

Drifting Around the Driftless Area

By Marcy Hotz

If you weren't on this drive, you missed a good one! Greg Garnett designed a great ride full of curvy roads through the hills and valleys of Wisconsin's Driftless Area, and his wife Cindy was great at telegraphing upcoming turns, oncoming vehicles, and road dangers such as fallen branches and gravel. Hank Netzing did a great job as Sweep and kept the group together. Ride along with me...

Never covered by ice during the last ice age, the Driftless Area lacks the characteristic glacial deposits known as drift. Its landscape is characterized by steep hills, forested ridges, and deeply carved river valleys, much different than the topography of the flatter land and gently rolling hills of southeastern Wisconsin.

We rolled past Taleisin in Spring Green on curvy roads over green hills and valleys. Taleisin is the home, studio, school, and 800-acre property of Frank Lloyd Wright. Up and down the hills we saw a patchwork of planted farm crops and fields with their grazing cows. Barns and chicken coops, silos and farm houses dotted the land.

The Garnetts found several long stretches – one 12 miles, one 7 – of the most gorgeous Miata-loving roads through tunnels of trees and breathtaking valley views. We drove topless until it started to sprinkle, so we were forced to stop to raise those tops as the rain fell harder. Now we drove through the rain forest, someone remarked.

Our first pit stop was on the main street of Boscobel, a town of roughly 3,000. Here we found a BP, Subway, A&W and a Kwik Trip only 2 blocks down the road -- everything a Miata could want. Some of us purchased food for our picnic lunch a bit later.

By now the skies were blue and partly cloudy, so tops down we headed toward Prairie du Chien. I love riding through small towns seeing how other people live – their houses, the commerce of the towns, the schools and churches. We rolled through Woodman (pop. 118), and Millville (pop. 122).

On our right was the Wisconsin River, breathtakingly beautiful, and quite high from yesterday's rains. On our left was a tree-lined hillside stretching upward. We crossed the main channel of the Wisconsin River at Bridgeport (pop. 942) when we turned onto the Great River Road. This area was familiar to some of us who had been on the Mississippi River Drive of 2023. We passed a shirtless man doing what seemed like a sandhill crane dance, or maybe he was trying to fly.

Approaching Prairie du Chien (pop. 5,000+), we drove down the familiar Blackhawk Ave. with its myriad of restaurants. The name of Prairie du Chien came from the French for Prairie of the Dog, an early Fox chief who lived on the prairie. French Canadians engaged

in the fur trade settled on the island by the river, and the fur trade made the first major economic impact on the settlement.

We passed a car show in the park along the Mississippi and found our way to the picnic shelter the Garnetts had reserved. We ate a leisurely picnic lunch in the park overlooking the river and near the stately Dousman House, a former railroad hotel now the venue of weddings and special events. Tourists rode by in horse-drawn buggies.

The third leg of our journey brought us through the towns of Seneca (pop. 1000), Gays Mills (519), and Steuben (122). Gays Mills boasts a plethora of apple orchards which it begs you to visit. Looking for apple pizza, cider and other apple delights? Gays Mills is the place. Boaz (124) is the home of the Lonesome Dove Bar & Grill. Richland Center is a Big City by Driftless standards (pop. ~5000) and even has a Visitors Center, hotels and a drive-in theater with current films. Most importantly, it had a Culvers which made for a fine ice-cream pit stop.

Now we were heading east, with the sun behind us. We passed lots of downed trees, perhaps from yesterday's high winds, or possibly even a small tornado. The sky was a beautiful blue with no sign of a potential rain. I turned my curiosity toward the many different styles of silos. From a distance, I saw four silos together, standing erect like soldiers at attention. Wherever I looked there was the ubiquitous AO Smith Harvestore in dark blue, often next to a steel silo with a dome. I saw one silo completely and beautifully covered in ivy, and another made of dark beige stone block.

Once again crossing the Wisconsin river, we arrived at the Green Acres supper club in Sauk City at 5:00 sharp. Just in time for a wonderful dinner with our Miata friends.

Thanks to Greg and Cindy Garnett for putting together a pretty great day, and to Hank Netzing for keeping us all together.