

ROADTRIP



The Roads Less Traveled: Old Highway No. 9

By Jeanna Goodrich

Here's nothing like a cold, wet, cloudy day to brighten the spirits. Gusty winds create piercing drops of near-freezing rain, and noses and toes are chilled straight down to miserable. There is not enough drizzle to warrant turning on windshield wipers, but just enough to smudge the view hills, drenched in damp fog, ahead. Sounds to me like the perfect afternoon for a road trip, no?

The destination was Alamo Springs Café; the roads we'd take to get there were less certain. Could Google show us the way? There was the tried and true path of I-10 to 87 to Fredericksburg then down Old No. 9, but that seemed too boring—too much highway and not enough road. There was 1376 to 473 to Old No. 9, but that seemed too short—too much road and not enough trip. And then there were the mysterious, squiggly, grey lines representing unmarked roads. If Google didn't know what they were, then they were definitely road trip roads by our standards. And so the journey began.

The plan, as good as any other, was to turn right or left whenever we pleased. We happened to please on Grape Creek road, and as soon as we passed over the first cattle guard, we knew we'd be back on a journey similar to that on Crabapple Road. What we didn't expect were the speed bumps we'd meet along the way.

Here's where I'll go ahead and get philosophical. It was a damp, dreary, dismal day. It could not have been more than 45 degrees outside, and I'd already made up my mind that I wouldn't be able to get any good pictures because I couldn't see farther than half a mile in front of me. To top it all off, I was just in a downright awful mood. The last thing I needed was yet another speed bump on, erm, my road of life.

So, of course, that's when I hit it: the world's most terrible

I travel not to go anywhere, but to go.
I travel for travel's sake. The great affair
is to move. ~Robert Louis Stevenson

pothole. Talk about a speed bump. I threw my front right tire in that sucker so hard, I had to stop the car to make sure it was still attached to the rim. Pulling to the side of the road, I got out to take a look. The tire was still intact, but I was beginning to fear that my last nerve was not.

After we've been shoved over all of the speed bumps we think we can take in one metaphorical trip, there is one thing we tend to forget: On days when it seems like nothing could get us out of a funk, it's always the smallest, silliest thing that actually does somehow. Sometimes it takes the cold and dreary to illuminate the dim lights in our lives, the lights that we might not have been able to quite make out before. Think about it: When faced with the grey and miserable, doesn't even the smallest ray of hope seem to shine more brightly?

My ray of hope was a cow. Before you laugh at me, or tilt your head inquisitively, I want you to picture this cow. A deep reddish brown with a few white spots, the cow was standing not twenty feet in front of me, chewing slowly on dew-drenched grass, casting the occasional glance my way. She couldn't have cared less that I was there, and was probably wondering when I would move my car so she could get back to, well, chewing (I suppose).

I was busy staring at this cow when Alison rolled down the window and asked me, "Hey, wouldn't it be an awesome picture if the cow was in the middle of the road?" I chuckled softly to myself, but soon my eyes widened with excitement. It WOULD make an awesome picture, and it would be a testament to how much we felt like we were truly road-trippin' through the boonies.

Suddenly, my mind switched from feeling glum to feeling sneaky. We had to execute this cow-in-road plan carefully. I tip-toed slowly back to the car and quietly opened the passenger door. I lifted my camera from the floorboard and held it up to my eye. Now if we could just somehow get the cow to cross the road...

It's not every day that you get outsmarted by a cow. And, I'd say, on a day like this, being outsmarted by a cow would most likely add insult to injury. Instead, I couldn't help but laugh. The moment that cow saw me put my camera to my face, she'd had enough of my nonsense. She turned around, shook her tail at us, and walked into the woods.

But we weren't going to give up. No, we had our hearts set on a picture of a cow crossing the road, and we weren't going to leave without it. We waited, and waited, and waited, eagerly anticipating another cow to pop out of the woods and, for some reason, need to cross the road. We sat in the car, the drizzle slowly coating the windshield, plotting ways to get our picture. Should we honk the horn and hope the cows think they're getting fed? Should one of us get out and find a cow to chase across the road? Or should we just sit here and, well, wait (but what would be the fun in that)?

Luckily we didn't have to wait long for an answer, as cow number two and cow number three happened to come out of the woods to see what was up. With laughter and squeals that would rival any two girls at a Jonas Brothers concert, we snapped photos like never before. They gave us a reason to smile, these cows, and we carried our smiles all the way down Grape Creek Road.

It was beginning to look like our speed bumps weren't going to be so bad after all. We even made up stories for them. Our next speed bump was at an intersection of an unmarked road, where we discovered a quarry and a warning about explosives. "Man, if I was a high school kid around here," I said, "I know exactly where I'd be getting in trouble." After that, we had to slow down for a lone goat making his way down the road, no other goats in sight. "Where was he coming from?" Alison asked, laughing; "It's almost like he just told the other goats, 'See ya'll later! I'm leaving this one goat town!'" Even better, we came upon a rock wall that we judged to be at least a hundred years old, and we lost ourselves in history and mystery, excitedly saying to each other, "I wonder if..." and "What must it have been like when..."

A quarry, a goat, a wall: things that, on a bright sunny day, might not have caught our eyes, were an illuminated contrast to the haze. Colors changed. Reds and oranges popped brilliantly against grey trees and fog. Even the drab yellow-brown of an endless, dead field of grass seemed to shine with a sparkle of gold.

Yes, we eventually made it to Old Highway No. 9. Grape Creek Road took us all the way there, and by the time we were done with what might have been our most awe-inspiring road trip yet, our tummies were rumbling, pointing us in the direction of Alamo Springs Café. Cold beer, good food, and a hippy band with scarves flowing from their bongo drums were all great companions to close out the night. And on the drive home—a shorter route this time, through Comfort and down I-10 so we could get home—I began to realize just what that road trip really meant for me.

All too often we, as a culture, hear the phrase, "Take the time to stop and smell the roses." I suppose that has some merit. However, we're never told to take the time to stop and smell the hyacinth, or the buttercup, or the cedar for that matter. We're so focused on either the best or the bust that we forget about the things in the middle—the normal, average, everyday things that actually give a lot of substance to our lives.

And so I've discovered that it's ok to have a bad day. It's ok to sometimes be surrounded by grey, because the grey is what makes the little bits of color stand out. What skewed perspectives we'd have if our lives were full of neon color—we'd never be able to find joy in red berries against a brown bush, or the last yellow-orange leaf on a winter tree. We'd never be able to smile solely because of a cow crossing the road. And we'd certainly never be able to laugh hysterically because of a lone goat. X

