

THE ROAD TRIP

Stephen Shore



Beginning in 1955, Robert Frank, funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship, took a series of road trips across America. This project became the archetypal road trip in American photography. The photographs he made were first published in France in 1958 as *Les Américains*. The Grove Press edition of *The Americans*, with text by Frank's friend Jack Kerouac, came out the following year. Kerouac had just, the year before, seen his book, *On the Road*, be published.

Kerouac's first road trip took place in 1947, a decade before the book reached publication. This happened to be the year Robert Frank first came to America. Kerouac writes in the book's first paragraph that he "often dreamed of going West to see the country..."

Going west is a frequent theme of road trips at that time. The year before Kerouac's trip, Bobby Troup, while driving to Los Angeles to make his fortune in Hollywood, wrote the first great road trip song, "Route 66". It was recorded later that year by Nat King Cole.

"If you ever plan to motor west: Travel my way. Take the highway that's the best. Get your kicks on Route 66! It winds from Chicago to L.A. More than 2000 miles all the way..."

I don't know if Jack Kerouac knew the song – he doesn't mention it in his book. He does mention what is perhaps the first road trip movie, Preston Sturges' "Sullivan's Travels". In this film, Sullivan, played by Joel Macrea, is a director of lightweight movies. He decides to tackle a serious subject and make a film about the depression (to be titled "O Brother, Where Art Thou"). To research his story, he dresses as a tramp and sets off on a journey.

Bobby Troup's song contains a magical litany of place names:

"Now you go thru St. Looney; Joplin, Missouri and Okalahoma City is oh so pretty. You'll see Amarillo; Gallup, New Mexico; Flagstaff, Arizona; don't forget Winona, Kingman, Barstow, San Bernadino."

Though I grew up in New York, this song and those names made a powerful impression on me. The place names took on an iconic, a mythic significance. After hearing them for years, I wanted to see these cities. By the late 1960s, I became friendly with a group of young people from Amarillo, who were living in New York. I began visiting Amarillo with them in the summers and found a culture that was alien to my East Coast life. It was fascinating and sparked my interest in, as Kerouac wrote, "going West to see the country".

So, in 1972, I set off on my first photographic road trip, the series that is called “American Surfaces”. A few days after leaving New York, I realized that I wanted to make a photographic diary of the trip: every meal I ate, every person I met, every bed I slept in, every toilet I used, every town I drove through. I also realized that driving for extended periods, seeing the world pass by the windshield for hours, put me in a very clear and focused state of mind. Robert Benton, who wrote the screenplay of the great road movie, “Bonnie and Clyde”, has spoken of discovering, during his youth in Texas, that a compelling aspect of long drives was that they put him in a trance state. The experience seems to me to be more attentive than a trance, but I know what he means. On road trips I am an explorer traveling in a bubble of familiarity, my car. There is the freedom of being able to travel in any direction I want for as long as I want. Each journey is an adventure. Our country is made for long trips. A few years ago I drove from my home in upstate New York to a town just a little southwest of Houston, Texas, to make some photographs. I made the drive in two days. This is about the equivalent of driving from Bilbao to Kiev.

For my 1972 trip, after driving as far west as Utah, I followed Route 66 from Flagstaff all the way east to Chicago: Flagstaff, Winona, Gallop, Albuquerque, Tucumcari, Amarillo, Granite, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Joplin, St. Louis, Normal, Chicago.



Amarillo



Oklahoma City



St. Louis

In April of 1947, Henri Cartier-Bresson began a photographic trip across America. He traveled through the South and into the West. This work was published in the early 50s in Harper's Bazaar at the same time Robert Frank was working as a young staff photographer for Bazaar. Cartier-Bresson's work in some ways prefigures Frank's. There are photographs of self-satisfied politicians, people gambling, American flags, a cross saying "Jesus is coming soon".



1947 was also the year of a great fictional road trip. In August of that year, Humbert Humbert, with Lolita in his car, began his year-long trip across America. Nabokov lists the motels they stay in:

“all those Sunset Motels, U-Beam Cottages, Hillcrest Courts, Pine View Courts, Mountain View Courts, Skyline Courts, Park Plaza Courts, Green Acres, Mac’s Courts.”

Like Bobby Troup’s litany of place names, this has some of the incantational quality seen in American poetry from Walt Whitman to Allen Ginsberg (friend of Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac).

There is something photographic about the way Nabokov respects the descriptive resonance of bare facts:

“We passed and re-passed through the whole gamut of American roadside restaurants, from the lowly Eat with its deer head..., impaled guest checks, life savers, sunglasses, adman visions of celestial sundaes, one half of a chocolate cake under glass, and several horribly experienced flies zigzagging over the sugar-pour on the ignoble counter...”

Lolita was published in 1955, the year of Frank’s trip. A friend of mine, the photographer Tim Davis, recently bought a copy of the first, Olympia Press, edition of *Lolita* on the Lower East Side for \$2. It was annotated by a previous owner, a teacher of American Literature at the New School in New York. Kerouac had taken his class in the late 40s.

These trips were all made by or described by outsiders. Even Kerouac was in some ways an outsider: while raised in Massachusetts, he was from a French-Canadian family and only spoke French until he was six. At one point on Kerouac’s trip, he was hitchhiking from Cheyenne, Wyoming to Denver to visit Neal Cassidy. He writes:

“I got a ride right off from a young fellow from Connecticut who was driving around the country in his jalopy, painting; he was the son of an editor in the East.”

This young man, exploring the West, took him as far as Longmont, Colorado, later the home of the great photographer, Robert Adams.

There seems to have been something in the air that year, 1947 – an urge to get in a car and drive; particularly, to “go West to see the country”. The war had ended and the troops had returned home. America had gone through almost twenty years, a generation, of economic depression, drought, and war. This was the beginning of the baby boom (This was the year I was born). This was the beginning of the American Prosperity that Robert Frank so piercingly saw through. Frank’s vision of the 50s has filtered through our culture much as Walker Evans’ has become the visual experience of the 30s. And the road trip has taken its place in our culture.

