

David's Fort Davis Adventure

For Christmas 2005, my cousin Court gave me a "Friends of the McDonald Observatory" gift membership which included, among other things, a ticket for a once-per-month viewing through their 107" Harlan J. Smith Telescope, a daytime tour pass, and pass for a star party. The observatory is located north of Fort Davis, Texas, and I began planning my trip in early June, booking a cabin and renting a car. Then began the anticipation and gradual planning which led up to the start of my vacation.

Tuesday, July 11, 2006

I bought dry ice from HEB in the afternoon and stored it in my home freezer. Shortly afterwards, I read the directions for its many uses and learned that it should not be put inside a working freezer, so I stored it in my new ice chest, playing with a few small chunks in the process. I have always wanted to create fog with dry ice, so I filled a mug with hot water and did so. I also dropped a piece into my decorative water fountain and watched the interesting effect. Later that evening, I picked up my rental car, a silver 2006 Chevy Impala LT, from Avis at the airport. After I got it home, I discovered that the vehicle's registration had expired in June, but it was after Avis' business hours, and I could not reach anyone by phone to address the issue. I finally decided to ignore the issue and hope for the best. The remainder of the evening was spent packing, and I went to sleep somewhere around 11:30 PM.

Wednesday, July 12, 2006

I awoke at 4:45 AM, an hour before the time which I had set my alarm for. I spent a little time waking up, began my final packing, loaded my ice chest with a bucket of ice plus a lot of diet sodas, and then loaded the car. I pulled out of the driveway at 6:08 AM, only to notice that my dome light would not turn off. This created a problem, as it was still dark outside, but I drove on, hoping that it would shut itself off momentarily. It did not, so I pulled into a convenience store parking lot a few miles from home and began checking the adjustable preferences in the car's computer system. After going through all the options twice and finding nothing which helped, it dawned on me that I had twisted a small knob after picking up the car, trying to brighten my dashboard display. I checked that knob and discovered that it was also the dome light control, and that I had left it turned on without realizing it. (It was still quite bright outside when I drove it home, and the light did not shine when the ignition was off.) In my defense, I doubt I would have had this problem if the knob had been a part of the headlight control, as it is in older model vehicles such as my truck.

Having solved my first problem of the trip, I had also managed to

create my next problem by selecting the option to calibrate the car's compass while I was looking through the computer options. Wanting to get to IH 10 West before traffic got any heavier, I chose to ignore the issue and set out once again. With my windows up and the AC on, I reached Loop 1604 and felt I was finally underway. I had traveled a couple of miles and was passing Universal City when I suddenly heard a loud POP which sounded like a gunshot just outside the car. A quick glance around revealed nothing, so I continued, thankful that no one seemed to have been hit. I reached IH 10 at 6:38 AM, glad to be clear of the worst of the traffic.

After a few minutes of relaxed driving, my thoughts returned to the compass which, although I did not actually need, I knew it was available and wanted it working. I exited the highway at Boerne Stage Road, and was driving in slow circles in a parking lot at 6:51 AM, hoping not to attract attention of law enforcement since the registration was expired. Although I wasn't really worried about being fined, I did not want the hassle. Seven circles did the trick, and I set out once again, enjoying the sunrise behind me which quickly revealed that my rear window was horribly, horribly streaked from the Rain-X which I had applied on Tuesday evening and failed to wipe off well enough. The increasing light also showed me that the front windshield was streaked, too, so I stopped again at 7:02 AM, wiped down the windows, and called my dad to say hi. Eleven minutes later, I was on the road again.

As I drove, I began taking notes of the time and the distance traveled when I passed county lines and made rest stops. I did this until I arrived at Fort Davis, so I will have a reference if I ever make the trip again. At 7:38 AM, I exited at Kerrville and made my way to an IHOP to eat breakfast. Before departing at 8:19 AM, I went into my ice chest to pull out a soda and discovered that a can had exploded due to the intense cold of the dry ice, thus explaining what I had thought was a gunshot. I tried to make a quick rearrangement of things to protect the other sodas, grabbed one to drink, and set out again. I stopped on the side of the highway about an hour later after hearing another can blow up, and I spent 12 minutes pulling out cans and adding some insulation to try to prevent further problems.

At 10:50 AM, I exited IH 10 and drove to historical Fort Lancaster, which was closed. On the way back to the highway, I stopped at a scenic overlook of the Old Government Road and took some photographs, and was back on the highway at 11:39 AM. My next stop was Fort Stockton at 12:45 PM, where I filled up with petrol and dined at a Dairy Queen. I was back on the interstate at 1:46 PM, and noted that the car's thermometer said that the outside temperature was 100° F. As I left the city, I could see the Davis Mountains in the distance.

I reached the Hwy. 17 cutoff from IH 10 at 2:27 PM, and it was 103° F. As I drove south on the final stretch to Fort Davis from Balmorhea and entered the mountains, I stopped several times to

take photographs, and noticed that I could hear static from lightning on the radio's AM band. I finally reached Fort Davis at 3:34 PM and checked into my reserved cabin at the Overland Trail Campground.

The room was furnished with an old AC unit, a small refrigerator with a tiny freezer compartment, a microwave, a color TV on a shelf approximately five feet seven inches high, a small ceiling fan, and 40 watt bulbs in every fixture except for the toilet/shower area, which provided a 100 watt bulb. Noticing that the AC was not doing much to cool the room, I pulled off the front cover and found a deteriorated foam filter which was coated with dust and literally falling apart. I took the filter outside and removed the dust as best I could before replacing it, and then went about the business of bringing in my luggage and doing some unpacking before watching some television.

I left for the McDonald Observatory at 6:12 PM in 105° heat, and made the trip in 21 minutes. I had purchased a ticket for a buffet dinner offered prior to the evening's viewing from the 107" telescope, and that was scheduled to begin at 6:45 PM. As I sat outside of the visitors center with the other waiting guests, I watched as a large group of hummingbirds flew about and chased one another around a large feeder which was suspended beneath the wooden roof which sheltered outdoor tables and chairs. Never have I seen so many hummingbirds in one place; I counted at least eight of them in the vicinity of the feeder at one time. Hearing all their high-pitched chirping and the buzzing of their wings as they flew about was delightful! A bit less pleasant to my ears was the increasing sound of thunder.

Once the doors to the Visitors Center were opened, we all entered and searched out our assigned seats, indicated by place-cards upon the various round tables. Since I was a party of one, I sat at a table with the two volunteers who would be directing the night's events, Judy and Randy. Judy, the wife of an observatory technician, was in charge. The dinner was excellent, and since there was enough for seconds, I received my fill plus a bit more, and this was followed by a dessert. And as we all ate, the rain had begun and the thunder continued to rumble.

Judy eventually addressed the group and said that we would delay heading up the mountain to the telescope in the hope that the thundershower would stop, so a few of us stood outside beneath the shelter of an overhang, watching the lightning, while the rest of the people sat inside. After about half an hour, I ran to my car and spent the downtime trying to catch lightning with my camera, which I never managed to do. The group finally started exiting the visitors center about an hour later than had originally been scheduled, and the rain continued as we all drove up to the observatory. As I exited the car with my camera and umbrella, I noticed a blood red sun setting to the west, peeking through a very small hole within the dark storm clouds. I quickly tried to take several photographs of the eerie image as I sheltered beneath

my umbrella, and due to low light conditions and my struggle to keep the camera dry, the photos were not as good as I would have liked.

From the parking area, we all had to walk a quarter of a mile to reach the observatory dome. During this trip, I had to fight to hold on to my umbrella in the strong winds, and I thought several times that it was going to collapse. But it survived, and our group proceeded upstairs to the upper floor of the dome where we sat upon folding metal chairs. Judy then proceeded to pass out small, rectangular plastic lenses which had 1000 lines etched per each millimeter. These were designed to refract light as a prism does, and we received a presentation upon the science of spectroscopy which is heavily used in astronomy. Most large telescopes have spectrographs, which are used either to measure the chemical composition and physical properties of astronomical objects or to measure their velocities from the Doppler shift of spectral lines. Although the topic was not new to me, it was interesting to be afforded the opportunity to view the spectrographs of hydrogen, helium, mercury, and neon. This was accomplished through the use of specialized light fixtures.

Throughout the evening, thunder periodically reverberated through the dome as rain pounded down in waves of varying intensity. After the spectrography presentation, we received a lecture from astronomer Dr. Michael Endl, who received his doctorate from the University of Vienna in Austria. Using a few slides for illustration, he explained how extra-solar planets have been, and are being, discovered by observing wobbles in the rotation of stars, caused by gravitational influences exerted by massive planetary bodies. The gentleman spoke with an accent, and every time he turned to face the projector screen during his talk, his words were lost within the echo of the large chamber. Fortunately, I was already aware of the subject which he spoke about.

After the lecture, our group proceeded back downstairs to partake of large cookies, coffee, tea, and lemonade. Some of the group left after that since it was clear that we would be unable to view through the telescope. After approximately 15 minutes, we went back upstairs, and Judy's husband lowered the telescope so that we could look inside and see the large mirror. Upon observation, we all noticed a number of black spots on the reflector's surface. The explanation for this traced back to a disgruntled employee in the 1970's who felt that the telescope was responsible for his life's woes. One night, the man brought in a handgun and shot at the 10" thick glass of the mirror. Dissatisfied with the damage he was able to cause, he went downstairs to retrieve a fire ax with which to attack the telescope, and this allowed time for security to apprehend him. He was then banned from all University of Texas facilities and admitted to a mental institution. The damaged areas of the mirror were ground out to prevent cracking, and the mirror received a new coat of reflective aluminum, as has always been the case every two years. Interestingly, the quantity

of aluminum required to accomplish this is less than what is contained within an aluminum can, and it is applied to the glass within a vacuum chamber.

After seeing the reflector, our group was allowed to tour the control room where astronomers actually do their viewing on computer monitors. We were also allowed to question the astronomer as well as Judy's husband, and as time progressed, people began to quickly filter out of the building. As midnight neared, I found myself to be the last remaining visitor, so I said my goodbyes and returned to my car.

The drive back to Fort Davis on totally dark, winding mountain roads was interesting and uneventful. The rain had stopped, but occasional lightning was still visible in the distance. Once I reached my cabin, I spent a little time listening to the radio as I readied myself for bed, and finally settled down to sleep somewhere around 1:30 AM.

Thursday, July 13, 2006

At 4:45 AM, I awoke to the sound of a very loud POP! My heart racing, it took me a moment to realize that yet another soda can had exploded, despite my having added more insulation between the dry ice and the drinks. It took me nearly an hour to get back to sleep afterwards, and I slept until about 9:45 AM. After a bit of caffeination and a delicious breakfast at the historic drug store diner, I placed a telephone call to Burt Compton of Marfa Gliders, trying to schedule a glider ride. Mr. Compton informed me that he required 2 or more sales in order to get his tow pilot to come out, and that unless I wanted to purchase 2 flights myself, he would call me if and when he lined up another interested party. After a few minutes of contemplation, I called back and left a message saying that I would buy the two flights if I could be given the offered \$20 discount on both of them.

At a couple of minutes past 11 AM, I received a phone call as I pulled into the parking lot of a rock-shop called the Blue Agate. Burt Compton told me that I could meet him at the Marfa airport at noon for my glider rides. Having a bit of time, I browsed the Blue Agate for a bit, and then left town and headed to Marfa, arriving at least 20 minutes early.

By about 12:30 PM, I was strapped into the seat behind Mr. Compton and we were being towed down the runway and taking off behind a modified single engine plane. Once we broke loose, the first flight lasted for 15 - 20 minutes; I did not time it. I did, however, time the second flight, and we spent an hour and fifteen minutes in the air! At my coaxing, the pilot began banking and maneuvering the glider as he would have had he been alone, without a passenger who might become unsettled by such flying. He periodically asked me how I was doing, and I made it clear that I was enjoying myself immensely. After awhile into the second

flight, Mr. Compton allowed me to take the controls and do the flying, which was a thrill. He commented that he noted improvement in my skill during the several times he allowed me to take over. At one point, we were soaring at 18,000 feet, enjoying the significantly cooler air present at that altitude. We even flew into the base of a thick cumulus cloud for a moment, which totally obscured everything until we made a brief rapid dive out of it. The experience was a bit expensive, but I really enjoyed it.

After returning to Fort Davis, I ate supper at a Mexican food restaurant, then returned to my cabin for a nap. As the evening progressed towards sunset, I drove south, back to Marfa and then nearly nine miles east on Hwy. 90 to the viewing station built to accommodate people hoping to see the elusive Marfa Mystery Lights. There were quite a few visitors there when I arrived. I found a centrally located vacant spot upon the three-foot stone wall which bordered the area, then sat down to wait. Approaching traffic on the highway repeatedly shone their headlights onto the right side of all our faces, but it was only a minor annoyance, except for the periodic vehicle using high beam lights. Lightning was visible in the mountains on the distant northern horizon, and that was interesting to watch.

As the evening gradually darkened, the lightning became more evident, and stars began to crowd the sky in numbers unknown to most all modern, city-bound eyes. I overheard some people talking about the clearly visible swaths of the Milky Way; they did not recognize it, and believed it to be clouds. But clouds require reflected light if they are to be seen as anything other than dark patches in the sky, and due to the inspired efforts in the region to eliminate light pollution, there was no reflective interference with the view. As I gazed at the heavens, I glimpsed at least 2 meteorites which I imagine most everyone else missed, due to the absence of any audible comments around me. However, a third meteorite caught everyone's attention as it remained visible for nearly 4 seconds and created a short plasma trail behind it. There were also 3 satellites sighted during the evening, moving rapidly overhead. Unfortunately, these were the only moving lights which made themselves evident; the mystery lights remaining hidden from view. Even so, the beautiful night sky made the evening's efforts worthwhile.

A little after 11:30 PM, the waning moon began to rise and gradually began to bleach out the view of the sky. After attempting several photographs of the moon, I decided to return to the cabin. After reaching Marfa and beginning my return trek to the north on Hwy. 17, I began to notice jackrabbits on the right side of the road. It seemed as if one were stationed every quarter mile for awhile. I began a retroactive tally of each rabbit I saw when I began spotting groups of two and three together. When I spotted an (approximated) eight point buck and a fawn on the side of the road, I slowed the car down to about 15 mph below the speed limit and expanded my gaze to include the left

side of the road, too. During the drive, I counted two more fawns, another meteorite, and 61 jackrabbits.

Friday, July 14, 2006

I arrived back at my cabin sometime after 12:30 AM and discovered two girls seated outside the cabin next door to mine. Their names were Jody and LaDonna, and we began to chat. After standing for several minutes, my hands full with my travel mug and cameras, they invited me to join them and talk for awhile, so I dropped off my things inside the cabin, grabbed my camping chair, and did so. After a little while, LaDonna went inside their cabin for a bit, and accidentally locked them both out when she returned. (The doorknob lock did not work correctly, I later discovered.) Wanting to help out, I returned to my room and retrieved a safety pin which I tried using in conjunction with my pocket knife in order to pick the lock. That did not work. Both girls were anxious to avoid waking Dave, the landlord, in order to get back inside; he had managed to "creep them out" a bit when they arrived earlier in the evening, talking to them for over an hour about such topics as his sick wife, who was away for a week and also living in Florida while home schooling their son, and about his anger with the Davis Mountain State Park which has stolen his RV business away.

After several minutes trying to pick the doorknob lock, I pulled out a plastic Hallmark shopping card and managed to open the door after a few tries. Jody and LaDonna were very grateful. During the course of the evening, we observed 3 riders on horseback walking up the street, and then back again about 30 minutes later. We also noticed a cruiser who played a loud bass thumping noise (it could hardly be considered music) which drove back and forth within about a four or five block area; it was a very small town. Two younger blonde girls were also seen walking up the street. All of these things lent themselves to our speculations as to what kind of social life must (not) exist within Fort Davis. We continued our socializing until about 3:30 AM, during which time I saw my fifth meteorite of the night. Afterwards, I took a shower and went to sleep.

I awoke somewhere around 9:40 AM, and shortly afterwards I ate breakfast at the drugstore diner. My plan was to reach the McDonald Observatory by 11 AM, in time to catch the half-hour solar viewing which preceded the first of the day's two tours. Timing was tight, and I had to drive a little faster than I would have liked, but I made it to the visitors center by 11:05 AM and reached the theater during the introduction phase of the presentation. The solar viewing was accomplished through a closed-circuit connection with a small, filtered telescope outside the visitors center. The image of the sun was projected onto the theater screen, and the volunteer pointed out some small sunspots, prominences, and a few other features. Film footage of other solar events which have been captured on film were also presented,

along with explanations, and then our group went up to the 107" Harlan J. Smith Telescope to begin the tour. I was able to ride in the limited seating shuttle bus instead of driving, and rode shotgun to the tour guide.

The Hobby-Eberly Telescope, the third largest in the world, was the next stop on our tour. It is 11.1 x 9.8 meters, and is used exclusively for spectroscopy. After that stop, we all went back to the visitors center, where I spent a bit of money in the gift shop, and then attended the 2 PM solar viewing, hoping to see new developments on the sun. There was nothing new of any significance, so I returned to Fort Davis and ate some (award-winning) barbecue at the drug store.

I returned to the McDonald Observatory at 8 PM, having purchased a ticket for the Twilight Party which preceded the Star Party, which was to begin at 9:30 PM. I never could find the punch or the cake, so I questioned their usage of the word "party," but there was a brief theater presentation, followed by a participatory presentation in the amphitheater behind the visitors center. Afterwards, I spent more money in the gift shop, ran my purchases out to my car, and then returned to the amphitheater for the start of the star party.

As twilight settled over the large crowd, a man began to address us without the aid of a PA system (which none of the volunteers could get to work). Once the sky darkened, he produced a bright flashlight which was shielded within a long (approximately 3 foot) tube, and he used the visible beam of that light to direct attention to various stars as he spoke about the constellations, their patterns, and the Milky Way. This presentation lasted from 30-45 minutes and was very interesting. The view of the heavens was magnificent! Lightning could be seen in the distance to the northwest, which added an interesting feel to the night, in my opinion.

Afterwards, our group proceeded back up the wide walkway approaching the visitors center where 7 telescopes were aimed at various areas of the sky and manned by volunteers. The only lights were scattered, ground-directed, low-wattage, red-filtered lamps, approximately 4 feet high. It was very dark, which was very good for viewing. Two of the telescopes were fixed setups sheltered within small, single-story domes; one of these was a 22", and the other was, I believe, a 20". The other scopes were portables, and two of them were aimed at Jupiter. I could have stayed out there all night, marveling at the beautiful sky, but everyone started packing up by about 11:30 PM, so I began my drive back to the cabin at 11:45 PM, following behind several other departing vehicles which I counted on to flush out any wild javelinas.

Saturday, July 15, 2006

I arrived back in Fort Davis shortly after midnight, and after making a quick pit-stop, I drove to Marfa in the hope of seeing the Marfa Lights. There were very few people at the viewing station, and this gave me a clue that there had not been any activity. Had there been, I would have expected a larger crowd to still be present and watching. I stayed for about 20 minutes, then began the return trip as the moon was rising. Although there were a number of jackrabbits on the roadside again, I did not try counting them during that trip.

Once I arrived back at my cabin, I again joined Jody and LaDonna outside to socialize. I discovered that they had both been at the Star Party, but due to the lack of light, we never saw one another. After some time passed, Dave came outside for no reason that he made known to us. The girls feared that we were being too loud, disturbing the other two cabins of people which had arrived on Friday, but he said nothing about our volume level. It was mentioned conversationally that we had been to the observatory's Star Party earlier in the evening, and Dave used that as an inroad to assert his belief that the heat from the sun takes 2,000 years to reach the earth, and claiming that if the sun were to suddenly go dark, we would continue receiving its heat for millennia. I told him that I disagreed with his premise and suggested that he may have heard that light and heat from the sun's core can take such a length of time to reach the surface, but he chose to argue his point in ignorance of physics, insisting that solar heat is a property separate from radiation and light. After trying for a few minutes to explain the nature of stellar dynamics, Dave grew frustrated that he could not convince me that he was right, made a comment to the effect of "If that's the way you want to be..." and went back inside. We were all relieved, and LaDonna took amusement at mocking him for a few minutes.

Somewhere around 3:30 AM, LaDonna went to bed, but Jody and I continued to talk until, to our surprise, birds began chirping. When we realized it was 5:30 AM, we both rushed off to bed. I awoke (all too soon) after sleeping for about 4 hours, and eventually made my way to the drug store to buy breakfast before the 11-AM cutoff time. For the first time, service was very slow, and it took nearly 25 minutes for me to get my food.

A while after returning to my cabin, I saw Jody outside and brought up a topic we had touched on during the night, the idea of meeting for supper at the Limpia Hotel. We settled upon meeting at 7 PM to eat. A little after 1 PM, after unsuccessfully trying to take a nap, I drove to Balmorhea to see the natural spring pool. There were quite a few people there when I arrived, and finding anyplace to park was a challenge. I only stayed for about 45 minutes, leaving when I noticed thunderheads approaching.

As I began my return trip south on Hwy. 17, I became aware that,

during my entire trip so far, I had not taken any video footage. As a result, I place my video camera upon the car's dashboard, opened the LCD monitor so I could glimpse the field of view, and then began driving while I recorded the roadway and mountains ahead of me. After a few minutes, rain began to fall, slowly at first, but then with increasing intensity and accompanied by thunder. I recorded a few moments of this, but as conditions began to deteriorate, I gave up my efforts to passively record the scenery.

Heavy rain became a downpour, forcing me to use my windshield wipers on high speed in order to see and prompting me to slow my driving speed in order to remain safe. I eventually came up behind another vehicle also braving the weather, and was content to follow behind at a prudent distance, taking what advantage I could of the water dispersal made through ponded portions of the road. I mention this part of my trip only because of two morons who were determined to pass us in such unsafe conditions. First came a car which passed me up on the wet, winding roadway, then came a pickup truck driven by a fool who chose to pass illegally on a curve with ponding water, nearly resulting in a head-on collision. Fortunately, I did not encounter either vehicle wrecked on the roadway as I made my way back to Fort Davis.

Once back in town, I stopped by the drug store and ordered a vanilla fountain soda. As I finished it, the waitress offered me a refill, and kindly gave it to me in a to-go cup when I asked. Returning to my cabin, I noted that there was thunder rumbling from several directions, holding the promise of more rain than the small amount that was evidenced so far within Fort Davis itself. As I arrived, I noticed that the girls had left their canvas chairs outside, and that one was wet, so I took them both to my porch and blotted off the water as best as I could. I then sat down in my own chair with my American Indian flute, but quickly abandoned the idea as rain began to pour down and the wind began to blow. After moving all our chairs into the cabin to protect them from the weather, I stood outside beneath a narrow, semi-sheltered zone of my porch, and I played my flute to the growling sky.

I spent the next several hours just lounging about, biding time until 7 PM. When the hour came, the three of us walked to the Hotel Limpia and spent some time browsing their multi-roomed gift shop before sitting down to eat. I bought a souvenir harmonica, made in China, which I later discovered only played three notes, badly. The meal was delicious, and afterwards, we walked behind the hotel to satisfy Jody's curiosity as to the appearance of the garden area, which she had glimpsed earlier. We next walked up and down the town's main street, looking into the closed shop windows and chatting. After about half an hour, we returned to the cabins and sat outside, playing cards until almost 11:30 PM before calling it a night.

After 15 - 20 minutes of bedtime preparations and preliminary

packing for departure, I returned outside to look at the sky, and discovered the best view to date from the vicinity of the cabin. Previous nights had been somewhat clouded, in addition to some area light pollution. I knocked on the door to the girls' cabin and told LaDonna that they might want to consider taking a look before retiring, which they did after a bit. I kept returning outside to gaze at the sky until somewhere around 12:45 AM, when clouds began to arrive. I went to bed at 1:30 AM.

Sunday, July 16, 2005

I awoke at 8:45 AM, and gradually began my packing and loading of the car. I turned in my cabin key at 10:30, and spent a few minutes talking with Jody before leaving. My first stop was the Limpia Hotel, where I returned the defective harmonica. Before I could get a refund, though, the lady assisting me had me try the other two harmonicas they had in stock, but neither was any better. I then made my way to the drug store to eat breakfast. There were quite a few patrons, and not enough help. After sitting for over 10 minutes before receiving a drink (from the girl who was washing dishes), I decided not to order anything. Not wanting to wait in a motionless line at the cash register, either, I left \$1.65 on the counter beside my barely touched coffee and then left, stopping at a small grocery store on the way out of town. I bought a box of Pop-Tarts and ate two packages worth as I drove to Balmorhea, headed north to IH 10.

With the exception of two truckers playing highway games, blocking both lanes of traffic for several miles, my return trip to San Antonio was uneventful. I made three rest stops, then stopped in Kerrville to buy a sandwich and telephone my parents. I ate as I continued my journey home. I arrived somewhere close to 5 PM and unloaded the vehicle. I then returned the car to the rental agency (a day early) and proceeded with unpacking once I got back home. I was very, very tired, and so ended my adventure in West Texas.