

## On The Road Again - Episode #1: And They're Off!

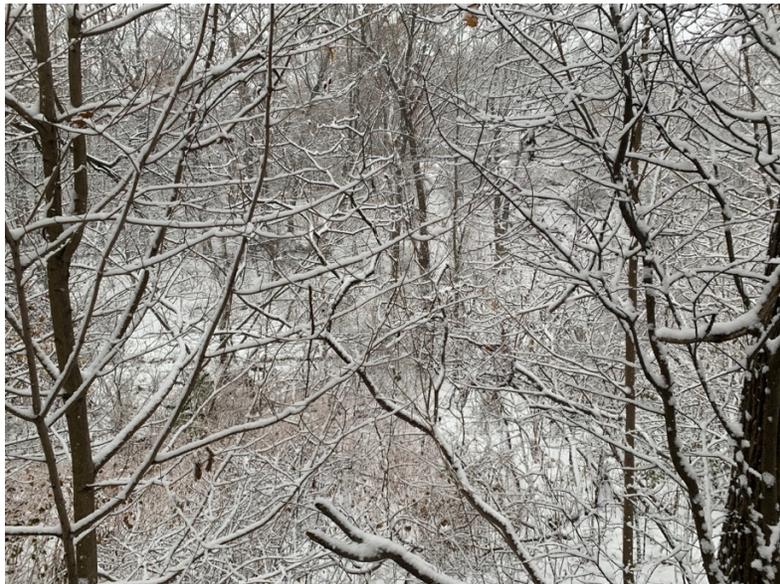


In the walkway to the racetrack at Churchill Downs.

With the cold weather approaching, we decided it was time to team up with Charles again and hit the road. Heading south and west.

We had hoped to stay home through Christmas and then start travelling, but every bit of research we did told us we should get south as soon as possible to avoid bad driving conditions, the possibility of battery problems and freezing water tanks.

The day we chose to depart was Sunday November 28, when it looked like this:

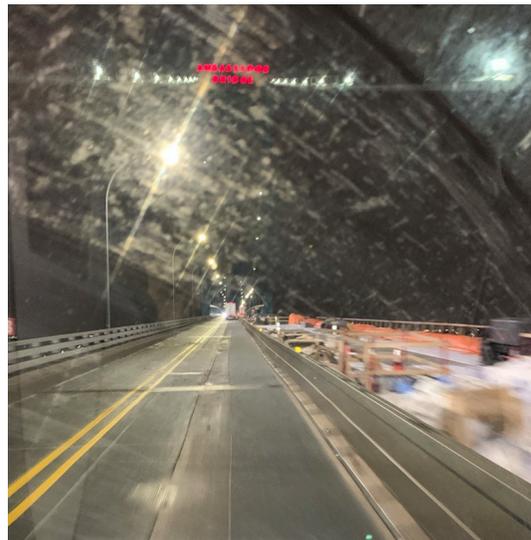


Which just reinforced our resolve to start driving south. So we loaded everything we could think of and started our next adventure, hoping that this was the last time we'd have to pose like this:



Our plan was simple: To get the hell south as quickly as possible. We headed toward Detroit, and saw a kind of ominous sunset as we neared the border. I don't think I've ever seen the sky so dark with so bright a sunset.

But we crossed the Ambassador bridge and the border without incident and because it was too cold to camp, we overnighted at a motel in Monroe Michigan.



The next night, we made it to a campground in Louisville, Kentucky ... or so we thought. Turned out that because we'd crossed the Ohio River, we were actually in Jeffersonville, Indiana! Who knew? It was a very chilly night, but, being hardy Canadians, we made it through.

We had a very nice meal at a restaurant called Drake's and had our first toast of the trip.



The next morning, we decided that since we were in (or just across the border from) Louisville, of course we had to go to Churchill Downs, where Northern Dancer made history as the first Canadian-bred thoroughbred to win the Kentucky Derby. (Soon to be the subject of a famous Canadian musical, of course.)

(Photo courtesy of a very nice man who offered to capture the moment for us.)



When the woman who sold us our tickets found out we were Canadian and were interested in Northern Dancer, she left her post, took us straight to the spot where his record was noted, and helped us find other information about Canadian winners of the Derby. Very nice.



We didn't get to explore the Kentucky Derby Museum fully, but we really enjoyed the movie they presented in the round (sort of). Jim had fun with some of the interactive exhibits. The tour was also interesting and fun. And it was a gorgeous day.







After our tour it was time to hit the road. Next stop Memphis, Tennessee.



Or so we thought.

The campground we booked was called Tom Sawyer RV Park, and it was in West Memphis, across the Mississippi River ...



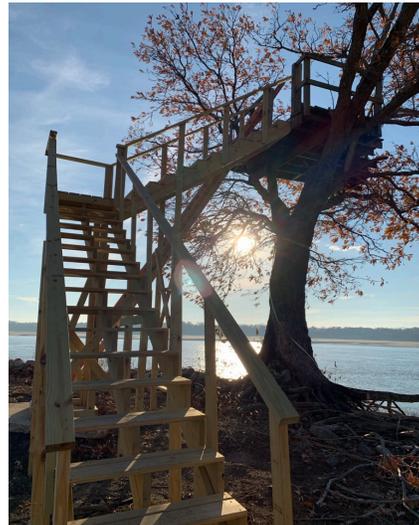
... Which meant it was actually in Arkansas!  
(Clearly neither Jim nor I paid attention in Geography class.)

It was right on the river, so when we awoke in the morning, we had our first real views of the mighty Mississippi.



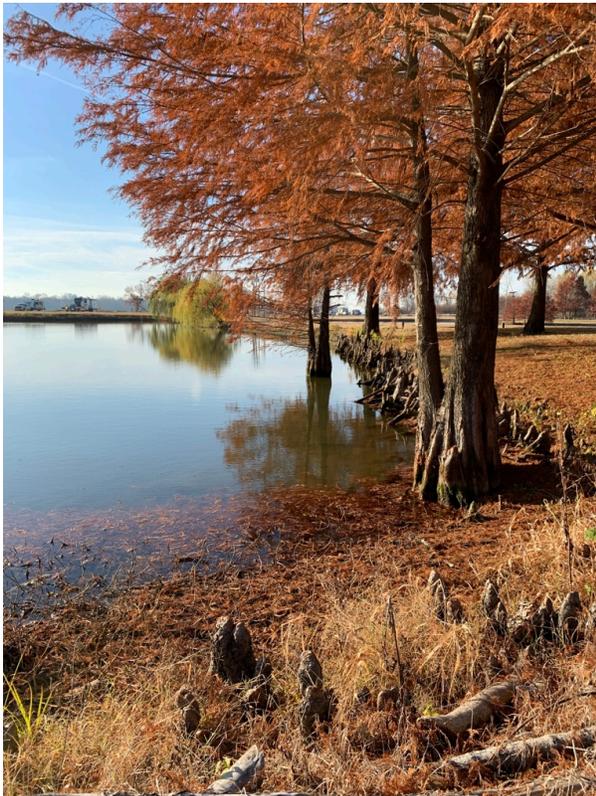


And it had some interesting features – like lots of treehouses! One even had rocking chairs up there so we could sit and enjoy the barges going by.





And although it was a little spare, there were still some beauty around us.



We stayed at Tom Sawyer for three nights (which gave me time to do some work I had to deliver), and we were able to go into Memphis a few times, which was fun. We were practically the only people there, it seemed, so we felt quite comfortable walking around Beale Street – the Home of the Blues.





We met a lovely woman from Baltimore, Ellen (now a Facebook friend). She knew the Double T Diner, which my uncle used to own! And she recommended we go to the Rock & Soul Museum, which we did.

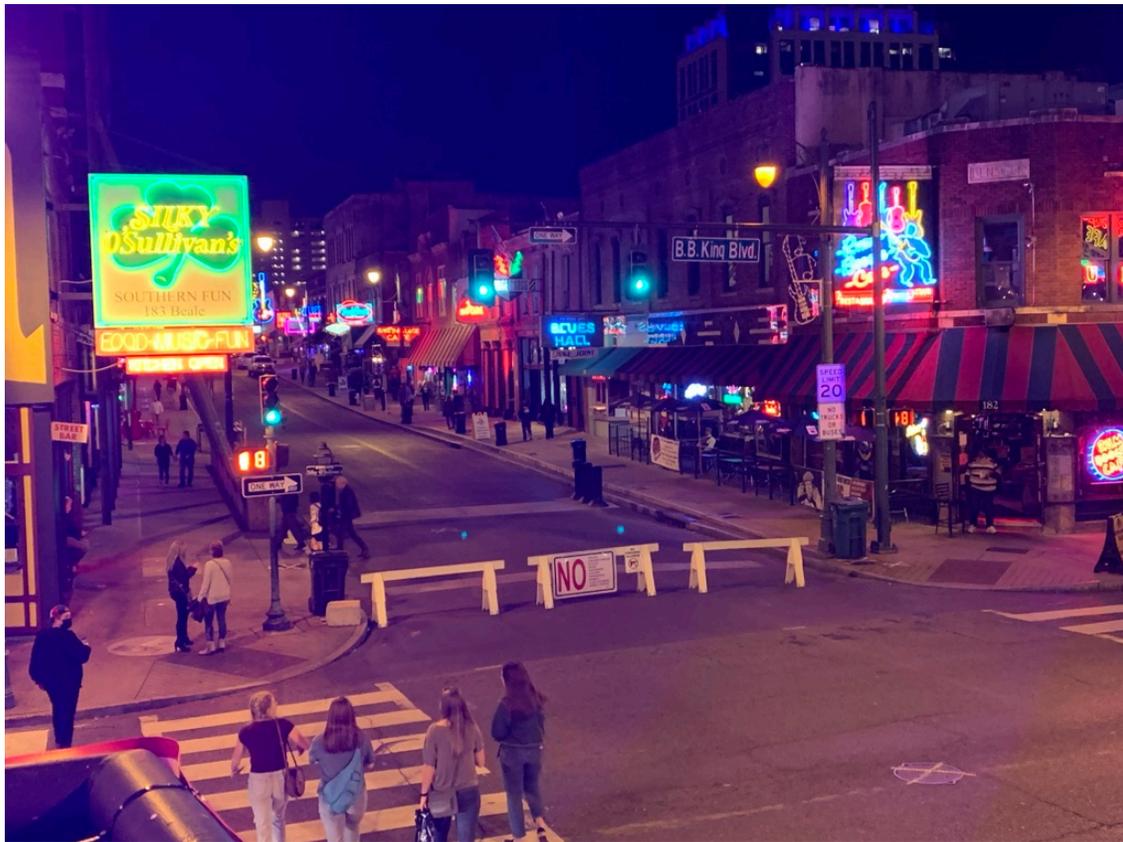


It has a very impressive collection and helped us understand the significance of the melding of Rock and Soul music.





And we couldn't pass up the opportunity to eat some barbecue and listen to some blues at BB King's.



But probably the oddest stop we made in Memphis was to the Peabody Hotel. My longtime friend Dennis Adams told us we had to go, and I always do what Dennis (aka St. Denis) tells me to. What fun!

This sign tells the story:

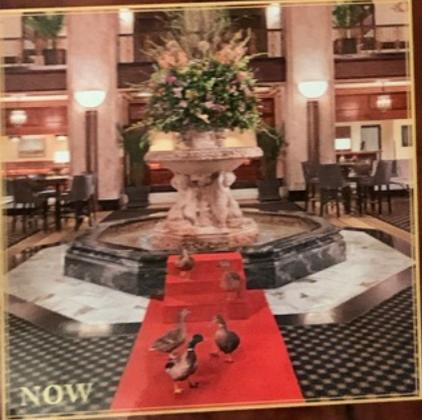
## THE LEGEND OF THE DUCKS



**How Did The Tradition of the Ducks in The Peabody Fountain Begin?**

Back in 1933 Frank Schutt, General Manager of The Peabody, and a friend, Chip Barwick, returned from a weekend hunting trip to Arkansas. The men had a little too much Tennessee sippin' whiskey, and thought it would be funny to place some of their live duck decoys (it was legal then for hunters to use live decoys) in the beautiful Peabody fountain.

Three small English call ducks were selected as "guinea pigs," and the reaction was nothing short of enthusiastic. Thus began a Peabody tradition which was to become internationally famous.



The original ducks have long since gone, but after more than 80 years, the marble fountain in the hotel lobby is still graced with ducks. Today, the mallards are raised by a local farmer and friend of the hotel. The ducks live in the fountain until they are full grown and, on retirement from their Peabody duties, are returned to the wild.

The Peabody ducks march at 11:00 am and 5:00 pm daily.

*The Peabody*  
MEMPHIS



In the glorious lobby of this stately hotel, people gather every day at 11:00 am and 5:00 pm for the March of the Ducks.

We got there, as advised, about half an hour before the march, and managed to get a front row spot - just. The place was packed. (With mostly maskless people.)

The charming duck master explained the history and then gave a group of delighted kids instructions about rolling out the red carpet. Then the duck march began





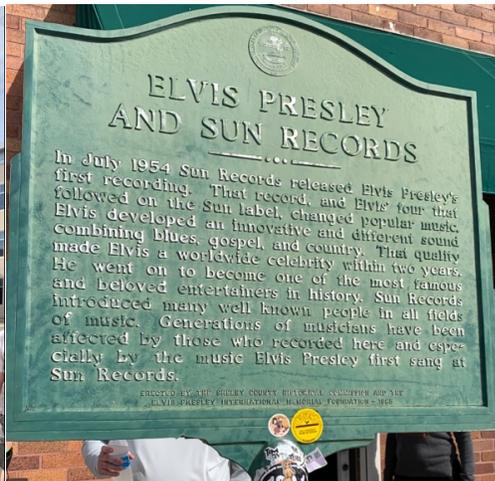
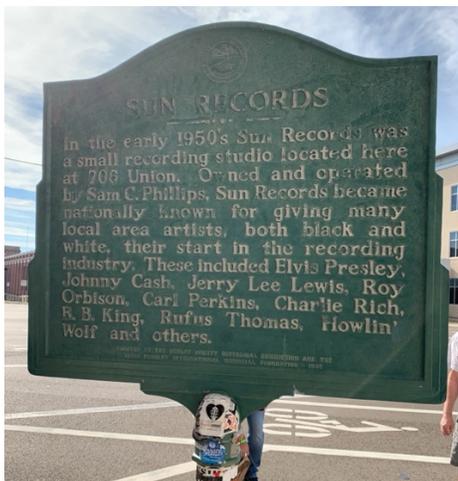
After swimming around in the fountain all day and then marching down the red carpet, the ducks get an express elevator ride up to the roof where they get to rest in their "palace". Till their next show at 11:00 the next morning. Tough life.

Yes, it was touristy. And yes, we felt a little silly. And yes, it could be argued that the ducks should be flying free.

However, on the plus side, duck has never been served on any menu at the Peabody Hotel.



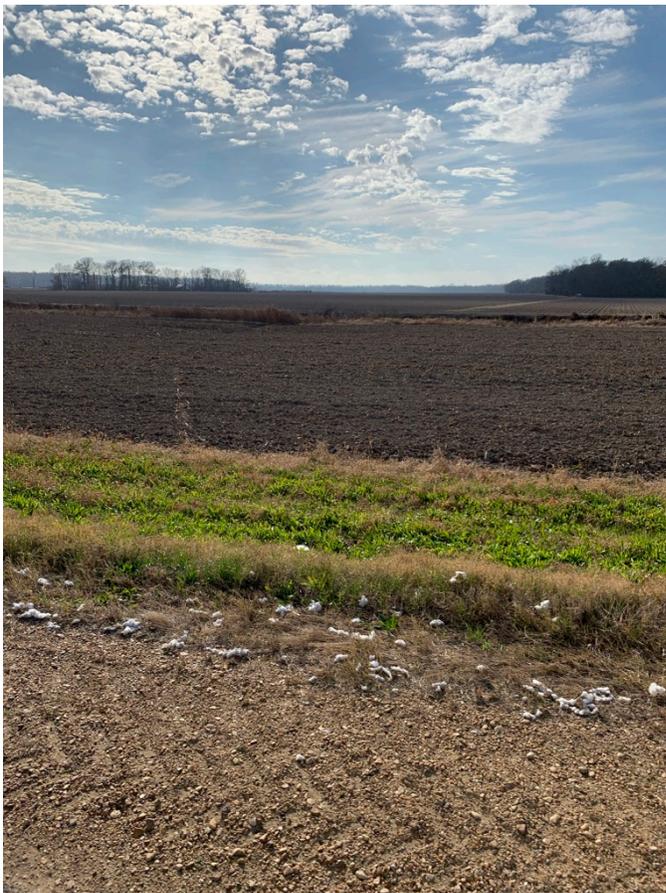
On our way out of Memphis, we stopped in to see Sun Records, where Elvis recorded his first songs in 1954. It seemed somehow appropriate that a DeLorean was parked just up the street.



Then we headed further south, crossing the border into Mississippi. We chose to drive Highway 61 instead of the Interstate. From here on, that's what we'll be doing: Taking the more interesting, scenic route wherever possible.

Along the side of the road, we kept seeing all this white fluff. It was way too warm for it to be snow. We finally realized it was cotton balls. And the fields we were passing were cotton fields. The season was obviously over and the cotton had been harvested, but the cotton balls along the side of the road remained.

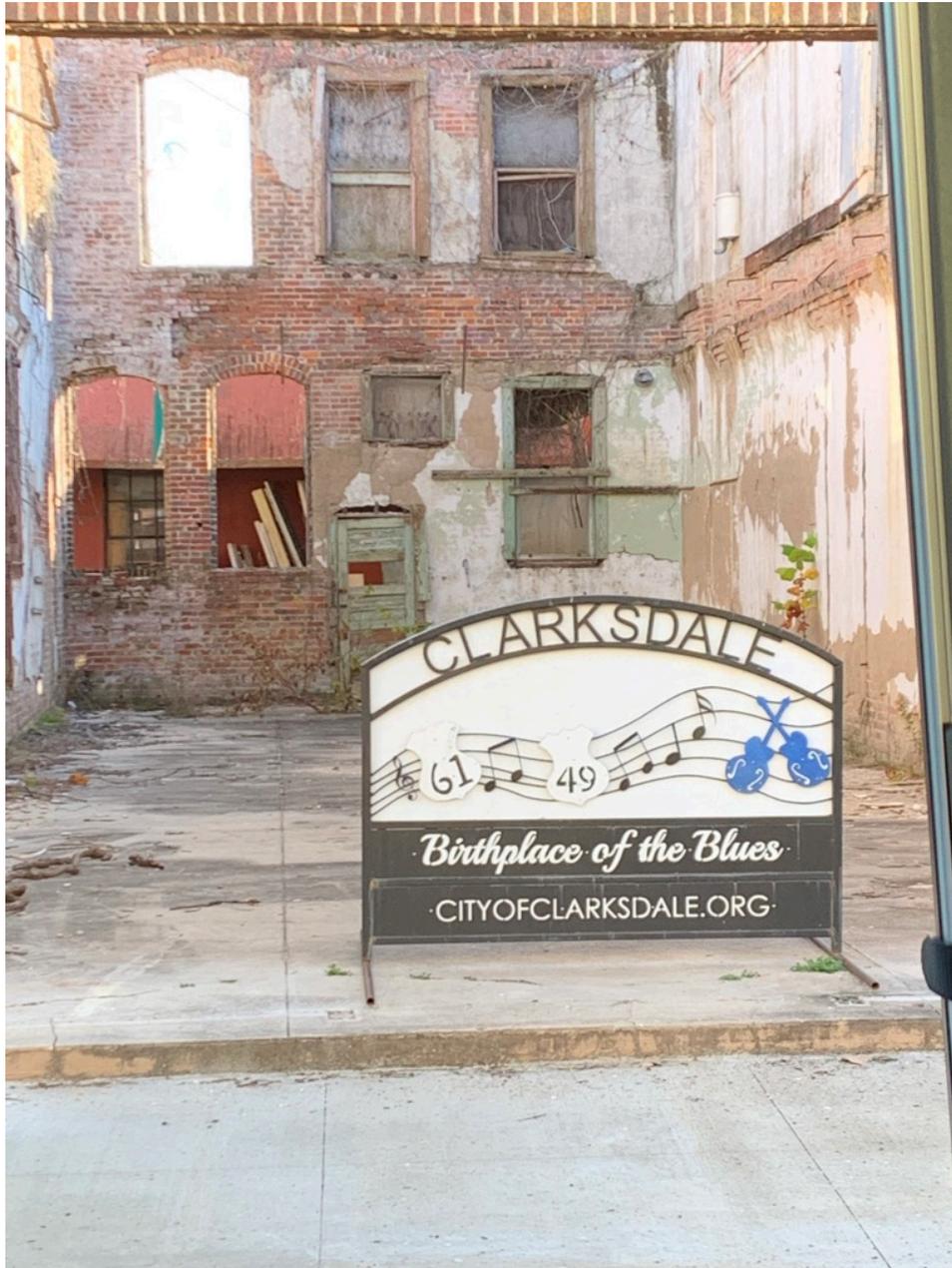
When we stopped at the Mississippi Welcome Center, I picked up a ball of cotton from the side of the road. It's hard, in our minds, to separate the cotton fields from the centuries of slavery. And it was hard to imagine anyone escaping to freedom in this flat, open territory. Something we don't come face to face with, in our country.





We read about the blues clubs that presented music seven nights a week. And the writers like Tennessee Williams and Faulkner whose time there was commemorated in museums. There were also lots of great food options we could enjoy and “endless” places to stay.

While there were lots of signposts and indications that Blues legends had lived there – Ike Turner, John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters - the town itself – or what we saw of it – was empty, broken and battered. Very sad, and kinda scary.







Sad and quite uneasy from all we'd seen, we decided it was a good idea to move on. We found a nice camping spot in a state park by the Mississippi River, cooked our own meal and settled in for the night, confident that the next day would be better.

And it was!