

# Rialta Diaries

By Thomas A. Nolan



## Prologue

My wife, Carol, and I decided that 2007 was to be our year for a cross country trek in our 2004 Winnebago Rialta, a 22 foot RV. Since we're both retired it seemed that finding a contiguous three or four weeks wouldn't be too hard. However, with our various board and commission meetings, grandchildren's school activities, and my writing workshops, the earliest we could start that block of time was the second week in October – even then we opted out of several events. Anyway, we finally agreed on a start date and Carol began planning our route and locating the state and federal parks that would be our nightly stopovers. I started preparing the Rialta.

I wanted new rubber on the machine for this trip, partly because the old shoes had 21,000+ miles on them and partly because they were terrible tires. I soon discovered that only Continental, the manufacturer of my current tires, and Nokian, a Norwegian company, produced the odd sizes that the machine required. About the tires: the Rialta comes from the factory with 195/65 R16C tires on the front and 215/65R16C on the rear. This means they couldn't be rotated front to back to equalize wear. The bigger problem was actually replacing the tiny, but heavy-duty front tires. I was unable to locate a Nokian dealer who could get that size even though the company allegedly made them. Sensing that this would be a continuing problem, and reluctant to return to the Continental line, I asked my mechanic to check and see whether the rear tires would also work on the front. Turns out they do, even though the manual that came with the vehicle says they won't, so I ordered four of the larger tires.

While waiting for the new rubber, I began making small storage modifications to the interior. The Rialta comes with a closet in which to hang clothes. I don't know about other campers but neither Carol nor I generally bring clothing that requires

hanging so I built a set of shelves into that compartment. There is also a ledge above the refrigerator that has all manner of connections for a TV, an item neither of us thinks essential when camping, so I partially enclosed it in order to give us extra storage in that area.

The day before we were to leave, I went through the water purification process in the course of which I filled the holding tanks to overflowing. Purifying the drinking water system meant draining and refilling it three times, each iteration requiring that all faucets and the toilet be activated for a minute or so to circulate everything. The result was a full (to overflowing, yuk) blackwater tank. Emptying them would have to be handled on the first leg of the journey.

October 11, 2007 – Day one

I spent part of the morning on my computer locating dump station possibilities along our route. I remembered that *Flying J Truck Stops* had stations and located one about 250 miles into the trip. During the search I discovered that *Petro Stopping Centers* also provided facilities. Armed with this information and a sloshy mess in the toilet, we set out on our way west, leaving the driveway at 10:15.

Just South of Scranton we located one of the Petro places and, in a hard rain, pulled in to dump the tanks. After cruising the expansive lot several times without locating the dump station, I went into the building to use their facilities and to find out where to purge mine. Since it was raining buckets, and since I'd be spending about ten minutes in it, I bought a rain suit for fifteen dollars that included a hooded jacket and pants. I put the jacket on before returning to the Rialta with a key for the dump station, that cost ten dollars because I wasn't also getting gas.

"We have rain slickers," Carol reminded me.

"They don't have pants," I responded.

At the station I positioned the machine to access the sump and got out. It seemed like the rain was even harder but I had my new waterproof hoody on so I went to work. In order to connect the hose I had to get on my knees in an inch of water, and do the same to close the drain, so by the time I entered the camper again, my jeans were soaked.

"Why didn't you wear your new rain pants?" Carol asked.

Not having any possible retort that made sense, I remained quiet, took my wet jeans off and put on the rain pants.

The rest of the day we traveled through Pennsylvania and most of Ohio in rain of varying intensity.

*An aside: service areas on the Ohio Turnpike are like airport terminals, they are absolutely huge! With showers and food courts available, Carol and I theorized that one could find a quiet corner and take up residence there.*

We left I-80 a little east of Toledo, heading for the **Mary Jane Thurston State Park**. After hunting the back roads of northern Ohio for more than an hour, during which Carol pointed out several places where we "could ask", we found ourselves in Grand Rapids. Our map pinpointed this tiny hamlet on the Maumee River very close to the park, so we stopped at "Rapids Marathon and General Store" to ask a cordial gentleman named Tom sweeping up outside the place. Our exchange went something like this:

"Hi, may I ask you a question?"

"I reckon." Smiling and leaning on his broom, "If ya ask nice."

"How do we get to Mary Jane Thurston State Park?"

"Well, you go down Front Street," pointing to the well-lit street down a slight hill. "Take the road past the firehouse and the court. Take a hard left 'bout a block further on, unless you want to take a swim in the old quarry, then turn right at the stop sign and it's about a quarter mile down that road on the right."

We found the place easily but the campground was full. Carol wanted to find someone in the park to verify what the sign said. I mentioned that it was almost ten PM. After some more discussion, we decided to go back and ask Tom if there were any other campgrounds nearby. We had, by this time, been on the road for eleven and a half hours and were not looking forward to any more. He thought about it, asked some of the patrons then looked in the phonebook for one he thought was a little west. He had no success.

Suddenly his expression changed. "Are you self-contained?" When I said we were, he pointed to a parking area across an unused railroad line about fifty yards from where we stood. "Semis sometimes park there," he said, "The only problem is the sheriff might object." Just then a sheriff's patrol car stopped at the intersection. Tom hailed it and explained our situation. The officer said there'd be no problem parking overnight where Tom suggested so we pulled into our free campsite next to the Maumee River by an old railroad trestle and walked into town.

Front Street was probably half a mile long from the stop at Rapids Marathon to the ninety-degree left turn at the other end. At 10 PM it was deserted except for one teenager skateboarding in the middle of the street in the business district. The actual business district was probably a football field long with closely

spaced streetlights cutting parallel rows on either side, their pairs of hanging globes giving the place a European flavor. At the end of this section were a firehouse, town hall and another brick building that could have been a law office, or something equally prestigious. The town was plastered with posters advertising their annual "Applebutter Fest" preparations for which had apparently begun today (we missed the peeling.) I wished we had no agenda on this trip so I could be here for the rest of the festival weekend.



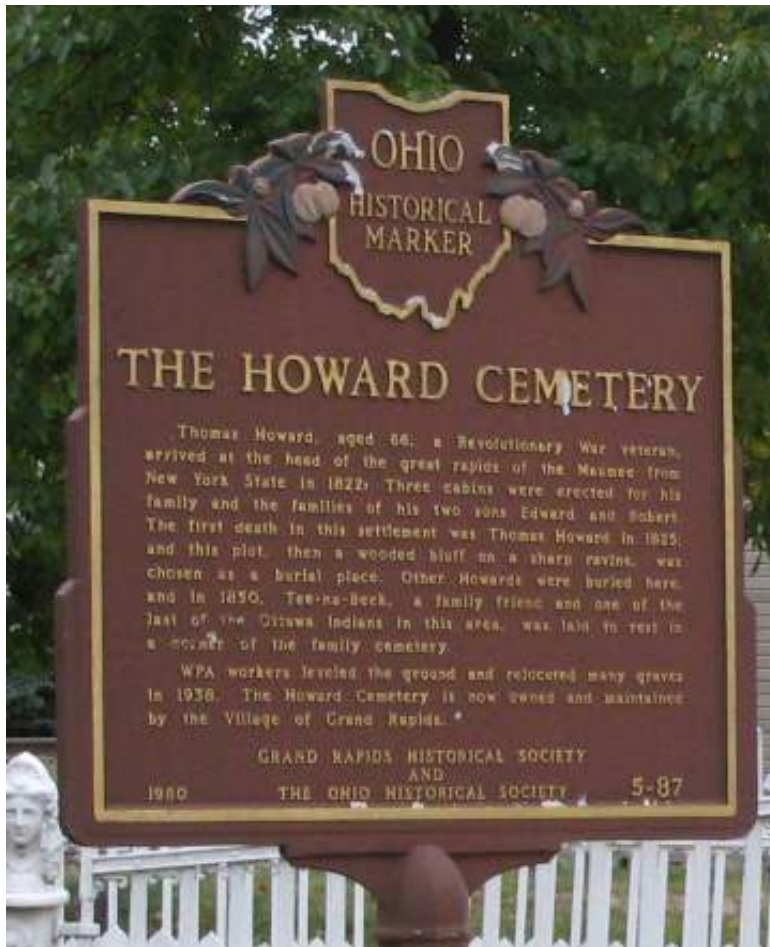
We went to sleep to the sounds of traffic on US 24 across the Maumee.



October 12

We woke this morning at about 6:30. I took a photo of the street before morning traffic showed up and then took a shot of the trestle over the Grand Rapids of the Maumee. Meanwhile Carol went for a walk. Thinking to catch up with her at some point, I began my own explorations.

Turns out there's a short canal around the rapids, not in use anymore, that now is the centerpiece of a linear park extending all the way to our unrealized destination from last night. I didn't walk it, choosing instead to take another look at the center of town. On my way back, I saw Carol emerge from the park and cross the street to a tiny cemetery with a historical marker in front of it. The marker and gravesite were of Thomas Howard, a revolutionary war officer who was the town's founder. His family and an Ottawa Indian friend are also buried here.



We left the town after breakfast, on our way to somewhere around Des Moines, Iowa, 550+ miles away. To avoid the boredom of the Ohio Turnpike (I-80) as long as possible, we opted for Ohio 20A most of the way to the border. Leaving Ohio on I-80, we continued onto the Indiana Toll Road (EZ-Pass works there) passing through that state and Illinois pausing only for the usual pit stops.

Thirty miles southeast of Des Moines we located **Elk Rock State Park** on Red Rock Lake, about six miles North of Knoxville. For eleven dollars we were able to occupy a site with electric, our little Rialta's first time on a shoreline (that's RV talk for an extension cord), and reload our drinking water bottles from the nearby tap.

This park has an entire camping area designated "Equestrian" and one that bars horses completely, with a \$116.00 fine for violating the rule. I think the "extra" \$16.00 was the price of an equestrian site. The non-eq area was empty except for one other small camper. The equestrian area, on the other hand was almost full. I road my bike to the gate to deposit our registration and felt much improved after the effort. ("Much improved" requires some explanation, I guess. Beginning on the first day of our trek, my right hip joint started aching. This has progressed to the point that it takes some determination to walk until I've been moving for a while. Thank God, or

pharmaceutical research, for ibuprofen; I've been living on Advil. This aging body is paying me back for years of mistreatment.) I made a fire and cooked some stir-fry while Carol cooked the rice on our stove. We ate at the picnic table under a display of stars rivaling Cape Hatteras.



October 13

After a morning shower and a hot breakfast we walked the mile or so to the equestrian campground. It bustled with all the normal morning activities common to a crowded camping area, kids on bikes and scooters, adults cooking and drinking coffee; except for the presence of a couple of dozen horses tied to hitch rails. One heavyset man in his fifties, near a strikingly beautiful pinto, greeted us and we chatted for a bit. He and most of the others were from Minnesota, traveling home from a Missouri campground, which he said had box stalls for four thousand horses and was three-quarters full when they were there.

We stopped at the dump station to purge the tanks and refill with drinking water, then took Iowa 92 west rather than get back on the interstate. We had a small shopping list building: windshield wipers, replacement rubber gloves for the tank purging process, actual winter gloves this big dummy neglected to pack, extra stick-on hooks, and Windex. We figured today was a good day to get them. This took a bit

longer than it might have because Carol refuses to enter any big box store if an alternative exists (she refers to Wal-Mart as "The evil empire"), so we searched a good amount of Knoxville, Iowa looking for a locally owned store. We finally located an acceptable business and were able to get what we needed. We continued our way west.

At Council Bluffs we picked up I-80 again and crossed the Missouri into Omaha, Nebraska. We got a state map and some park info in the visitors center and were told the Nebraska game in Lincoln was in the fourth quarter and that we'd probably hit heavy traffic there (you gotta love division 1-AA football), then were on our way to North Platte and our next overnight.

In North Platte we located and rejected Buffalo Bill's Ranch, and spent the night on the side of one of the several park roads at **Lake Maloney State Park**. (Another Aside: Small world variety - Our neighbor, friend and cat sitter, Bob was raised in Nebraska and as a child, fished with his father in Lake Maloney.)

October 14

Since entering central Ohio a couple of days back, we have been seeing thousands of acres of dry, standing corn (Carol refers to it as 'dead corn') on either side of the road. It's like every farmer from Ohio to Nebraska had planted only corn. Finally, in western Nebraska we started noticing that the south side of the highway was planted in 'dead corn' while the north side looked like prairie, with native grasses on the ever more prominent hills and cottonwoods lining the dry washes.

Speaking of dry, there ain't been much of it lo these many miles. We left New York in the rain and it continued during each driving day until today when we started across the Rockies on I-70. There it turned to wet snow. I dreaded the thought of hauling my raggy old body out into the mess to put on our tire chains (I actually had the forethought to buy some before we left even though I forgot my gloves) but my dread turned out to be needless. We made it across the highest point without the 'chains' directive and started back down.

On our way down the western slope we stopped in Frisco, drawn by the Starbucks sign. The coffee shop was inside a Safeway supermarket so while Carol replenished our groceries, I had our two travel mugs filled for fifty cents each and was given a card that allowed me to download a song from iTunes. You just can't beat that kind of deal. We stayed in the parking lot and ate our lunch before continuing toward our destination, one of a couple of state parks near Grand Junction.

I'm sitting writing this outside our little home with my mini-Mac plugged into the outside outlet, no precipitation evident finally. Carol's out scavenging for firewood, something she's done whenever we camp. The park is the Colorado River

State Park, Island Acres, the eastern most end of a 30 mile linear park. Here the river is about the width of the Wallkill back in New Paltz. I-70 traffic is a constant noise about a quarter mile away but that doesn't bother us. We have a site with electric, water, and sewer for eleven dollars. Not too shabby.

I made a fire with the scavenged wood, and after dinner we sat by it gazing alternately at the flames and the zillion stars framed by the dark cliffs until



finally we admitted that it was just too chilly to sit outside so we went to bed.

October 15

This morning we needed to turn the propane heater on to warm the cabin while we ate breakfast. We showered in the park's warm shower rooms, five quarters for five minutes. After dressing, disconnecting the camper from the facilities and buttoning it up for the next leg of the journey, we moseyed around the grounds for a while, enjoying the trails along the river. It was almost noon by the time we pulled out of the campground.



Cisco gas station 2007



Cisco gas station 1981

After a stop in Grand Junction, we took a short detour to Cisco, Utah, where we'd stopped with the kids twenty-six years ago. The murals depict the Colorado, a mile or so west of the station as it wends its way toward Moab. Curiously, the 2007 derelict building is in the same location as the 1981 but they are different buildings. The older one is wood sided while the newer looks like cinder block and the murals are definitely different. Apparently the station was rebuilt sometime during the past twenty-six years and then it burned. I remember talking to the owner back in '81, as he sat in an overstuffed chair alongside his shop, about how running a station in a non-existent town. He told me there was a large hotel just a couple of hundred yards down the road but it caught fire several years back and burned to the ground. The town

economy was built around the place and when it went, people left. When I asked why they weren't able to save the building, he looked up at me and said, "See any water around here?"

Back on I-70, we traveled through magnificent sandstone cliffs, colors varying from deep ocher to light tan. I had forgotten how truly beautiful rocks can be.

We exited at Salina in the middle of a convoy of eight identical Semis pulling double trailers with strange shaped tanks. We'd tucked in behind number five as it pulled onto the interstate about 30 miles East of Salina up in the mountains. On our way down in this convoy we saw many more of the same rigs going in the opposite direction. By the time we stopped to eat lunch and fuel up, we'd seen probably fifty of them, counting both directions and never did see where they were going to or coming from. After lunch we continued West on US 50 through Utah into Nevada and our next stop, **Great Basin National Park**. The trip through Utah gave us a sense of the real wilderness that is this area. The tree population thickened substantially as we entered "Fish Lake National Forest" and thinned out again as we descended into the Black Rock Desert.

As we left the town of Delta, where 50 is joined by US 6, a sign immediately after the last Sinclair station read: "Next Services 83 Miles" it would have been more accurate had it read: "Next Sign of Human Life 83 Miles" for with the exception of the occasional grazing steer, we saw nothing of the fauna persuasion. I checked our odometer when I saw the mountains in the distance and again when we started climbing into them, 68 miles.



View from the Border Inn parking lot.

We made our final fuel stop of the day at Border Inn; the gas pumps and motel are on one side of the border and the convenience store and restaurant are on the other so we filled up in Utah and peed in Nevada.

We are at Lower Lehman Creek campsite, space 10. My Eagle Passport lets us camp for half price. There are some benefits to being old.

I volunteered to take the self-registration envelope up to the kiosk and soon was reminded that walking up even a slight hill at 7500 feet can be an interesting experience for a sea level type. Carol is making dinner, the generator running so she can use the microwave, while I scribe this record. Our plan is to spend two nights here before continuing to Yosemite, the first of our three National Park destinations in California. There are some caves that we will explore tomorrow in one of four guided tours.

October 16

I didn't mention this earlier but our water system has been acting up in strange ways since the morning at Elk Rock State Park in Iowa. We have very little water pressure, hot or cold, in the galley, there is normal hot water but no cold in the bathroom and the toilet works fine. After puzzling about this the last couple of days I think I've finally figured it out. Some of our water lines are frozen. The hokey way the water system is configured has the troublesome lines running very low near the outside wall; the one functioning tap comes almost directly from the water heater. Now that I think know what the problem is, I don't know if I can fix it. Right now I'm running all the bad taps open to see if the tiny movement of water will free the freeze. One more episode in the saga of my love/hate relationship with this machine.

Getting back to the trip, we spent a delightful day at this park in the mountains. After a hot oatmeal breakfast we drove down to the visitors' center and chatted with the owner of the café and gift shop there, enjoying her hospitality and good coffee. We bought our tickets for the 1100 cave tour; Carol bought her Senior Pass, being officially a senior citizen this year, so we got them at half price. Unfortunately new regulations ban cameras in the cave so I couldn't get any pictures. The cave had formations I've never seen in other tours, tiny helectites that defy gravity (they weave in and out from the side wall of the cave horizontally), a sheet-like formation the guide called drapery, and another he called bacon that when backlit really looks like a giant strip of the stuff.

After the tour we went back to the café and had a great lunch, then drove to Baker and bought firewood. By the time we returned to number ten Lehman Creek, it was precipitating quite heavily, rain mixed with snow. The whole episode lasted maybe fifteen minutes then the sky cleared so I went out and made a fire. The brief storm had dropped the temperature a bunch making the warm fire a great place to sit around.

I'm writing this inside the camper as water drips from the taps. We talked about getting a very early start tomorrow, coffee and out as soon as we get up, then stopping at Ely, Nevada to replenish stores and dump the tanks before continuing on US 50, billed as the Loneliest Road in the USA.