

2000 Year-end letter by John and Mary Lou Tanton

Happy Holidays

At Christmastide 2000 ;

And what should they know of England who
only England knows?

The English Flag Rudyard Kipling(1856-1936)

Among the benefits of travel is a greater understanding and appreciation of what we have at home. I surmise that is one reason so many of us hit the road so often at this stage of life. We were not exceptions this year, and would like to tell you in some detail about our trip on the Natchez Trace. If you haven't yet discovered this wonder, perhaps our description will encourage you to put it on your list of places to visit. The Trace (a path or trail through a wilderness that has been beaten out by the passage of animals or people, according to the dictionary) begins at Natchez on the Mississippi River. It runs through Alabama to its terminus in Nashville, Tennessee. The Trace got its start back in the riverboat days. Rafts and barges that brought goods down the river from the interior had no way to get back upstream before the age of steam. So the river men broke up their craft and sold the wood, and then hiked 400 miles overland back to Nashville to start the process all over again. It was a tough hike, beset with bugs, cutthroats and thieves.

The Natchez Tract Parkway follows this entire route with a roadway built to specifications for slow travel and sightseeing. It has just two lanes, with mowed grass right to the pavement's edge. And NO BILLBOARDS, or truck traffic. The park service provides a "strip map" for the whole route that unfolds as one goes along. Making this trip has been on our list for years. We decided to combine it with other visits, and to travel by the "Blue Highways," William Least Heat Moon's name for the older, slower roads that are shown in blue on road maps, rather than in expressway red. (He wrote a good travel book of this title.) Our favorite maps for such trips are the National Geographic Society's "Close-Up: USA" series (available at 1-800-NGS-LINE or www.r.uoads.com). These maps indicate many of the sites and features one might want to visit along the way.

So on March 19 we headed out from Petoskey, stepping in the Kalamazoo area to visit my 92-year-old mother. Then we used National Geographic map No.7 that covers Indiana and Kentucky. We poked our way southward through Indiana, stopping at state parks to stretch our legs, eating at lunch counters in small towns, and staying the motels that the interstate highways made obsolete years ago. We visited Lincoln's boyhood farm just north of the Ohio River, and then crossed to Mammoth Cave, where we wanted to see some of the grand old trees: tulip poplars, buckeyes, basswoods, oaks and so on- a much richer flora than we have in Northern Michigan. We had last visited this area 30 years ago.

Then we switched to National Geographic map No.3 that covers the Southeast: Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi (plus a few other states). We drove through the Walking Horse country of Tennessee, and on into the beautiful hill country in northern Alabama. Knowing that we were going to visit some Civil War sites, we listened along the way to Knowledge Products tapes on that conflict ... very good background. We stopped at the Tuskegee Institute east of Montgomery, to see the institution founded by Booker T. Washington, whose famous "Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are" speech we had reprinted some years before in the journal I publish, *The Social Contract*. Very interesting to see life and the situation in the Black (soil) Belt of the South.

Then on down into Florida and the Gulf Shore so my planning-commissioner wife could see the famous planned community of Seaside. Very densely packed (and expensive). Many services are within walking distance, so there is less need for cars. From there we drove on to Tallahassee where we parked the car and flew to Miami to visit our older daughter Laura and husband John. Laura was by this time "great with child," as they say in this Christmas season. (More on them later.)

That side trip over, we flew back to Tallahassee, picked up the car and headed west toward Natchez. We stumbled onto and enjoyed the Gulf Islands National Seashore, where a completely blind chap ran the visitors' center . . . sometimes our problems loom small in comparison to those of others. We had a nice tour at Civil War-era Fort Pickens, then drove on into Alabama proper, where we accidentally discovered Bellingrath Gardens, the beautifully landscaped former home of the chap who had the Coke franchise in Mobile. A big part of the fun of these loosely planned trips is the unexpected side excursions that crop up.

Then on across coastal Mississippi to another feature I've wanted to see for years. ever since reading an article about it in *The New Yorker*: The US Army Corps of Engineers' Old River Control Project (see the enclosed section of the relevant National Geographic map). But for the Corps and its work, the Mississippi River would go up the Red River to the west, and then follow the Atchafalaya River to the Gulf, leaving all downstream areas (including New Orleans) high and dry. An elaborate set of locks and dams now control the river's flow and navigation. These almost went out in a big spring flood two decades ago. We fortunately ran into a Corps interpretive guide who showed us around. He gave us a great tour. The Corps has very good maps to explain the whole project, and the near miss with the flood.

Then finally to Natchez (see the map) and the rationale for this trip: the Trace!! There is a line interpretive center at the outset. Since there are no accommodations on the Trace itself, one gets off to find a place for the night. Our first such detour was at Vicksburg, site of a famous Civil War battle. We toured the visitors' center and the battlefield with the help of an audiotape, because all of the personal guides one can hire were busy. In a visit to Gettysburg earlier in the year, I had hired such a guide, and I strongly recommend this approach to learning about Civil War battlefields. One of the ironclad war ships was sunk here; it has been raised and put on display. Amazing!

Then it was on up to Canton, where we stayed in an Asian Indian-run motel. one of several we encountered on the trip. This is getting to be a big thing, as the Indians apparently know and like the hotel business. The locals notice this competition. Further along the road we saw a motel that advertised itself on the marquee as "American Owned and Operated."

Where the Trace crosses the Tennessee River, we got off to visit Shiloh Battlefield, where 3400 died in 34 hours, and 6000 were wounded. The hardship and butchery at many of these Civil War battles is barely believable. General Grant was in command here. The battle was fought in heavy rain. His horse fell, painfully smashing the general's leg. He tried to sleep with the agony out in the rain, and couldn't. He retreated to a hospital, where the cries of the wounded soon drove him back out into the rain to manage as best he could. The next day the battle continued. The dead were buried 7 deep in trench graves, up to 800 per trench. There were no dog tags in those days; if your son went off to war and didn't come back, chances are you learned nothing about how or where he fell or was buried.

The speed limit on the Trace is 50 m.p.h. There are few straight-aways. The many curves are well banked. It is really a delightful driving experience. Along the way there are many nature trails and historical markers, one of the most interesting of which was the gravesite of Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis and Clark fame. As we had read about their expedition, this stop was of particular interest. He apparently suffered from depression, and shot himself. His manservant gathered up all of his papers and journals and delivered them to Washington ... otherwise we'd know far less about their epochal travels.

We took four days to cover the Trace's 400 miles ... a leisurely pace, but we were kept busy hopping out of the car to see all of the sights. We pressed on to the terminus at Nashville, where we toured Andrew Jackson's home, The Hermitage. There were very interesting displays on his hard-fought election battles of 1824 and 1828, of which today's polite versions are a mere shadow.

Our one disappointment with the trip was that the season was not as far advanced as we had hoped, so there were fewer wildflowers to be seen. The masses of redbud and dogwood blooming along the roadsides on the drive back north through Kentucky and southern Indiana made up for this in part.

If you'd like to consider this trip, you can contact the Natchez Trace Parkway at 2680 Natchez Trace Parkway, Tupelo, MS 38801-9718, or call 1-800-305-7417, or visit www.nps.gov/natr. Ask for a copy of the "Official Map and Guide."

I, in particular, seem to have fallen into a "battlefield mode" this year. While at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio to take a course for my continuing medical education (I've decided to keep my medical license in force, and that requires quite a bit of CME), I looked at National Geographic map No. 5 covering Texas and was surprised to find a museum for Admiral Nimitz in Fredericksburg, miles from the nearest body of water. Turns out he grew up there, and got an appointment to the Naval Academy that was otherwise going begging. I visited his museum, and the adjacent and just-opened Museum of the Pacific War. Both were excellent, and gave one a good feel for the battlefield conditions. The LBJ ranch is nearby, so I stopped there on the way back to San Antonio. Lady Bird was in residence and waved at us. LBJ is buried there ... a somber sight that leaves one lots to think about, including the Vietnam War. The thoughts include how fortunate I've been to have all these wars pass me by, chiefly due to being born in 1934, and thus having been too young for some, and too old for others. This was reinforced by seeing *Saving Private Ryan* last year, and having just viewed *The Longest Day*, about D-day.

In this same vein, daughter Laura's father-in-law, then a 20-year-old ensign in the US Navy, had command over a half dozen landing craft for ferrying soldiers to the beaches at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. We saw movies of these operations on the History Channel recently, which again gave us cause for thanks for the accomplishments of *The Greatest Generation* - the title of Tom Brokaw's book on their contributions to our lives today.

At year's end we passed by the Bok Tower on the highest spot in Florida (295 feet above sea level). Mr. Bok had been inspired throughout his life by his grandmother's charge the last time he saw her, "Make you the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it." The Tower was his response to her admonition. Her challenge is one we would all do well to heed.

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That travelogue took so much space that I may be accused of giving short shrift to other very important family matters. Daughter Jane was married in June to Hugh Thomson, complete with a Scottish piper (with dirk stuffed into his knee sock) to pipe them from the church to the reception hall. This was all to the great amusement of some Japanese tourists, who got good photos, I'm sure. Jane and Hugh live in Ann Arbor, where she is an operating room nurse at the University Hospital and Hugh is an engineer with GM.

Daughter Laura and husband John presented us with our first grandchild on August 30, healthy girl named Olivia that is her grandparents' delight. Looks as if we'll be making frequent trips to their home in Coconut Grove, just south of Miami (but avoiding the hurricane season)!

Late in 1999, we had a chance to purchase a cottage on Douglas Lake, 30 miles from here. So despite saying for many years that we wanted only one place to manage, we sprang at the opportunity. This is the lake on which the University of Michigan Biological Station is situated, and where I've often taken courses. We've already spent some happy times there. The hiking is great, **as it is** right next door to the undeveloped 40 percent of the lake that the university owns. Good small boat sailing too.

As to natural history, there were several nice fieldtrips, including an entomology tour to Sugar Island in the St. Mary's River that drains into Lake Superior. and a botanical trip to the Canadian North Shore of Lake Superior. I also gave a talk on avian vision to the local Audubon Society. Many birds have far more acute vision than we humans do.

As to my public interest activities, I had a close call with actually running for the U.S. Senate seat on the Reform Party ticket, but finally decided against it. The incumbent, Senator Spencer Abraham, was our archrival on the immigration policy question, since he chaired the relevant Senate committee. We used the high media profile of the campaign to air the controversial topic of foreign guest workers. In the end, the voters turned the Senator out. I continue to serve on the board of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR).

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On the language front, our organization ProEnglish (formerly English Language Advocates) has been in the thick of the controversy over bilingual education, and of English as the official language of government. The U. S. Supreme Court has just taken a case from Alabama which, if we lose, would mean that any individual could demand government services in any language, written or spoken, and any state government would have to respond. I plan to attend the oral arguments before the court on January 16, 2001.

Our nomination for best book this year was E. O. Wilson's *Biophilia*, about our natural affinity for life and the essence of our humanity that binds us to all other living species. It is an excellent statement of the conservation ethic.

We'll stop with that, and with our best wishes for a healthy, happy and mobile New Year.