

# What I Did On My Summer Vacation

## Including ... A Night at the Historic Eklund Hotel

It was a dark and stormy night ... but I'm getting way ahead of myself. My last stay at the Eklund Hotel was in June 1968. However there is a lot more to the story than just that.

### Prologue

It began simply enough. On a cloudless Thursday morning in late June, 1968 I jumped on a motorcycle and headed for Colorado ... and unexpected adventure. A few days earlier I had realized that I had a week of vacation remaining, and although I owned a year old BMW R69S motorcycle (see below) and the bank and I shared ownership of a two-month-old Porsche 912 automobile, I hadn't even left the Oklahoma City limits. I was 25, single, and gas was still less than 32 cents a gallon, so naturally I decided that a solo motorcycle trip to Colorado was just the answer.

As a preface, at this point I need to remind you that 1968 was still a year before the movie "Easy Rider" was released, before motorcycles entered the mainstream of American culture, and when motorcyclists still weren't particularly welcome in many parts of the country. It would be decades before doctors, lawyers, and investment bankers began donning spotless leathers and parading their sparkling new Harleys around neatly landscaped suburban roads.

My preparation was hasty and planning was minimal. Since the BMW didn't have a windshield, I borrowed one from a friend, John Spivey ... a wise move, as it turned out. My lifelong friend Mike Beals offered me a key to his family's summer "cabin" in Breckenridge. Mike and I agreed that I would roll out my sleeping bag on the floor of the mudroom and that I could use the adjoining bathroom and shower; I would also check the house for any problems while I was there. This would be my longest motorcycle trip ever, and by far my longest ride without the company of another biker.

### Day 1 - Thursday

And so my adventure began on that bright Thursday morning. Breckenridge was only 697 miles away. I happily calculated that since I had custom-ordered my BMW with the extra-large 6½-gallon "sport" gas tank, I would need only one or two fuel stops enroute. I was wearing jeans, a long-sleeved shirt and yellow nylon windbreaker, lightweight boots, ventilated leather driving gloves (see below), goggles, and a helmet with face shield. Strapped to the rear of the seat were a sleeping bag and a small suitcase packed with two changes of clothes, a light



My 1967 BMW R69S ... 42 years later!



One of the gloves still survives

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jacket, a poncho, rain gear, and two cameras. In my pockets I had about \$20 (!) in cash, a couple of oil company credit cards, and a BankAmericard (now Visa) credit card that I had never used.

My planned route included Okarche, Woodward, and Boise City in Oklahoma, and on to Springfield, Lamar, Pueblo, Colorado Springs, and Fairplay Colorado. My first fuel stop was probably at Guymon, OK. I had been comfortable enough while riding ... although I knew it was hot and felt that I might be getting dehydrated ... but I hadn't realized just how hot it was until I stopped for gas. I pumped about 5 gallons of gas (~ \$1.65) into the motorcycle and perhaps a quart of liquids into myself, paid with my gas credit card, and pressed on. I distinctly remember the bank thermometer proudly advertising a temperature of 107 degrees as I rolled through Springfield, CO; I was really glad that I had borrowed the windshield. My second fuel stop was probably at Pueblo, CO. This time, when I removed my gloves I saw that I had rows of sunburned dots down the backs of my hands and fingers ... an unanticipated consequence of the ventilation holes. Many miles later, the temperature had dropped but the sky was still clear as I descended west of Pike's Peak into the beautiful and (at that time) still-undeveloped South Park grasslands. The summer twilight was fading behind the Mosquito Range as I finally rode north out of Fairplay, across the Continental Divide at Hoosier Pass, and down into Breckenridge. I found the Beals house on French Street, parked outside the garage, let myself in, took a shower, changed into clean clothes, and walked the two blocks downhill to Main Street for dinner. Life was good. I slept soundly that night.

### Day 2 - Friday

Friday was a day for sightseeing. I had originally considered going back south through Hoosier Pass to Alma and then taking county road 12 west from Alma Junction, crossing the Ten Mile/Mosquito Range at Mosquito Pass, and descending via county road 3 to Leadville, but I eventually decided that it would be unsafe to attempt solo. The distance between Alma and Leadville is only 18 miles, but the road was unpaved, poorly maintained, steep, and rough, and there was no one to help me out if I were to become stuck or involuntarily "dismounted." (There were no cell phones back then, either, so calling for help was not an option.) Instead, I loosely planned a leisurely 270 mile loop north from Breckenridge to Dillon, east on old Highway 6 through Loveland Pass to Idaho Springs, then north on secondary roads to Estes Park, west through Rocky Mountain National Park, then south through Grand Lake, Granby, Winter Park, and Georgetown, and finally back west to Breckenridge.

After breakfast down on Main Street I hit the road. The sky was still cloudless but it was much cooler in the mountains; I was glad I had brought a jacket. I don't remember much detail about that morning except that the weather and scenery were both beautiful. Rocky Mountain National Park was spectacular riding, as expected, but it was getting cold and cloudy; at some point I donned my rain gear for added wind protection and warmth. There were intermittent light rain showers as I rode south from Grand Lake, and as I neared the summit of Berthoud Pass it began snowing heavily. Wow ... 107 degrees on Thursday, snow on Friday! I was glad I had brought my rain gear. I rode back to Breckenridge in clearing weather, parked, took a shower, and walked down to Main Street for dinner. A rising young folk singer named John Denver was performing at one of the few bars in town that hadn't, as was the local custom, gone bankrupt at the end of ski season. It was too crowded inside, so I just listened for a while from the sidewalk. Somehow I ran into another friend from Oklahoma City, Ben Parks, and his new wife, whose

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mother lived in Breckenridge; they invited me over for breakfast the next morning. Life was good. I slept soundly.

### Day 3 – Saturday morning

Saturday was an eventful day ... and it started with a rush of adrenaline.

I was first aroused by an insistent tapping noise, and someone calling, “Open the door!” I sleepily extracted myself from my bedroll, walked to the outside door, and opened it a crack. Instantly, there was a gun in my face! The guy with the pistol shoved me back, pushed the door open, and began a semi-coherent diatribe ... all the while continuing to wave the gun in my face. I was later to learn that this was the next-door neighbor, Roger Gray, introducing himself. (According to my friend Mike, Roger was a volatile local bully who had once been the Breckenridge town marshal and/or a Summit County sheriff’s deputy. Rumor had it that Roger had been defrocked, voted out of office, or otherwise involuntarily retired as a result of some unspecified abuse of his authority. To make matters worse, Roger and Mike shared what could most politely be described as a fully developed personality conflict.) He spewed, “Who the hell are you? What the hell are you doing here? You are trespassing! Pack up and get out! Etc! Etc!” As soon as I could get a word in, I protested that I had permission to be there ... I even had a key! Roger’s reply was, “You may have Mike’s permission, but you don’t have his parents’ permission! Pack up and get out!” I called his bluff, “Mr. And Mrs. Beals know me. Let’s call and ask them. I have their phone number in my bag.” He finally moved the gun away from my face, but his only reply was, “If you aren’t out of town by noon, I’ll have you arrested for trespassing!” (Gee ... it was kinda’ like an old movie showdown.) I calmly insisted that I had permission to be there and that I would leave Breckenridge as I had originally planned. Roger muttered a few more curses and threats, but eventually left. Days later, I learned that ol’ Roger had actually called Mr. And Mrs. Beals ... and had told them that “a motorcycle gang” had taken over their house!

Both changes of clothes that I had brought with me were pretty smelly by now, so I found a coin laundry before calling at Ben’s mother-in-law’s. Hers was an older house on the south side of town, probably dating from the gold-boom days of the 1920s, but very nice and well maintained, and she was quite gracious ... especially considering that she had never met me before and that I had arrived on a motorcycle. I remember that her large kitchen had two stoves, a modern electric range on which she was cooking breakfast and an old cast-iron wood stove in which she had a batch of chocolate chip cookies baking. The warmth of the wood stove felt good after the cold morning air. She explained that she kept the wood stove because it still worked better for her for baking than the electric range. I don’t remember much about breakfast, but I do remember that the cookies were good. I politely said goodbye, stopped by the laundromat to retrieve my clothes, and returned to the Beals house. I changed into fresh clothes, packed my stuff, cleaned up the bathroom, checked the house one last time, and hit the road by 10:30 or 11 o’clock.

My plan for the day was to ride north to Frisco, then back south through Fremont Pass to Leadville, Buena Vista, and Poncha Springs, down the long San Luis Valley, with a stop at the Great Sand Dunes National Monument, and then on east through La Veta pass to Walsenburg, south to Trinidad and Raton (NM), east past the extinct Capulin volcano to Clayton, then on to Dalhart (TX), Dumas, Pampa, Elk City (OK), and home. Total distance was 764 miles. I could

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be home by midnight ... but I had also allowed an extra day, so I could stop just about anywhere along the way and roll out my sleeping bag if I got too tired. (One positive aspect of the social stigma still associated with motorcycles back then was that people *did* tend to leave you alone.)

After the cool morning in the mountains, descending into the high desert of the San Luis Valley returned me to hot weather. The Great Sand Dunes, near Alamosa, were impressive as always. After cooling off, doing a little exploring, and taking a few pictures, I hit the road again. When I reached Raton it was still about an hour before sundown, so I stopped for dinner.

### Day 3 – Saturday evening

When I left the restaurant, about 30 minutes later, I observed that the mountains west of Raton were now crowned with massive cumulonimbus clouds, and that they were building rapidly. Such clouds are typical during the summer monsoon, when warm, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico riding up the eastern slope of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains collides with cooler, drier air riding up from the west. The usual result is locally intense thunderstorms that dissipate after a few hours and then form again the next day. But sometimes they develop into monster storms (meteorologists call them “Mesoscale Convective Systems”) that roll eastward out of the mountains, spawning lightning, high winds, hail, torrential rain, and occasional tornadoes all the way across Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana, until they finally exhaust themselves over Mississippi or Alabama the following morning. This would turn out to be just such a night.

I considered my options, including finding a motel room in Raton for the night ... even though it was still pretty early ... but that would have required me to figure out how to use my still-virgin BankAmericard. I had about \$7 in cash left in my pocket, it wouldn't be dark for at least an hour, and I was anxious to get home. I thought I could probably stay ahead of any rain, but if not I was well prepared with both my rain gear and poncho, my trusty BMW was still running flawlessly, and besides ... I had ridden through some pretty heavy rains before, back home in Oklahoma.

I struck out east along Highway 64 toward Clayton ... 83 long miles through some pretty empty cattle country. What on your road map today may appear as the towns of Capulin, Des Moines, Grenville, and Mount Dora were in 1968 little more than abandoned gas stations and/or a few seldom-used ranch outbuildings that happened to be near the highway. Even riding at 70 mph, the fast-building storms were overtaking me, the temperature was dropping, and I began to feel the sharp sting of an occasional big, wet raindrop. Not good ... and I wasn't even 25 miles out of Raton yet. At Capulin I pulled up in front of a boarded-up gas station, put on my jacket, donned my rain gear, and then put on my poncho over that; it was still 63 miles to the next possible stop, at Clayton, and I was definitely going to get wet. Everything went pretty well for the next 20 miles or so. Riding through more or less continuous rain in the fading twilight I was still able to maintain about 45 or 50 mph. I was half way to Clayton; only 43 miles to go.

Somewhere past Des Moines it suddenly got very dark ... and the sky collapsed on top of me! Torrential rain; continuous lightning in all quadrants; thunder so loud I could hear it above the din of the big raindrops whacking my helmet; intense wind gusts; occasional hail. Visibility was so poor that I was soon down in first gear, probably no more than 10 mph, following the centerline of the road one stripe at a time. I almost ran into the back of a car that had stopped

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dead in the road, unable to find the shoulder. Indeed, for perhaps the next hour every car I passed was pulled off the road and onto the shoulder; the visibility was that bad! I was afraid to pull off myself because there was no shelter anywhere and I thought that a stationary target in such flat country would invite lightning ... and I didn't want to be a human lightning rod! Staying on the road had its own hazards: The visibility was so poor that I was afraid of colliding with another car or blindly following the road down into a flooding arroyo ... in which case they would probably have found me days later somewhere near El Paso; I was also afraid that the motorcycle, and me with it, would be blown off the side of the road by a wind gust and end up in a nondescript heap that might not be discovered for weeks. I didn't even want to think about what damage the grapefruit-sized hail that such storms can generate might do. I was now cold and wet, and my goggles and face shield were fogging up ... which made the visibility even worse ... but every minute I stayed on the road took me one minute closer to Clayton and shelter.

I don't know how long I rode along in these conditions. It seemed like hours, but it was probably only 30 to 45 minutes. The ghostly light of a railroad semaphore appeared out of the gloom and passed off to my left. Eventually, the storm diminished somewhat and I was able to speed up to maybe 25 mph, still in heavy rain. After what probably *was* another hour, I finally saw something that looked like a couple of lights ahead in the distance; but they appeared and disappeared in the rain. Several minutes later I recognized that off to the left I was seeing mercury vapor lights like those used to light farm or ranch yards, which meant that there might be shelter nearby. As I got closer, I could vaguely make out what appeared to be a large building beyond the lights. Beneath a sign that identified the building as the offices and sale barn of the Union County Feedlot, I turned into what looked like an entrance and slogged my way across the muddy parking lot toward the building. I could now make out a lighted doorway, but I suddenly had a new concern ... motorcyclists weren't always welcome back then, and I knew from experience that real-life cowboys could be pretty picky about the company they keep. Soon, however, I could see one or two figures silhouetted in the doorway, waving me on in. I parked on the firmest ground I could find, dismounted, and approached the doorway. I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to spoil my welcome by getting water and mud all over the floor ... but as my eyes adjusted to the light I could see two or three young cowboys already mopping at full speed. As I stepped inside, water poured off my poncho in a solid sheet, all the way around.

My fears had been unfounded; the cowboys welcomed me like one of their own. They got me a chair; they offered me a cup of coffee. It was as if I were a medieval knight who had appeared unexpectedly out of the past on this dark and stormy night ... or maybe those cowboys were just amused to finally meet someone crazier than themselves. In retrospect, it seems possible that some of them might have had their own memories of similar storms, alone at night on horseback. As the storm finally moved on east, the guy who seemed to be in charge asked what I planned to do. Rolling out my sleeping bag under a tree was no longer an attractive option. He recommended the old Eklund Hotel in nearby Clayton as decent and inexpensive, and he even offered to call and tell them I was coming. I accepted his offer; I figured that it wouldn't hurt if the bedraggled stranger on a motorcycle had references when he showed up in town.

It was only a couple of miles into Clayton, and I arrived at the Eklund around midnight ... probably four hours after leaving Raton. My BMW had never missed a beat. The hotel lobby was dark. The night auditor, who appeared to be in his 80s, was dozing peacefully behind the massive front desk; in my mind I still think of him as draped with cobwebs. Once awakened, he

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cordially checked me in: private room on the second floor, bathroom down the hall, \$3.72 for the night, including tax. I paid cash.

I was still shivering somewhat ... was it from the cold, the accumulated adrenaline, the feedlot coffee, or perhaps all three? The old man advised that due to the late hour I could probably take a bath if I wanted without being disturbed. (Were there actually any other guests that night? I don't know.) Now fully awake, he started to tell me a little about the history of the Eklund, and how outlaw "Black Jack" Ketchum had been hanged just outside the hotel entrance back in 1901. (Had he actually witnessed the event in person? It seems possible, but he didn't say.) He offered to turn on the lights and give me a personal tour of the "museum" exhibits set up around the lobby. I was exhausted, so I politely asked for a rain check until the next morning.

I remember my second-floor room as large and spotlessly clean. I wondered how long it had been since anyone else had spent the night there. There was a well-worn wool rug on the dark wood floor. The heavy, dark furniture was antique, but it appeared to be in flawless condition. In one corner was an old-fashioned washstand, complete with basin and water pitcher. The bed, covered with a knobby white cotton bedspread, was so tall that I couldn't comfortably sit on it and keep my feet on the floor. I found the communal men's bathroom. It seemed huge, with several sinks and at least two large enameled cast iron bathtubs. I was so cold and tired that I didn't care if I *were* interrupted; I filled a tub, stripped off my clothes, and immersed myself in the hot water. An exclusive spa could not have felt any better! After the bath, I returned to my room, climbed (literally) into bed, and slept soundly.

### Day 4 - Sunday

The next morning, I took my tour of the Eklund lobby/museum, climbed back on the BMW, and rode the remaining 360 miles to Oklahoma City in moderate temperatures and brilliant sunshine. Life was good.

### Epilogue

As it turned out, severe weather has been a recurrent theme in my professional life for the past 35 years. I have ridden many interesting motorcycles over the years, but that old R69S is still my favorite. I have driven automobiles in North America, Europe, and South Africa, in all kinds of weather, and I have experienced hail and other adverse weather in airplanes that I was piloting. I have since endured similar monster storms in person, as well as observing others from the detached isolation of a radar console. But in all the years since 1968, I have never felt quite so alone, so small, or so vulnerable as I did that June night long ago on Highway 64.

Four days on the road; total travel: roughly 1731 miles; total cost: about \$30. If you manage to survive adventures like this, the memories of them eventually become priceless treasures.

- Marvin McInnis  
July 2005  
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<http://www.mcinnisusa.com/public/MotorcycleTrip.pdf>

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My 1967 BMW R69S reappeared in 2010, beautifully restored by Tucker Glavin  
(Only the solo seat and a few other details are different than the original.)



The Old Gas Station, Capulin, NM – Still Standing, August 2005

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U.S. Highway 64 East of Capulin, NM – August 2005  
(Looking southeast from Capulin Mountain, an ancient volcanic cinder cone)



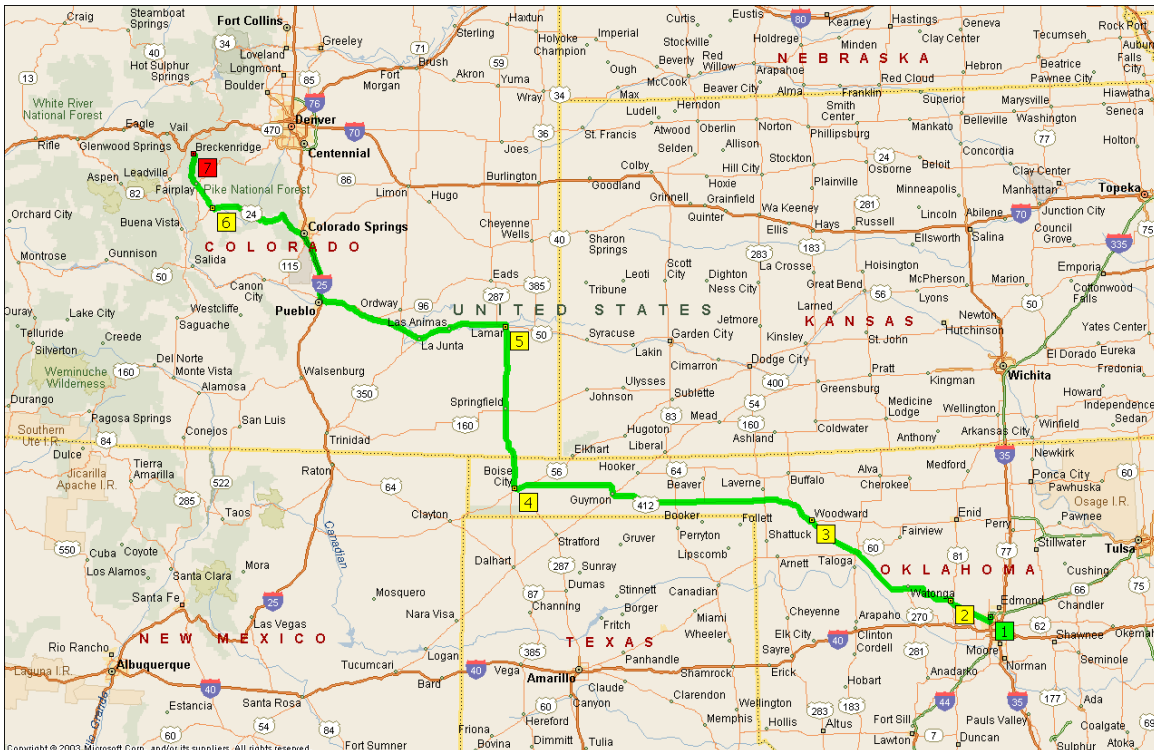
Union County Feedlot, Clayton, NM – Still There, August 2005



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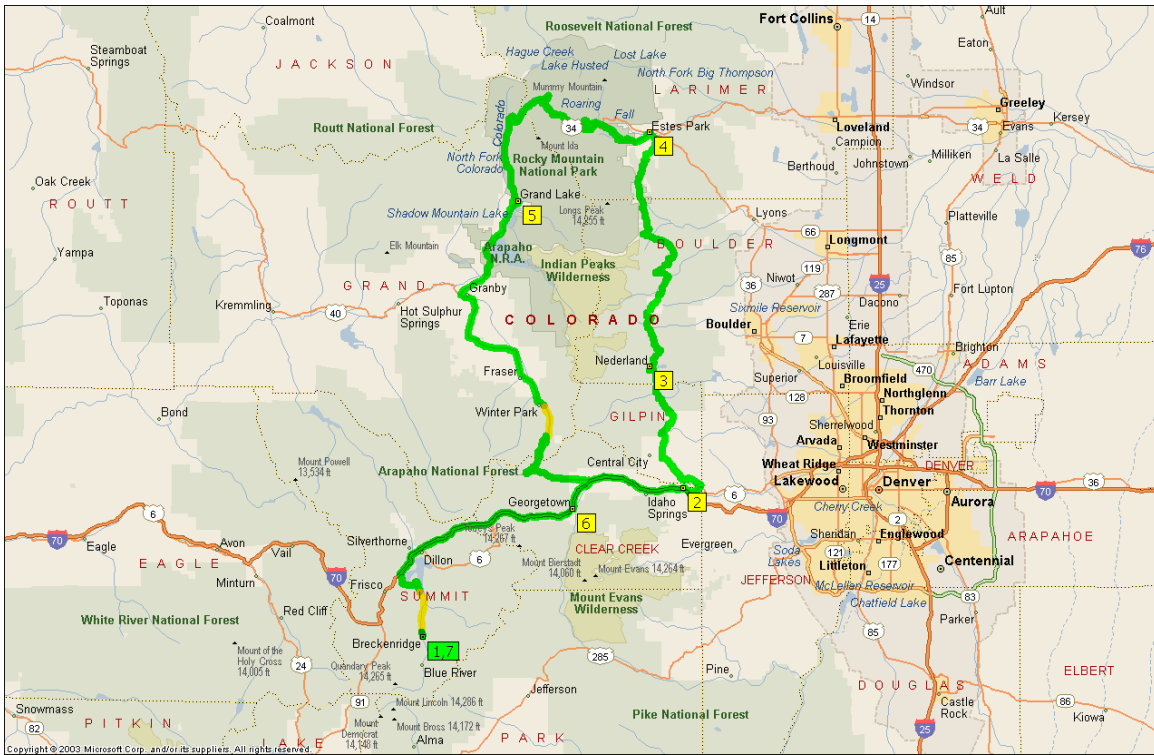


The Historic Eklund Hotel, Clayton, NM – August 2005



Trip Log – Day 1 (697 mi)

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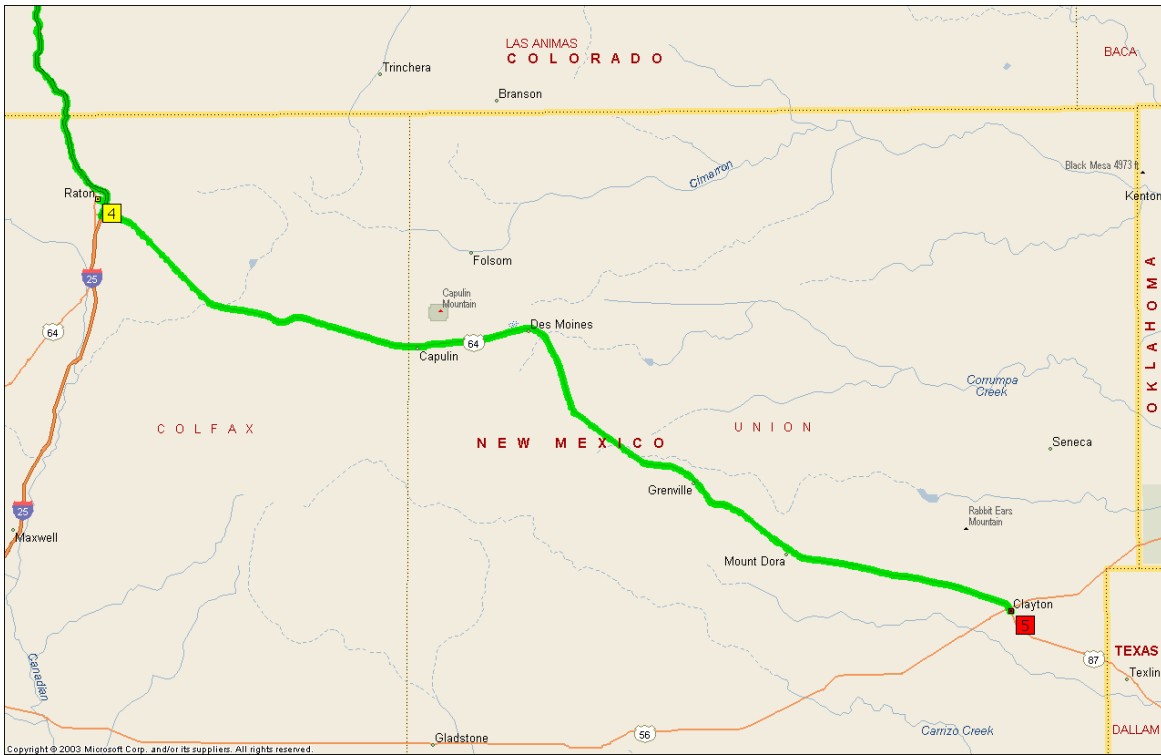


Trip Log – Day 2 (270 mi)



Trip Log – Day 3 (404 mi)

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Raton to Clayton ... 83 eventful miles



Trip Log – Day 4 (360 mi)