Title: LAND OF THE DIESEL BEAR. By: McPhee, John, New Yorker, 0028792X, 11/28/2005, Vol. 81, Issue 38

LAND OF THE DIESEL BEAR

DEPARTMENT OF AMPLIFICATION

Back on the interstate in a silver tanker.

If you have crossed the American continent in the world's most beautiful truck, you prefer not to leave it forever. You think of it from time to time-stainless, flashing like a signal mirror in the Carolinas, in California, in Wisconsin, Wyoming, Oregon, and Georgia-and you want to climb back into the cab. Exactly thirty-six months after I said goodbye to Don Ainsworth and watched his chemical tanker as it slowly pulled away from the Port of Tacoma Truck Stop ("A Fleet of One," The ***New Yorker***, February 17 & 24, 2003), I got back into his cab. While he was making a round trip between San Diego and Dudley, Massachusetts, I connected with him in Rochester for an eastbound-and-westbound seven-hundred-and-fifty-mile reunion with the truck.

The driver of an eighteen-wheel, eighty-thousand-pound chemical tanker needs to be thinking ahead at least a mile, of course, but if he happens to own the whole rig--the tractor and the trailer-he is also thinking through itineraries for long-haul routes in which the smartest distance to profit is not necessarily a straight line. And always, in various ways, he is listening to and looking for bears. When I noticed a police car deep in a median like a beetle under a leaf, I mentioned it to Don, and he said, "I saw him a long time ago. He's on the phone, talking to his mistress." Skirting and crossing the Hudson River, there were two ways past Albany on limited-access roads. The one through Selkirk had tolls, the one through Rensselaer had no tolls but was a den of New York bears. "Cops roost in rest areas on the free side," he said, as he admired Selkirk. He called the tolls there "hush money." It was just a bit of overhead, to be taken into account with other tolls, state fuel taxes, and terrain (long slow pulls on hills) in the business planning of his route.

In the Berkshires, seventeen miles from the New York state line, he pointed out a brown-and-white westbound sign that said "Next Highest Elevation on I-90 in Oacoma, South Dakota." The long Berkshire grade had summited at seventeen hundred and twenty-four feet, and was not going to inconvenience Ainsworth in time or fuel economy. From eighteenth gear, he shifted to twelfth for the eastbound descent, and that was about all he needed to do to cope with the cordillera of Massachusetts. "It's not the Rockies," he agreed. "But it is steep enough to have a runaway-truck ramp." Massachusetts might prefer not to know that Oacoma is a Missouri River town accessible from the ocean in a yacht. We passed the escape ramp. It had been used so recently that its sand had not been regroomed.

Since that day in Tacoma when I had last seen him, he had driven nearly four hundred thousand miles, in forty-six states and three Canadian provinces. He had carried liquefied clay from Sandersville, Georgia, to Thunder Bay, on the Canadian shore of Lake Superior, delivering it in a blizzard. He had carried petroleum-based candle wax from Titusville, Pennsylvania, to West Jordan, Utah; fatty acid from Winter Haven, Florida, to Roanoke, Virginia; cutting oil from Hilton, New York, to Cullman, Alabama; tall oil (pine-tree resin) from Mobile, Alabama, to Oklahoma City; "elephant snot," trademarked ClariFloc, from Savannah, Georgia, to a wastewater-treatment plant in Fresno, California ("it's literally a

turd attractor"); herbicide from St. Gabriel, Louisiana, to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; calcium slurry from Cockeysville, Maryland, to Kimberly, Wisconsin ("a hard interior wash, an acid wash, failed the first time"); magnesium chloride from Wendover, Utah, to Little Rock, Arkansas; metam sodium ("a corrosive marine pollutant, a Class 8 hazmat") from Cadet, Missouri, to Pedricktown, New Jersey; plasticizer from Kalama, Washington, to Red Bud, Texas; isopropyl alcohol from Merrimack, New Hampshire, to Louisville, Kentucky; and--to the Powder River Basin, in Wyoming--forty thousand pounds of flocculent to Black Thunder Mine.

On the present trip, he had come up through Gila Bend, Flagstaff, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, and Columbus to I-90 east of Cleveland; and he picked me up at the Western Truck Stop in Henrietta--lollipop 362 on the New York State Thruway. New York is anomalous in the matter of Thruway lollipops, as it is in many other respects. Eastbound, we rolled from 362 to 361, 360, 359, and so on. Nearly everywhere else, the numbers count up from west to east. And New York has no weigh stations. In New York you don't pull over to get weighed; bears pull you over and weigh you. They carry portable scales. They take them out in rest areas and put them under your wheels.

We were rolling over broad farmland almost startlingly flat, screened with hedgerows and blistered now and again with drumlins. It was the bottom of Glacial Lake Iroquois, which had shrivelled up as Lake Ontario. Ainsworth in his youth had lived on a small; remote farm there. Each day, he was the first on his school bus and the last off, commuting to his high school in Honeoye Falls, a town divided by a small stream and still centered on a preserved gristmill. Among fields of corn, wheat, and soybeans, Don's brother Lorne lives near Lima, a dozen miles south of the interstate. During Don's infrequent stopovers at Lorne's farmhouse, he sleeps in his only home other than the truck.

Was I aware that New York produces more milk than Wisconsin? (I wasn't. It doesn't.) Did I know that New York is third in wine grapes? A reefer overtook us, bearing the logo of Heluva Good cheese. Ainsworth turned on the C.B. "Hello, there! Where are you from?" "Sodus Point," came the answer from Heluva Good cheese. Ainsworth said, "My dad and I used to go iceboating there." Click. Was I an admirer of John Steinbeck? Cormac McCarthy? Larry McMurtry? Ainsworth's middle names could be Free Association. "I just finished McMurtry's book about Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill. It's a series of anecdotes, loosely strung together." Near Utica, the floor of Glacial Lake Iroquois ended in the rise of mountains, the somewhat cooler air, and the green sloping dairyland of the Mohawk River Valley--Little Falls, Canajoharie--as the road ran close by the Erie Canal. "I was in Needles, California, the other day and it was a hundred and twenty-one degrees."

"Hello, there!" he said to toll collectors. If amiability could kill, they'd fall over in their booths. This was a Sunday, but he had not--as he once had routinely--attended service in a truckers' chapel. He described himself as "an Adventist-in-training" now. "It's as close as a Christian can get to being a Jew." He was planning to order new mud flaps from Goldie's Kosher Truck Parts, in Kearny, New Jersey. Approaching the Connecticut River, he said, "In Chicopee, put your hand over your heart, because that is where the Wall Street Journal is set." Coast to coast, he knows which truck stops carry "the Walleye." Politically, he tilts to the right, but not enough to capsize. He said, sombrely, of the President of the United States, "George is a lost soul."

Three years had not diminished his energy, his obvious zest for the road; and his vocabulary was still a mixture of truckspeak and idiosyncrasy, often less sortable than sand and salt. As we overtook a

"pumpkin"--one of the all-orange eighteen-wheelers of the fleet of Schneider National, the largest truckload carrier in the United States--he said, "An orange litter bag is a Schneider embryo." A tractor-trailer with extra cargo space attached to the tractor was a dromedary. Seeing a murdercyclist with no helmet, he called him a future organ donor.

Seeing flashing red lights far ahead on a Massachusetts shoulder, Ainsworth swung into the fast lane to give a wide berth to a cop with quarry--a four-wheeler having a bad day. Ainsworth was mindful of a new law. "You must get out of the right lane, if you can, when you see those flashing lights. They lose more bears in sideswipes than to people who put guns at their heads. They're tired of losing bears." Those flashing red lights were not on the roof but down in the grille of an unmarked Chevy Camaro. Bright-red lights in a police-car grille are known as unexposed cherries. A cop shop is a state-police station or "anywhere where guys in uniforms hang out." Ainsworth studies cop shops to see what is new in unmarked cars. He told me that bears specializing in big trucks drive Suburbans, Explorers, and passenger vans, "meaning baby trucks inspect big trucks--when you see one, you can bet that that cop is a diesel bear, dedicated to truck enforcement, but that doesn't mean if you go by him at one two zero he won't nab you." On the scanner, Ainsworth hears state police comparing the day's "trophy tickets--i.e., 'What was the highest speed you nailed someone for today?'" He went on to say, "They know who you are before they pull you over. The communications equipment in their cruisers exceeds the cost of the cruiser." They read a license plate, run it through their computer network, and rapidly find out if they are about to meet Pretty Boy Floyd or a retired librarian. Beside the easternmost I-90 New York toll booths, we saw a specialist bear looking through a trucker's papers. "Predators roost near the water hole," Ainsworth remarked. "Tunnels, bridges, toll booths--any bottleneck. Cops are so bloodthirsty in New York they'll stand in the middle of the road studying you. They are looking for expired license plates. They are looking at C.V.S.A. stickers." Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance. "C.V.S.A. stickers are color-coded and shape-coded, so a cop knows when you were last inspected. I believe in the C.V.S.A." The bear beside the toll booths was dressed in black, a style increasingly in vogue. "They wear all-black uniforms. Their boots are bloused, as they are in the military. Their holsters are made out of ballistic nylon. Why are they dressing that way? To frighten you. To intimidate you."

Police are also likely to ask for toll receipts, with which they test the assertions in a trucker's logbook. Toll receipts are stamped with date and time. Hours-of-service rules, recently revised, limit the trucker to eleven driving hours after ten off, and if the driving time is cumulative and not consecutive it cannot go past the fourteenth hour after ten off. Ainsworth calls this "the fourteen-hour shot clock." He said, "You've got fourteen hours to accomplish the eleven in. If you want to do elective maintenance, you'll never do it in the middle of the day." Long-haul drivers are still limited to a total of seventy hours in eight days, and when the seventy have been completed they now must spend thirty-four hours off. "Take thirty-four hours off--you're fresh, just like the Pony Express," Ainsworth said coöperatively. "I'm a born-again driver." Nevertheless, truckers feel "toll-ticket-tethered" when driving in the East, tolls being few and scattered in Western states.

To drop off the load from San Diego, we left the Massachusetts Turnpike at Exit 10, went south on I-395, and off into the neighborhood where Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island make a triple junction. After the interstates' oceanic sameness, the silver tanker in those suburban streets was something like an anadromous fish coming out of the sea and going up a river, suddenly having to pick its way through narrow channels past bridge piers and over ledges up rapids past erratic boulders. Old Howarth Road, Oxford, Massachusetts. The groin vaulting of shade trees. The blind curves. The

bouldery suburban houses. Dudley Road. Old Webster Road. The hunkered companies. International Photonics Group. Stop, start--stop sign to stop sign, light to light, the track was kicking like a mule. The load--sixty-two hundred gallons of concentrated WD-40-weighed forty-five thousand pounds, and the surge slamming the front wall of the tank felt like a punch in the spine. Ainsworth said, "It's got a lot of surge to it, a lot of slosh to it, because it is thin."

More than any other product, in his agented and freelance operations, Ainsworth carries WD-40, picking it up from Ken East the brewmaster in San Diego and taking it to packaging plants in Ontario, Texas, Georgia, Wisconsin, or Massachusetts. As Ainsworth styles it, he is "the Johnny Appleseed of WD-40." Occasionally, returning West, he picks up a "secret ingredient" in Painesville, Ohio-a corrosion inhibitor made by Lubrizol and known, like a Swiss bank account, only by a number. WD means water displacement. WD-40 was first brewed for the military, in the nineteen-fifties, and the brew came up right on the fortieth try. The load now surging was thin because his tank had kept its temperatures at and a little above a hundred and fourteen degrees for three thousand and thirty miles. That ovoid elongate stainless-steel tube was a sixty-thousand-dollar thermos. And, if necessary, it could add heat. "This is no F.P.U.," Don said. "This is a chemical tanker." An F.P.U. is a farm-pickup unit that hauls milk. Imagine what people saw, looking out from their living rooms on Old Howarth Road. In Waterloo, New York, on our way East, Don had spent seventy-five dollars for a "spot-free wash" so that people looking at his truck would think they were staring at the sun. Moreover, the tractor was only three and a half months old--a Peterbilt, replacing the earlier one almost identically, but in deep claret striped with tan. "This is one quiet machine," he said. "No wind wings. It's symphony-class." It had a chrome bumper, stainless-steel rock guards, and cylindrical stainless air cleaners with light-emitting diodes. Concealed behind a hinged license plate was a steel hook that could be used to pull him out of a ditch. There were, as before, no logos on the doors, or, needless to say, on the bright steel behind him. He still had his bug screen in the form of the American flag. A stainless-steel black-bristled boot brush was affixed to the lower stainless-steel step on the driver's side, enabling Ainsworth to degrime his custom-made boots as he climbs into the cab. To his inventory of cayman boots, mule boots, eel boots, and shark boots, he had recently added four sea-turtle boots, one pair dyed serpentine green and the other henna. He will not say who made the boots, because he prefers not to visit him in prison. He referred to the turtles as "domesticated." As he drew into the Shield Packaging Company, in Dudley, no one watching could have guessed that over the years leading to that moment he had hauled his spotless trailer 775,567 miles.

Shield was ensconced in what had been one of the first spinning mills in America, its windows now filled in with masonry but in a spruce and geometrical manner that had returned dignity to a vacant shell. The approach driveway was flanked by the plant and a retaining wall. The driveway's concrete surface was as clean as it had been the day it was laid. Beside a row of discharge tanks, the driveway was depressed, and a large drain grid was at the lowest point. Any big chemical spill would go into that drain-to end up where? In the nearby Quinebaug River? In nearby Lake Chaubunagungamaug? No. It would go into the packing plant and be disposed of from there. So why did a Ghanaian called James, newly arrived in the United States, come out of the plant laden with thick cardboard sheets, and carefully tessellate them under the entire truck? Because-Chaubunagungamaug or no Chaubunagungamaug--it mattered to the boss that not one drop of anything but rain land on his driveway. The driveway was as stainless as the truck.

On a railway siding in the Shield grounds were two coupled tank cars. Each could hold thirty thousand gallons, five times as much as Ainsworth's truck. My glance moved from the tank cars to the truck driver. "So why not send the WD-40 in tank cars?" I asked him.

He said, "You can't supply heat in transit to a railway tank car; and service is piss poor."

On the Mass Pike, later, I asked him how it felt to be forty-five thousand pounds lighter, how the driving differed. He said, "You don't have to think as far ahead. That doesn't mean we're going to sleep up here." And, in miles that followed, he added, "The gap is the most important thing--keeping a good gap. A lot of times, people will steal your cushion.… People talk faster back here, and they also drive faster here in the dogged arteries of the Northeast. They squeeze into my lane and force me off into the shoulder--it's the new trend in four-wheeler driving."

Five thousand live chickens went past us lying on their sides on shelves within open mesh screening, the road breeze ruffling their white feathers, white feathers snowing in the air. In a six-wheel "four-wheeler that civilians would call a truck," they were on their way to Heaven to join Colonel Sanders.

Stopping off for "a dab of fuel," Ainsworth dropped $307.10, and also bought the New York Times, USA Today, and his beloved Walleye. In the seven hundred and fifty-eight miles I rode with him from western New York to Massachusetts and back to western New York, he paid $108.50 in tolls. When I rode with him from Atlanta to Tacoma, he paid zero in tolls.

"Why was Howard Hughes surrounded by Mormon advisers?"

I said it was news to me.

"They're sober," he said, and went on to praise Flying J truck stops, because they are clean and well managed. They are based in Utah.

The Petro network of truck stops seemed to be his favorite. We went into one in Waterloo that not only had the usual food, maps, showers, and hardware but also had a chiropractor, a hair salon, an Internet room, and a video horse-racing parlor with wall-size screens. "You can take a prom date to a Petro," Ainsworth asserted. In San Diego, though, no one dances at a Petro. San Diego, in its beautiful setting, clearly regards itself as aesthetically incompatible with big trucks--at least according to one truck driver. He said, "They don't allow ugly unwashed trucks into the county. They have only one tiny truck stop, not a real one. They have no support structure for trucks. The closest real truck stop east is at a casino sixty miles east. The closest to the north is in Los Angeles County; to the south, in Mexico. To the west, nothing, for obvious reasons." He later added, in a letter, "The beauty of the city makes it antithetical to greasy, smoke-belching behemoths of the highways. However short-sighted, their lack of care for trucks does not mean they are an evil town, merely truck-care deprived."

Eastbound, we had overnighted at a TA truck stop, which we reached in the evening, just before his shot clock ran out. "It's a fairly new, bummy one," he said, a description that was not altogether contradicted by the motel next door, where grass was growing through cracks in its dry swimming pool. With Flying J and Petro, TravelCenters of America is one of the national big three. The lot was all but full. Nearly two hundred and fifty trucks were there, a large number for the Northeast but below the size of big truck

stops nationally--Bankhead, Georgia, five hundred trucks; Walcott, Iowa, eight hundred trucks. "In these New England and Middle Atlantic states you're scratching with the chickens just to find a place where you can turn your key off," Don said, as he swept his mirrors and wrestled the wheel, gingerly backing into a tight slot between two other trucks. Pull-through parking--in forward, out forward--is not as common as one might hope. Parking in various truck stops, he has to back in about fifty per cent of the time. As we walked through the lot, carrying our gear, the hum of the many trucks was not deafening; it was just voluminous. This was a humid, heavy night in the middle of the summer. At night, anywhere, if it is very hot or very cold, Ainsworth goes into a motel instead of sleeping in the truck, because he prefers not to run the engine just for heat or air-conditioning. This does not seem to preoccupy his colleagues. The hum of a truck stop in the dead of night is one of the sonic emblems of America, right up there with the bombs in air, the rutilant rockets, and the stern impassioned stress. You have not heard the sound of creature comfort until you have heard hundreds of huddled trucks idling through the night.

A company called IdleAire, in Knoxville, has heard the sound and seen a market. It sells cool air and warm air to tracks at truck stops. From an overhead insulated duct, the air comes down a bright-yellow accordion-pleated tube and enters the window of a parked truck IdleAire's facilities are like black smokers with unimaginable pendant worms waving to and fro, looking to connect with trucks. From the IdleAire company, drivers buy adapters that fit into truck windows and snug the tubes. IdleAire simultaneously offers satellite television and Internet and telephone access. In California, Ainsworth had recently noticed that IdleAire was selling its coolness for $1.60 an hour, while trucks' idling diesels were each burning a gallon an hour, for--at the time $2.60.

Most tractors and trailers are mated promiscuously, as a matter of business practice, but taking them all together there are some two million big trucks in the United States. When their drivers' shot clocks run out, they idle for ten hours. Two million trucks times ten hours times three hundred days amounts to six billion gallons of diesel fuel per annum burned basically to keep truck drivers cool, to keep truck drivers warm, and to keep happy Presidents content.

Walking on through the sultry lot, Ainsworth said, "Misuse of a resource in short supply. Some folks call that fuel."

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By John McPhee

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