The Prairie Light Review

Volume 1 | Number 1 Article 18

Fall 1-14-1982

Roads of Transmontania

Tom King
College of DuPage

Essay

Kinds Roads of Transmontania

ROADS OF TRANSMONTANIA

by Tom King

Roads can be dichotomized according to their destinations: some get you to places that are worth getting to, while others lead you into wastelands of glass and steel. Freeways and urban thoroughfares tend to fall into the latter category. But roads of the better kind still exist in all parts of Transmontania, and it is to them that I invite your attention.

First of all, Transmontania has a certain number of long, straight, county roads. These are mostly paved with asphalt, though a few will turn out to be narrow ribbons of cracked concrete. They tend to have, not just the usual numerical designations, but real names — like "Red Arrow Highway", or "Roscoe Tooker Highway" — and they will take you into real towns, the kind that haven't yet been spoiled by "progress". They're at their best in Summer, when the sky is softly hazy and the greenery is lush, when the local country clubs (you'll find them along these roads) have their dances and lawn-parties, and when manifestations of teenage life — lanky red-haired boys ogling thick-thighed blondes at the nearby lakes, cars full of petting lovers at the drive-in movies — are most easily observed.

Oftentimes these roads run parallel to the railroad tracks; you can even race a train once in a while. There will be roadside picnic tables, at intervals, and maybe even the remains of some old Burma-Shave signs. The farms by the wayside tend to be rather large and unprepossessing. The farmhouses will be some distance off the road, and you may see no sign of life apart from a far-off tractor throwing up a dust-cloud. But, in any case, the principal monuments along this type of road are not farms, but commercial establishments designed for the travelers of forty years ago.

Here and there (but with increasing rarity nowadays) will appear an old-fashioned gas station, in the form of a little brick castle or stucco wigwam, with an old car — or even, years ago, a World War II airplane — mounted high on a pedestal to attract customers. You'll also pass lodgings in the form of, not motels, but tourist *courts*: individual cottages tucked away in a wooded, deliberately-outdoorsy spot. Such places will often have a bit of pseudo-Indian flavor about them, left over from the old days, such as a wooden Indian, a stucco teepee, or a sign shaped like a war-bonnet. (Don't you remember — from when you were a kid?) If you're really lucky, you may come across an old cafe built of concrete or peeling stucco molded into the shape of a sombrero or a beehive, or with a giant statue of Paul Bunyan on top of its roof — all painted in once-bright colors.

You'll know you're getting near a town when you pass an old-fashioned roadhouse or two — the kind where your father might have parked his '41 Buick and gone inside to have a short beer and smoke a Fatima and play Frankie Carle's record of "Sunrise Serenade" on the jukebox. Some of them still have names like "Stardust Club" or "Honeybear's"; there may even be a few tinsel stars left on their walls.

Coming into town, the first few outlying dwellings will be farmhouses-turned-townhouses — simple white frame buildings with gingerbread porches, each with its disused barn hulking behind it. Once in a while there will be an old mansion among them, set back from the road on a knoll, the Transmontanian chateau of an early founder from New York or New England. (Why did they call this land "transmontane"? — Because it lies *beyond* the Allegheny *Mountains*.)

Speed-zone signs and widening pavement welcome you into the town. This is Main Street. There will be stop-signs (but no traffic-lights) at the quiet, shady intersections: Grove Street . . . Erie Street . . . The old sidewalks, sometimes bordered with the remnants of low, iron-spiked fences, are cracked and upthrust by the roots of aged trees. On left and right, set close to the street, modest two-storied Victorian houses sit quietly on lots that somehow seem a few inches lower than the roadbed. Their low windows and wide sills are a favorite place of repose for elderly tomcats (even in winter you can see their silhouettes behind the chintz curtains).

Fremont Street . . . Union Street . . . An old railroad underpass, its high embankment faced with mossy, crumbling stone. Beyond the underpass, Main Street is heavily shaded by a long double line of huge old trees, behind which stand the gables and turrets, belvederes and brackets, chimney-pots and cornices of the town's centenarian homes; if you're in luck, you may spot an octagon-house among them.

Jefferson Street, the first traffic-light. On the left, a greystone Gothic church; on the right, a small park graced with a Civil-War monument. Then, preceded by the town's two or three oldest remaining Greek Revival homes, comes the rather drab row of Main Street storefronts. Some have tasteful moldings around their windows and doors, with names like "Pratt Bros., 1879" above their entrances, while others are decorated with ornate ironwork, and bear more pretentious inscriptions ("Mercantile Bldg., 1901"). Most have neon signs and plate-glass doors dating from a frenzy of "modernization" twenty or twenty-five years ago.

At the second traffic-light stands the fire-station, red-painted brick and white concrete, with a big American-LaFrance ladder-truck parked inside. Next door, Dorsey's Ice Cream Shop (teenagers on both sides of the counter), where you can still buy a "phosphate".

Washington Street: the Courthouse. Tiers of decoration in multicolored stone and concrete climb confidently to a patinaed dome . . . Diagonally across the street, Mary's Diner has the only storefront on the block that hasn't been modernized. You can rest assured that Mary herself is behind the counter. And you won't see any "Big Boys" or "Ronald MacDonalds" in there, either; Mary is not a franchise.

State Street . . . Church Street . . . Maple Street . . . Now it's the same thing in reverse: the last of the storefronts, another line of huge trees, another homely Victorian neighborhood — and the town is gone.

But the highway will go on for as long as you care to follow it, changing its name occasionally, bending its direction a bit from time to time, passing down one Main Street after another for a hundred, two hundred, five hundred, a thousand miles. For Transmontania is a *big* place — bigger than Texas, bigger than Quebec, bigger than Poland . . .

By contrast, the farm roads of Transmontania are rarely more than a few miles long. In the rolling country which comprises much of the land (incidentally, if you can see a mountain of any kind from where you're sitting — even if only far off on the horizon — you are *not* in Transmontania) the farm roads twist and turn uphill and down dale. In the little dales you'll find the classic Transmontanian farm, eighty acres of sovereignty and self-respect. The big red gambrel-roofed barn, bristling with lightning-rods, dominates the other farm-buildings, even outshining the tall, turriculate silo. The two-storied white frame farmhouse may look vaguely Greek Revival or vaguely Gothic, or it may be just a boxy pastiche with a bit of gingerbread on its front porch. Whatever its style, it's a real house — not merely a cottage or bungalow of the sort you'd see out West or down South. More than likely there will be a collie lounging at the door, and flowerbeds in front of the porch, and flowerpots on the bannisters. On a fine spring day — the best time to drive down one of these roads, by the way — the glassy surface of the cattle-pond will reflect the white puffs of cloud floating in the pale blue sky. If you pass by late in the afternoon, after school, you may see a little girl with blonde pigtails swinging in an old tractor-tire hung by a thick rope from the branch of a sycamore; or a tow-headed boy, looking too young for the job, driving a big tractor across a field; or a plump farmwife crossing the road to get some letters from the mailbox.

If rolling country and spring sunshine incline you to metaphor, you might observe that the flocks of white sheep grazing on the gentle slopes are as much a mirror of the flocculent clouds as the cattle-ponds are. That is, if you see any sheep at all — for these pastures are mostly the domain of Guernseys and Holsteins. Pastures must have fences, of course, and you'll find one running alongside the road — a lonely old fence of rusty barbed-wire and weathered posts, half-overgrown with brush and weeds, with only an occasional ancient tree to keep it company. Once in a while you'll see an apple orchard aflare with blossoms on the other side of the fence, or perhaps a row of Lombardy poplars planted for a windbreak. (You'll note that a Tansmontanian fence, unlike fences further south, is almost never smothered with creepers and other vegetation to the point where you can't see what's on the other side of it.)

Where the road climbs to the top of a ridge or knoll, a more stately kind of farmhouse than those in the dales will make its appearance. It might be a serene Greek Revival structure, columned and pilastered, its bulk lightened by delicate sunbursts and fanlights. Or it might be a cubical Italianate mansion of orange or yellow brick, with a little cupola atop its hip-roof and a line of carved buttresses under its eaves. In either case, you can be pretty sure it was built by one of that prosperous generation of New Yorkers which took control of Transmontania in the 1840's and '50's. Schooled in the classics of Greece and Rome, of Renaissance Italy and eighteenth-century France, they were so different from us that their very names sound foreign and outlandish: "Levi Runyan", "Orlando Pratt", "Abigail Van Duser", "Seneca Younglove". These houses are about all that remains of their world. Nonetheless, they are with us yet, in a sense, for their tombstones are likely to be still standing in a hill-top cemetery nearby — perhaps even within a few yards of their former homes — or else in a tiny churchyard in the dale.

From the very highest elevations, you'll be able to view the landscape as a whole. More farmhouses, grazing animals, fences, budding woodlots, church steeples, barns and silos dotting the horizon — in short, concretized well-being. It's the best sort of countryside America has to offer, and the equal of anything you'll find in Europe. (Too bad European visitors rarely get to see it. When they're done with New York City, they head out West, where the blazing sun glints off the hangarlike steel barns and galvanized-iron prefabricated outbuildings, and where the desolate plains are relieved only by tumbleweeds and strange bushes with blue leaves and green flowers.) Our forebears made it this way because they wanted it this way . . . and they were right.

But not all farm roads run through rolling country. In the flatter parts of Transmontania — or the "Old Northwest", as it used to be called — you will sometimes come upon narrower, straighter farm roads, the kind that are paralleled on one or both sides by deep ditches or drainage canals. These solitary roads carry little traffic except during Spring planting and Fall harvesting, when you may encounter an occasional dusty red tractor or aged pickup truck hugging the middle of the hogback. This kind of road will lead you more often to farm *fields* than to farmhouses or barns. (If you do pass a dwelling, it will more than likely be a tall, white frame house, like a rectangle sitting on its shorter side, with a steeply-pitched green roof; it will have green shutters on the windows, and there will almost surely be an enormously tall tree planted at each of its four corners.) Once in a while you may pass a farmer ploughing his land or driving a combine through the ripened grain. (In years gone by, they used to never fail to wave at you.) And sooner or later you'll pass an old one-room schoolhouse, its bell motionless and forever silent in its little belfry, a goat lounging on the front steps.

The Prairie Light Review, Vol. 1, No. 1 [1980], Art. 18

By and large, though, there will be little to distract you from the introspective flow of bumpy asphalt across level land and iron-bridged canals. It is perhaps in this very solitude and flatness that the charm of such roads lies. In November the defunct stubblefields, overflown by flocks of crows, lie glistening in the pale sun. And in February the wind whips up huge clouds of powdery snow which obscure the old farmsteads and woodlots on the horizon. Amid the emptiness, there is plenty of room to think about the day of your birth and the day of your death, and what has happened, if anything, in between . . .

And finally, Transmontania has its share of old, "unimproved" roads. Though they may be seventy-five or a hundred or a hundred and fifty years old, they have been dirt roads all their lives and seem content to remain so. They are at their best in Winter, when the old gods of Greenland and Lappland and Spitzbergen come down from the Pole to regain possession of their rightful domain. By the middle of December these washboard roads will have become covered with a hard, milky coating of ice several inches thick. The ditches or runnels at either side of them become filled with drifted snow which merges imperceptibly with the roadbed on still, sunny mornings, and swirls wildly across the ice on dark afternoons when a storm is blowing up. Shadowy stands of birch and spruce and fir, their trunks flecked with snow, hem in these icy tracks and make them seem even narrower than they are. Generally there is not a sound to be heard, except the wind in the trees and the occasional cracking of a snow-burdened bough.

Such roads simply wind further and further into the woods. Some of them were originally laid out for the use of lumberjacks in the days of logging; others were put through for the benefit of hunters and trappers; and a few are so old that no one alive can remember who built them or why. But they all eventually come to a dead end in a clearing, or beside a stretch of long-abandoned railway, or among a wilderness of gray, frozen swamps and frosty deadfalls. There, if you are wearing your boots and your heaviest wool mackinaw, you can plod slowly and quietly deep into the gloomy forest, where the animals are hibernating and there is no sign of life or movement. Standing there, listening to the infinitesimal rustle of falling snowflakes, you can be alone with the North.

These are the roads of Transmontania, more commonly known as the *Midwest* — the place they say is dull and bland and flat. Theses are the roads you never see on television nor in travelogues, the roads no chamber of commerce boasts of . . .

Our roads.

TIME

By Carla Bergstedt

Walking. I am walking. Walking, form of walk. Walk, move by steps at a moderate gait; go or travel on foot. Current definition in a changing world; walk, to move on foot to places inaccessible to superior forms of transportation.

But I am walking. I am walking on a street called Washington. Washington is dirty-gray. It has selling establishments on both sides. The selling establishments are dirty-white, dirty-yellow and dirty-rainbow. Washington is covered with a dirty haze. Washington is indistinguishable from all other streets. That is why it has a name. Washington is a name of distinction. America's first president was named Washington. Also numerous schools, companies, and many other streets are called Washington. Selling establishments on Washington want you to buy, buy, buy, what they sell, sell, sell. Roads and selling establishments make the world go round. Travel, sell your time, travel, buy. Travel, sell your time, travel, buy. That's economy. Economy is taking over and we are being consumed.

Consumed. Consume, 1. devour. 2. Use up. "We are all consumers and we are being consumed by our consumption." Those quotes are there because I said it.

I have never said that I didn't ask to be born — instead I say, I didn't ask to consume. I was trapped into consuming the day I was born. Trapped. Trapped did I say? I am no longer trapped. That is why I am walking.

I am walking to a wondrous invention of modern man. An invention my mind could not even begin to conceive, but I may reap the benefits of it like I have with so many other inventions I have consumed. I no more comprehend this new wonder than I could a light switch. But I may use it anyway.

The inventor is selling it to people who wish to escape. Many people have escaped already. I may escape too.

Chapter 2

escape' 1. get away or flee, as from capture or confinement; evade or avoid threatened harm.

Escape! I may escape! Joy! Absolute! Confusion. I cannot go. But Washington is dirty gray.

Washington is dirty-gray.

Chapter 3

Time heals all wounds

"A man's greatest burden is being subject to the whims of the Century he was born into" I said that too. I am subject to the hairstyles, the dress, and the thought processors of my time. The great ones can think — I have to learn and become them.

Time Machine. The invention is a time machine. Rather sci-fi cliche' isn't it, but the time machine has become a reality. I can choose any time. Any time. Any time that allows me the freedom (cliche') to become. Become. Become, 1., come into being as. I want to become.

Chapter 4

Starting Over

I am walking to a selling establishment to buy time because Washington is dirty-gray and I too am indistinguishable from any other member of my species. I also have a name. I also sell, sell, sell, so I can buy, buy, buy. Now I want to buy time.

Chapter 5

more confusion

I am walking, but there are cars all around. Cars. Flashy and fancy cars. I hate cars. I bought one last week.

I wonder where everyone is going? All these people out and about when usually they are contained in a structure which steals space from the outside. Houses, selling establishments, cars, and roads, they all steal space from the outside. People build them and use them to create an illusion of security. They also sell and buy them.

It is Sunday; maybe these people are going to church. Church, 1. an edifice for religious worship; the chief services held there.

A church is also a structure which steals space from the outside.

Chapter 6

Space

People are abandoning their cars and beginning to walk. There are people all around me. More and more are coming. My space is dwindling. Dwindling. Dwindling everytime another individual makes his way into the masses. Masses. I am one of the masses. I wonder where they are going?

People. People walking, people talking. People carrying possessions. Possessions? Where are they going?

All these people. I must go. I must go to another time. I must leave here and escape. Escape. Leave, go. I will. Joy! Absolute! Confusion.

Where are these people going?

I am so massed into this crowd I can hardly see. See. I see a door. The people are stuffing themselves into the door. They are stuffing themselves into the structure of a selling establishment. A structure which steals space from the outside. Let the people have it. Wait. There is a sign above the door. Time Machine. The sign says time machine.

Chapter 7

AAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUUUGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHH!

AAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuuuuuuuuuuuggggggggghhhhhhh! (Scream therapy.)

Chapter 8

Why?

Why? Why, 1. used interrogatively, for what reason, purpose or cause?

Why?

I hate consumption, yet I want to buy time.

Why?

I want to become an individual, yet here I am, one of the masses again. Why?

Why?

Chapter 9

Contradictions

"You can't select people with the qualities you admire and then blow up the rest of the world." I said that once.

High among the qualities you'd admire would be peace, love and compassion. Blowing up the rest of the world would be a contradiction. No one could pull the trigger except someone who should be blown up.

Same with me.

I can't consume to avoid consuming in the future. The beginning would be contradictory to the ultimate goal of the end.

I am leaving., I am leaving. Let the other people buy time. I will stay in my own. I will come into being as.