spring, Porter’s Rock, Guernsey Ruts, Mexican Hill, Prayer Circle Bluffs, Chimney Rock, Ash Hollow. I was now out on the Great Plains. There was something new about this place for a westerner. The vista was endless, the sky a vacant blue dome, the electric air full of insect noise. I now ventured many times along the wayside—tromping weeds, breaking reeds. This was all new territory for me—and therefore exciting. Most of my meandering was done on Highway 26 as it conveniently crisscrossed the ancient trail. It was marked with many signs which supplied information on points of interest. The Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, Pioneer Trails Association, the National Park Service, and the U.S. Department of the Interior had all combined to clarify and illuminate the journey. I suppose I slowly began to realize that my project would be an attempt to convey a feeling of the landscape without the didacticism of illustration. Let me explain.

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Let the magic happen....

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People who do not dabble in the arts generally do not understand the concept of what we shall term an “artistic conversation.” That is, that the finished art piece oftentimes emerges a very different entity than the original plan would have led one to believe. To some this would simply be a failure of control, artistic skill, or technique. But there is another explanation that is worthy of mention. I have come to understand that in creating a work of art, one must remain open to the possibilities that present themselves. That creating a work is, in a way, a magical experience. To exert too much control is to stifle the very creative forces that one is attempting to engage. I know myself, and therefore know that if the problem is ever too clearly defined, I will immediately abandon the project. I knew, therefore, that there would be no lines of wagons or handcarts in my paintings, no columns of trudging figures or oxen kicking up dust. To do so would be to provide a lexicon, not a novel. I felt that the rendering of the experience now fit perfectly with my painting style—especially as I moved through Nebraska and into Iowa—where the edges were soft and the air was sweet. The landscape of the trail would be suggested, hinted, guessed—never burnished. I didn’t want locations to be too obvious—although places like Chimney Rock are a little hard not to recognize immediately.

Even though the outcome of the project was to me a great unknown, I suppose that I just wanted to try to respond to this place—this effort—this monumental migration over these mud ruts and grass fields. I guess I felt a little like the Saints themselves as they lifted their eyes above the mosquitoes, camp smoke, manure, horseflies, sickness, exposure and the wretched burden of endless tramping and gazed out over 360 degrees of endless possibility toward the sky with a little patch of blue. ☺



Ayers Natural Bridge, Wyoming

OIL ON CANVAS 18" x 24"



Chimney Rock, Nebraska

OIL ON CANVAS 18" x 24"



Headwaters of the Platte

OIL ON CANVAS 24" x 18"



Squall at South Pass, Wyoming

OIL ON CANVAS 24" x 18"