

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS



It may not be much, photographically, but this photo has a soft place in my soul. It's from Utah in 1998. The vignetting is from some ancient Nikon lens I had at the time and the grain is from whatever film I was using. Probably Kodak 100 Royal Gold, although it doesn't quite have that Royal Gold look to it.

Either way, it's a photo of the Mighty Wagoneer, my first car, and I stopped to take it after gassing up at Green River, Utah and before heading down the road to the Maze District, in Canyonlands National Park. This is no ordinary place, the Maze District, and my friend, Peggy J, and I were about to venture into what felt like another planet.

The Hanksville sign is most likely why I stopped, though. Those who know me know that I have a peculiar fascination with the town founded by Ebenezer Hanks. It's a remote crossroads and if you're in Hanksville, you're either on the way to or from someplace fascinating. Anyway, I could go on about Hanksville, but I won't here. I'll save that for the sequel.

Suffice to say that this Wagoneer was loaded to the brim. You cannot see through the tinted rear glass, but it was a living pile of clothes and camping gear and food and lost items from earlier in the trip. Slung underneath was the custom, 34 gallon gas tank, made by Aero-Tanks, Inc, of San Bernadino, California, which I had had trucked across country and which the shipping company almost did not surrender to the mechanic I had hired because he had stiffed them on some previous deal. I ended up paying the freight and the tank was installed and I had it gassed up as far as you could fill it. That filler tube was brimming.

In hindsight, I'm amazed that I trusted my safety and sanity to that vehicle, as it usually broke down at least once on every trip and we were heading over 100 miles down a rocky track. If you break down out there, your car can sometimes become part of the landscape.

That did not happen, though, and we went on to glory and red dust camping of the finest sort.

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Gerlach, Nevada - 2000

Grumpy's Texaco, before it changed signs and became Grumpy's Shell.

Actually, "Grumpy" is nowhere to be found on any of the signage, but that's what it's called by the denizens of Gerlach. Grumpy is the man you most and least want to see, driving out to meet you in his tow truck, if you're stuck on the playa after a rain.

I actually had a low-level vendetta with her for a few years. He was unaware of this, of course. It began when I pulled in for gas one day and asked him a question about something. As with most good vendettas, I have long-since forgotten what the question was or what the response was that raised such umbrage in my, but I do remember that he said something offhanded and I instantly took offense. Unfortunately, there are few other options for gas up there, but there was the station in Empire, only 7 miles away, and I made a point of topping off there every time I went to Gerlach for the next few years. Of course, I eventually broke down and got gas again one day from Grumpy. Perhaps I had to. Perhaps Empire was closed. Either way, he was pleasant as can be and I let bygones be bygones. The truth is, I had let him rent space in my head for a long time and he was oblivious to it. I took this shot while staying at Bruno's Motel one night. That's worth a long dissertation one day.



Southern Arizona – 2001

There's a stretch of U.S. 60 that goes from I-10 to Wick- enberg, Arizona. Along a very small section of this stretch is a collection of old motels that are now privately occupied. I still am hesitant when shooting these places, as they are private homes. Aside from any moral scruples I may have – and I do have a few – there is also the fear factor. A motel owner is much less likely to chase after me with a gun than somebody who sees me aiming a camera at his house. At the same time, though, I count on the idea that these people are used to a small segment of the population finding their preserved signs interesting. They are aware of it and, hopefully, tolerant of a few curious photographers who just happen to stop for a minute, pop out, take their shot, and go. Still, you can never take anything for granted in this life. I hope to make it by the remains of the Saguaro Motel again one day. Maybe I'll stop and talk to the people who live there.