

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS

I have been in a funk for a while, so I'm going to continue putting off the piece that Jim keeps asking me to write about Elko, the desert dog. I want to be in a decent head space when I tackle that one. The good news is that the funk seems to be dissipating. This small series of photos aims to continue this process by reminding me what feeds my soul in this life, namely the desert and most points west of the Continental Divide. These were taken over the course of a week in May of 2010. I'm hoping to break the bondage of the East Coast in another two months and trust I can hold my breath until then.



1. Winnemucca, Nevada. I have never shopped in this establishment, but I pass it every time I enter town from the north, usually on my way back from soaking in the hot springs of Oregon. After a few hundred miles, with darkness coming on, it's always a relief to cross the Humboldt River for the sanctuary of this heavily Basque town, home to many motels and the infamous Griddle cafe, the greatest food in the Great Basin.

2. Austin, Nevada. I don't keep notes for individual photos, which is an awful lapse for a photographer. I do keep a running journal, but this is almost always odd stream-of-consciousness stuff, ramblings about what I'm eating, maudlin thoughts of loneliness on the road or, even worse, snippets of horrible, improvised songs that I'll sing into my tape recorder. Years later, when I try to identify a photo, I'll sometimes have to reconstruct the route I took by looking at the photos on either side of it. No need to do that for this photo, but I did have to figure out how I had landed in Austin on this bright morning. I woke up in Winnemucca, then drove, along with my hot spring buddy, also named Paul, down to Battle Mountain. From that point on, we worked our way south and east, eating up prodigious amounts of good, graded gravel road and getting our butts wet in some backcountry hot springs. We ended up on Highway 50 in Austin, that reliable oasis that not only doesn't die, but continues to thrive, as evidenced by this sign.





3. The Monitor Valley, Nevada. The previous photos shows you the sign as you climb out of Austin towards Austin Summit. Not long after you come down on the other side, east of the summit, you'll hit a major junction - major for this part of Nevada, at least - with State Route 376. Just a mile off of this road, which leads straight down to Tonopah, lies the gravel road pictured, which heads to a few significant ranches and even more significant hot springs. I have already revealed too much and will probably be chastised for publishing this information. My soaking buddy, Paul, was once contacted by the spirits of the hot springs at one of the soaks deep within this valley. Like the Sirens of old, he felt that they were trying to get him to remain there. It was only with great effort that he was able to rouse himself and escape. I think he still questions whether leaving that spring was a good idea or not. Anyway, it's when I find myself on roads such as this that most of my troubles and much of civilisation's veneer fall away and I'm left with only the moment - the precious, irreplaceable, easily lost moment - which is all we really have, when you think about it.



4. Beatty, Nevada. Skip forward a day and I'm in Beatty, "Gateway to Death Valley," as well as a few other things. I like to stay in Beatty, even though it's not a great place to provision for a trip. It's simply convenient, another one of those towns that just comes along at the right time after a long day's drive. This sign is about 7 miles north of Beatty proper. It's what remains of the old sign for Bailey's Hot Springs and RV park, a semi-grassy patch of desert that sits on a hot aquifer and is just down the road from Angel's Ladies, the brothel with a broken-down plane out front. I love to soak in the water at Bailey's, which also happens to be not from the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Depository, but that's another story. The water is fantastic, although you do have to pay a small fee for it and you do have to soak in a small, corrugated tin structure that might make some people feel as though they are in a flooded prison cell. I like the privacy, though, and, in the colder days of winter, I like the shelter. Before Bailey's was sold, the place was manned by, alternately, by an old German gentleman and an old Native American, who lived in a trailer below the soaking sheds. You'd roll up, give one of them your five bucks, then grab your towel and happily soak. This sign is a remnant from when the restaurant on the grounds used to operate. It was never open when I passed through but, the last time I went by, a year or two ago, it looked as though the new owners were trying to open it up again. Even though "Cocktails" and "Hot Baths" make eminent sense when you're standing there, with that hot Great Basin breeze slapping you in the cheek, the combination does sound a bit decadent from the confines of the East.



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5. Baker, California. My route took me from Beatty down to Baker, which I passed through the next day, at which point I made a left turn and began to head east, for home, hearth and parking space. Baker is another one of those towns with a transient feel. It's also another self-proclaimed "Gateway to Death Valley," and it used to be home to a Bun Boy restaurant that served the best jalapeño poppers in the universe but which, sadly, is long gone. In 2010, though, if you followed the arrow on this trailer, most of your needs would have been met at the Lucky Lotto Store. Baker is yet another one of those desert crossroad towns that make me happy. They usually are a welcome place to gas up, eat - in this case, at the Mad Greek diner - and often to make a Big Decision. Where to next? In this case, it was for home, but Baker can also send you on a path directly to Las Vegas, Los Angeles or, if you're really lucky and have a day to meander, on the Kelbaker Road, right through the heart of the Mojave, to Twentynine Palms, Joshua Tree, and points south. I need to hit the road soon.