

TRAVELS IN A Chevy Van

A trip across America



With Roger Mayes and Sally Lackaff

Written and illustrated by Sally Lackaff ©2000

For the month of October and more, we went on a trip across the continent, with goals of Michigan and Maine. All along, our objective was to visit our respective parents, and take in as much as humanly and vehicularly possible on our vaguely straight course. As on any journey, plans warp and weave, priorities shift and flex, and along with accomplishing our primary aims, seeing new sights has opened our minds to new possibilities.

ARTISTS

In the Upper mitten of Michigan we visited a print shop - the studio, press, and shop of Gwen Frostic, an artist who for more than 40 years has been dedicating herself and her art to minute and beautiful details of Nature, rendered in lino-cut prints, and produced on 10 antique Heidelberg presses right before your eyes in Benzonia, MI. To a fascinatingly designed building of unshapen wood and boulder, people come in huge and regular droves to buy Frostic cards, calendars, books, etc., and have been doing so for years. Shelves are built of rough-hewn, half polished slabs of log; burls and nests and interesting artifacts of the wild adorn the walls along with cobwebs and scraps of man-made creatures. A running waterfall and tiny pond, filled with moss and water plants, greet you in the foyer, and a chipmunk has free run of the building. It is a wonderful spot, and remarkable in that really all one comes to do here is shop - while a small room houses a library of well-thumbed natural history books, there is no museum, or fancy garden, or interpretive center. It is Gwen Frostic herself, 90-some years old and a mysterious personality, who forms the focal point of interest and ambiguity; and her continuous devotion to pointing out and stressing the importance of the natural world is apparently an on-going inspiration and reminder to succeeding generations. Fan letters from all over the world decorate select walls, and books are filled with gushing words of praise from countless admirers.

I am clearly one myself, of her beliefs as well as her deceptively simple, almost period-style art. My first encounter with this work came as a birthday present, a slim hand-crafted book with ethereal shadowy coloured images of tree branches and moss and insects and small furry things, and words printed in old-fashioned font speaking of just walking and looking at the world around. Later, I came upon another similar book, and thinking they were quite old, was surprised when a friend presented me with a current calendar by the same hand. I was also pleased to find out that Gwen Frostic was a favorite artist of a dear great-aunt, who continuously distributed her work throughout the family.

Gwen Frostic, who hides herself away in her office drawing while her magic elves print and collate and fold and press her works (so it was explained to us by the man monitoring the presses), seems to live inside the images of her mind, where she pontificates and ruminates on the relationships between man, nature, and the universe, forever enthralled with the mysteries of life in the world around us and determined to impress the importance of these mysteries on the people of this world.



Our trip was blessed by many such brushes with art, both man-made and natural; and it seems that the works which impressed me most were almost always somehow a combination of the two.

Passing through Montreal we made the art museum there a primary stop, and were rewarded by centuries-old iconic images, a room of Dürer prints, and most of all, an exceptional gold painting from the 1400's by Mantegna, of Dido - Queen of ancient Carthage, whose ingenuity won her the city. (She also made us homesick, reminding us of our cat by the same name.) Lexington, KY sported life-sized statues of horses on every downtown street corner, each individually painted and decorated by different artists. Some were lovely, and though many were corny, they aimed to demonstrate a wide sampling of the abilities of Kentucky artists.

In Maine, we gleaned a taste of the inspiration that so influenced a great many artists - the lovely, harsh rocky coast. Here, for obvious reasons of beauty, a rich selection of artists honed their craft, depicting the tiny islands, the brilliant ocean, the stony shorelines and stark lighthouses. The Portland Museum of Art was handily displaying a show of the works of NC Wyeth at the time of our visit - a huge variety of his work spanning all his passages of stimulus, from elaborate

book illustrations to a sort of futurism to the sharply detailed scenes of rural Maine. One day, we drove down the coast to the tiny town of Ogunquit to an arts institute housing a museum full of generations of members' works; with plenty of images of the sites we had passed that day, including the view from the building - a small neck of rock upon which a whole herd of people with easels were presently cutting their teeth.

Further down the coast we came to Portsmouth, NH, where, in a cemetery too good to believe, we were captivated by stones dating to the 1600's. The fear and awe of Death was lively in the hearts of those carvers; almost every headstone is lavishly embellished with a fierce and spirited skull, winged and wrapped with trailing plumes. Their hollows eye one from every side as you squat on the cold grass, picking out the obscure abbreviations and old, old names.



STONES

The glorious coastline of Maine became a focal point for one of my overwhelming passions - the amateur examination and collection of rocks. One of the most fascinating breeds of stone was discovered on a point of land known as Prouts Neck (once home of painter Winslow Homer). A public path edges the rim of the neck, which is formed almost exclusively of an amazing substance called schist - it is identical to wood in every observable particular. Grain and knots, big stumps and tiny bits of bark, all are in reality rock. The whole point of land seems to be a big chunk of the stuff, which has through the pressures of ocean and time been demolished into smaller and smaller portions at the rim. It is a remarkable stone, fascinating and puzzling; each time you feel sure that this piece, at least, must be wood - you are wrong.

The collection of rocks has proved to be a primary souvenir fetish. At every stop my eyes find themselves drawn to the earth at my feet - the bedeviled grows, and as each piece of stone is lovelier than the last, it becomes very time-consuming. Pieces of places are to me the most obvious of relics, and in any case, much cheaper than gift store trinkets. At state parks, rest stops, cemeteries, lake beds; from the Craters of the Moon to the Badlands and Black Hills; from the shores of Lake Michigan to the beaches of Maine, our van accumulated a geological weight.

A thwart occurred at Mt. Rushmore, however. Here, below the surprisingly intriguing carvings - truly monumental both physically and artistically - lies a skirting of chunks of the granite blasted during construction. I itched to get my obsessed hands on a piece of the honeycombed stone, crossed with the hollows made by drills and dynamite, but was handicapped by the fences along the walkway, and the countless signs forbidding any further exploration. And finally I learned that the protection was precisely for people like myself, eager to collect a piece of Roosevelt's shapen nose - all the honeycomb rock is considered a part of the monument, and only one piece is known to have ever left the site. So I went away comforted in part by the knowledge that I had been saved, against my will, a lot of prosecution and strife.

On our return trip, rolling along the huge flat bed of the Great Salt Lake Desert, we became aware of several strange unifications of art and stone.

For miles and miles of this windy salty highway, an astounding and seemingly endless parade of faceless people have left their marks. Words are strewn on the barren white soil, formed with countless small black lava rocks and sometimes highlighted with coloured rejected bottles, spelling out a diverse array of names, love messages, warnings, religious threats and promises, and braggings. It seems a pretty unique form of folk art - one has to imagine the myriad cars separately pulled over, their passengers toiling under the monstrous leaden sky as trucks caroom past, honking; gathering up the sparse dark stones and laying them tediously out in the sand; just to leave the world these bizarre mementos of their passage. It certainly made the northwest corner of Utah much more interesting for us.

And passing by a small hillock alongside the road, we realized some hills really do have eyes - two tiny cave entrances had been fitted with barrel ends painted with pupils and whites, set to stare eternally across us and all the other west-bound traffic, across the tarmac, and into the infinity of the desert.



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