



Blog Post #7: NEW MEXICO-part 2

## Greetings from the Land of Enchantment (Part 2)!

**Leavin' on a Jet Plane.** With a nightcap (e.g. carry-out coffee) in hand, and the crossword from today's *Gallup Independent* mostly completed, I'm awash in the ambience and mystique of El Rancho Hotel in Gallup. This "Home of the Movie Stars" – as pronounced by the hotel's promotional materials – has been our base camp for the last couple of days. Seagram's busy in the parking lot checking the car's vital signs and pre-packing gear for tomorrow's departure – his toils well-illuminated by El Rancho's prodigious neon displays. While in Albuquerque, and then the stretch Route 66 in western New Mexico, we've traveled not only into the mythic past of the highway. We also revisited the myth of our own memories and lives from younger days spent in a different way along this road.

Of course, seeing TJ off at the Albuquerque International Sunport was bittersweet. Surrounded by a totemic array that included three duffle bags, two laptops, miscellaneous taped-up boxes and his backpack – TJ and his gear created a singular tableau. Glancing back toward the car from the Sky Cap's stand, he gave us the thumbs up sign, waved mightily, and took a long and appraising look at the Mustang. His wistful grin hinted at the enormous bond he felt with the vehicle – they were co-conspirators, sharing a secret or crafting a scheme. It astonished me that TJ was game to let Seagram and me finish the drive without him. Although the two never hit it off in earlier years, somehow in the last 48 hours they'd found common ground in this caper, and seemed surprisingly simpatico on most fronts. Perhaps some of evidence of middle age's calming effect on the long arm of college angst and hubris...? As TJ turned around and headed into the terminal, I could tell that he was excited about embarking on his next odyssey. Being an unabashed nomad, he could never resist the call of a new adventure or challenge. And, Seagram was revved up to carry on with the mission at hand – delivering precious automotive cargo to its new home.

**Duke City by Day.** Since finishing college, Seagram (like TJ) had been in and out of Albuquerque countless times. But once they navigated the airport, they would immediately head north on I-25 for business, a weekend party, or a spiritual retreat. Consequently, Seagram hadn't seen anything of ABQ proper in years. It was a given that with our combined years of residence in Albuquerque, Seagram and I were no strangers to its attractions. Driven to make up for lost time and experience what he knew well in a new way, Seagram suggested a more deliberate approach to revisiting our favorite haunts on 66 – the local edition. Thinking of his recent research and writings about the Slow Food Movement's growth in the US, Seagram reasoned that we could apply a similar principle to our meanders. We would re-trace the steps from our UNM

years along Central Avenue – literally. Catching the Route 66 bus at a stop just off Central and Tramway, we improvised a Gray Line Tour – riding west until reaching the stop nearest to Monroe and Central. Seagram relished that East Central had remained just as it was years ago – gritty, edgy, no-nonsense and wide-open. An unassuming mix of manufactured housing outlets, independent mechanics, small businesses, chain motels and fast food spots persisted and thrived, even if the signs and storefronts changed with some regularity. As we continued farther west, the concentration of mom and pop restaurants stood out to us more, as did the number of old motor courts and inns in various stages of repair. Ghosts of our past lives met us at corner after corner. Our ersatz bus tour drew past Griff's (where one of Seagram's friends fortified himself each night on a double burger and rings before starting his shift as night auditor at a nearby motel), the State Fair Grounds (Seagram had worked as a seasonal employee at the race track), and then the tall beacon that we will always call the First National Bank building, (even though it now carries Bank of the West's name). After exiting the bus near Monroe, we walked to the Hiland Theater and admired its grand, if empty marquee. Both of us recalled more than one occasion in the 1980s when we waited in lines that wrapped around the old Walgreen's store (and then along the east side of the building) to see blockbuster movies on the venue's huge screen. We returned to our westward walk – with Seagram remembering low-on-the-line-up touring bands that stayed at the Zia Motel and old Ramada Inn long before they lapsed into sketchy destinations and were razed. He was relieved to find the De Anza remained somewhat intact; his grandparents stayed there when visiting snowbird friends in the 1960s and 1970s. Intrigued to see how other area motor courts had been re-purposed, Seagram felt an immediate kinship with the Aztec Motel's outsider/folk art flourishes.

Continuing on past Carlisle, we picked up a snack at La Montanita Co-op in the Nob Hill Business Center, and took an inventory of chic and whimsical store fronts as we munched and walked. We figured that we'd officially entered the University area as we strode beneath the neon Route 66 "arch" that spans Central just east of Girard. Memories flooded into our conversation as our path crossed Harvard: record buying jags at Budget Tapes & Records, scoring concert tickets and jeans at the General Store, raucous nights at Okie Joe's, pre-Starbucks era espresso at the Purple Hippo, and the parade of hippies, heads, iconoclasts and poets who waved their freak flags high and mighty at Yale Park. On the block west of Yale, we fell into peels of laughter walking past what had been Don Pancho's Theatre. Who could say how many times we'd seen the revival house's double-feature of "The Last Waltz" and "No Nukes", or how many friends we knew who'd had a vehicle towed from the parking lot designated for customers of the St. Germain "Purple Flame" laundry. We both recalled a morning spent recovering a car from savage and towing lots on South Broadway. After a fashion we again boarded the 66 bus, and took in the landmarks of Huning-Highland, Downtown (especially the KiMo Theatre), the Country Club area, and Old Town. The tour ended with an early evening dinner at Dog House drive-in. The neon sign had just lit up – with the wiener dog ardently munching on a string of frankfurters while his tail wagged in delight.

**Westward Ho.** With the Mustang freshly fueled and detailed, we made an early departure from Albuquerque, ascending Nine Mile Hill with a sense of expectation and curiosity as to the sights and experiences that we'd meet ahead. Driving west, we kept a log of Route 66 landmarks and points of interest. Seagram envisioned a travelogue project that he could build from our brief observations and recordings – a collage that deconstructed traditional postcard elements into discrete blasts of text and image. He liked to do this with the classic French dishes he was adept at cooking – his streak of culinary anarchy shining through. Along the way we walked across the historic Rio Puerco bridge and admired scenic views of Laguna Pueblo. Seeing the exit to Cubero, Seagram noted that Ernest Hemingway worked on *The Old Man and Sea* there. Farther on we stopped to inspect and photograph the old Whiting Brothers sign between McCartys and San Fidel, and diverted to Acoma Pueblo's Sky City Cultural Center and Haaku Museum. By this point along the highway, we'd enjoyed regular sightings of trains – both BNSF freight and Amtrak. Trainspotting was officially adopted as our version of the license plate game – with the passenger dutifully calling out and recording train engines as they appeared. In Grants we visited the New Mexico Mining Museum, learning about the mechanics and logistics of working underground in this risky, but potentially profitable, pursuit. We also took time to hike and explore Mount Taylor – one of four sacred mountains to the Navajo. And after a tasty repast at El Cafecito, we headed to our lodging. We both ended the day by imaging the postcards that we would write that night to share such a comfortable and engaging fall day.

**Red Rocks Rock.** We'd decided to stay in Gallup for a few days. Seagram's schedule included two more weeks of down time, and he seemed to revel in taking what he termed an "olde time car trip." One of the reasons he left the east for college was the mythic call of the West. Seagram's family traveled extensively in Europe when he was young – but until his arrival in New Mexico as a UNM freshman he'd never been west of the Mississippi. He loved the Mustang, was in his groove, and was hungry for more. The town and place name signs we passed en route to Gallup seemed like poetry to Seagram – word magnets that you could re-arrange on a refrigerator: Milan, Bluewater, Prewitt, Thoreau (pronounced "threw" we both announced), the Continental Divide, and our favorite – Iyanbito. Seagram was enthralled by El Rancho. With hundreds of celebrity photos decorating the dark wood walls of the lobby and halls, he felt transported to the pages of an old movie magazine – or even one of the B movies that had been filmed in the area during the "golden years of cinema". The guest room appointments in the original section of the hotel – twin wagon wheel headboards, heavily lacquered western-style furniture, and original tile and fittings in the bathrooms – made it all the more vivid and transporting. Our days included a trip to the Zuni Mountains, and hiking the Pyramid Rock Trail plus the High Desert Trail System. We also poured over hundreds of jewelry creations from Zuni, Navajo and Hopi artists at trading posts such as Richardson's, Perry Null and Joe Milo's. Seagram caved, and became the proud owner of a handsome and substantial thunderbird bolo tie. When we were overwhelmed by the fun of those explorations in addition to downtown walks, or trainspotting time at the old station between the tracks and US 66, we fell into a table at the venerable Earl's Restaurant. What could be better than a promise of a hearty,

square meal fulfilled at any time of day? We discovered beautiful handmade jewelry, arts and crafts sold by Native artists through Earl's vendor program (shop along the front of the building, or from your table as artisan's and their family members stop by to showcase their creations). And, we were charmed by the end note of a free desert (jello or soft serve) after the filling fare of New Mexican favorites or down-home American entrees.

As with our separation from TJ, leaving New Mexico is bittersweet. You miss the familiar places and people you've come to know and value...but you also can't help to wonder with excitement might be waiting down the road. Maybe that's why I always find myself coming back to New Mexico; the adventures and their allure are abundant, but there's no place like home.