

# Great Moments in Building History

## The Long Way Home

San Diego, California, is 2,913 miles from my home in New Milford, Connecticut. As an editor at *Fine Homebuilding*, I'm expected to travel to meet authors, take photographs and attend trade shows. These duties have taken me to the West Coast many times, but I've never felt as far away from home as I did on the morning of September 11.

Although a continent separated me from the terrorist attacks, I felt the impact of the tragedy the moment I arrived at the job site. Having spent the previous two days photographing a remodeling project in a San Diego neighborhood directly in the flight path of Lindbergh Airport, I'd grown accustomed to covering my ears every five minutes as another departing jet roared overhead. On September 11, I was greeted by a chilling silence.

Ryan Hawks, my author, had no more interest in working than I did, but we pushed on. He drove nails, I snapped photos, and throughout the neighborhood, American flags sprouted like dandelions after a spring rain.

I was able to hold it together as long as I had a job to do, but when we finished on Thursday morning and the skies were still silent, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to get home to my wife and my 3-year-old son. The airline told me I might be able to get a flight out on Saturday. Amtrak promised me a seat by the following Tuesday. I decided to drive. The clerk at Budget Car Rental expressed not the slightest hint of surprise when I asked her if I could drop the car off sometime next week in Connecticut. "No problem. Have a nice drive," she said.

I had people to visit along the way. My first stop was Tucson, Arizona. There, Lynn Underwood, a building inspector from the nearby town of Oro Valley ("Unified code makes life easier for builders and inspectors," *FHB* #142, pp. 48, 50), dropped everything to meet me for lunch and then offered me a two-hour tour of the beautiful high-desert country, complete with the most saguaro cactuses I'd ever seen.

Later that evening, just after sunset, I was driving through the tiny desert town of Holbrook, Arizona, when I noticed a large group of people gathered in the town square. Not until I was hundreds of yards down the road did I realize that what I'd seen was a candlelight vigil. The farther away I got, the more I wished I'd stopped to take part.

The next two days were uneventful. I spent only about half of my time on interstates. When I traveled on two-lane roads, especially when I was passing through small towns, the scene was the same. Countless variations of American flags and "God Bless America" messages made me feel as if I were driving an endless parade route.

While driving, I kept glancing up but never saw a plane in the sky, not even a vapor trail. Finally on Saturday, an hour's drive east of Denver, just as the sun was starting to set, I saw a commercial airliner overhead and punched my fist in the air with pride.

When I arrived in Lincoln, Nebraska, on Sunday night, I knew I'd at least made it halfway home because Lincoln was in the fold of my atlas. I'd arranged to meet

author Fernando Pagés Ruiz ("Choosing and Installing a Ceiling Fan," *FHB* #142, pp. 98-103) on Monday morning to spend the day photographing an upcoming article (I had been scheduled to visit in October).

Knowing what my unexpected visit had done to his plans for the day, I would have been happy just to see him show up. When he arrived carrying a tote bag filled with books on tape, I was nearly speechless.

The weather that day was warm and sunny, as perfect as it ever gets in Nebraska, I was told. I got the photos I needed with time to spare, took Fernando's family out to dinner that night and got a good night's sleep (relieved that I wouldn't have to think about flying for at least a month). Early the next morning, I headed for home.

A good book on tape can make the odometer spin like a roulette wheel. While I had stayed informed jumping between National Public Radio stations along the way, I was glad to focus on lighter stuff for the rest of the trip. I laughed my way across Iowa, thanks to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Two cassettes' worth of Hemingway short stories got me as far as Toledo, Ohio, where I spent my last night on the road.

The following afternoon, *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson's tale of hiking the Appalachian Trail, took me all the way across New York state and over the border into Connecticut. I pulled into my driveway in New Milford at 1 a.m. on September 20. It's not a good idea to wake up a sleeping child at 1 in the morning to give him a big hug, but I couldn't help it.

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