

The Historian

Preserving & Promoting Neighborhood History

Seeing America First

By John and Judy Fitzgerald

As far back as I can remember, I've always had wanderlust. As a lifelong city dweller, I've always loved Chicago but always wanted to see "the other side of the mountain" as well. Like many of you, I love maps; I love geography; I love photos of distant and exotic landscapes.

Although my father's advertising agency represented Ford, I always wanted to "see the USA, in my Chevrolet." Who can resist the lure of the open road, the foghorn of a ship, the graceful ascent of an airplane taking off, or the haunting and alluring sound of a train whistle at night? Where is it going? Why am I not on it?

My parents stoked these early stirrings of travelitis by taking me and my four siblings on family road trips from Chicago, almost every other year when I was a youngster. We drove to Niagara Falls and New York City in 1952.

The next year we drove to Florida, with me serving as navigator, at the age of ten.

In 1958 my parents gave me a tremendous thrill by taking me, just me, with them as they drove classic Route 66 to Los Angeles. I saw mountains and deserts, the Grand Canyon and the newly opened Disneyland before flying back to Chicago by myself.

I even got to miss a week of school. I was ecstatic.

Two years later we loaded the family station wagon and took a 3-week drive to California and back -- all seven of us -- with one of us, my teenaged older brother, taking up more than his share of space because of a full cast on the leg he broke on the night before departure. We survived, and had a great time.

Train trips to D.C., the Seattle and New York Worlds' Fairs followed.



John and Judy Fitzgerald at the end of the Alaska Highway in 2014.

And, on the day after our high school graduation, three buddies and I drove to Yellowstone, San Francisco, Hollywood and then home on Route 66. We borrowed the brand new family Cadillac of, not MY family, but that of one of my buddies.

During my college years, I worked for Rand McNally in Skokie and the Chicago Motor Club in the Loop. Maps and travel were clearly in my future. And surely, a prime attribute of my bride-to-be was her equally strong desire to travel.

Even our honeymoon was a grand auto tour of the mountain west. The next year we followed up with a drive to Quebec and Nova Scotia, and the following year, we spent our last dime on a five-week tour of Europe, using *Europe on \$5 a Day* as a guide.

It might not surprise anyone to know that I was somewhat obsessive/compulsive about keeping careful records of all my travels. Indeed, our apartment had plenty of maps and lists of places visited, routes taken, and places yet to see. One map, in particular, had pins showing everywhere we had spent an overnight.

Another recorded every flight I'd ever taken.

All of this, however, was somewhat unfocused and purely recreational at a time when I was turning 30 and starting a family.

One day in 1974 my wife, Judy, was reading her hometown Wisconsin paper, the *Stevens Point Journal*, when she came across an article that caught her attention. It seems that some guy had just visited the state capitol in Madison and had thereby achieved his ambition to visit all 50 state capitols.

She noted that I could do that, too, if I wished, having already been to at least half. We chatted a bit and agreed that, since someone had already done it, it wasn't so attractive to me anymore and, anyway, not so terribly difficult.

Then, one of us suggested, I think it was her -- "Why not counties?"

A light bulb went off! Why not counties? Indeed! A little research using my marked maps showed that I'd already been in about a thousand counties, about a third of them all. And so it began. And for 40 years since, we've been county-counting.

What Is A County?

What is a county? A county is a political and geographical region, an administrative subdivision of a larger area. Usually



John and Judy Fitzgerald pose in front of the Loop. After reaching all 3,143 counties, they still consider Chicago as the best place to live.



John, Judy, and their daughters at the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona during the summer of 1982.

they are smaller portions of states, provinces or territories.

Generally, they can be subdivided into districts, townships, cities and towns. A typical American county is about 1,200 square miles, about twice the size of DuPage County, although size can vary dramatically.

The name "county" derives from the French, which, in turn, comes from medieval times when lords and vassals lived on fiefs, and local landowners owed homage to a higher overlord, the local count. With the Norman invasion of England a thousand years ago, the French terms were superimposed on the English and, thus, existing shires became counties and existing earls became counts and viscounts. Of course, these terms often co-existed. (Please note that I've thrown in two photos of castles in Spain, not France, because they look good with my family in them.)

There have been many famous counts in history: Rochambeau, the French general who helped George Washington win at Yorktown; Galvez, the Spanish governor who aided the American Revolution along the Gulf Coast; the Count of Monte Cristo, the fictional character of Alexandre Dumas; Tolstoy's Count Vronsky; and, of course, the Transylvanian Count.



John and Judy Fitzgerald at Grand Teton National Park in northwestern Wyoming in 2012.



Judy and John Fitzgerald visit Washington Monument during their 2011 trip to Washington, D.C. where John (an attorney) was sworn in at the Supreme Court.

Today there are 3,143 counties (including parishes, boroughs, and the District of Columbia) in the USA. Tomorrow there may be fewer, or more.

Almost every year new counties are created from old and some disappear, absorbed into others.

In the late '80s, Bullfrog County in Nevada, containing Yucca Mountain, came into existence, then was dissolved.

A few years ago, suburban Denver was growing so fast that a new county, Broomfield, was created by subdividing four existing ones. Last year, Bedford City, a Virginia county unto itself, was absorbed into the surrounding Bedford County. Who knows, someday the five borough/counties of New York City may become just one county.

When I first began counting counties, Alaska had only four. Over the years since statehood in 1959, its number of counties has risen from four to 12 to 27 to its current 29. And more change is likely.

Some states have counties neatly arranged in parallel squares; some just follow rivers and mountain tops.

Delaware has the fewest counties -- 3, while Texas has the most -- 254. Illinois has 102. Georgia, about the same size of Illinois, has 159. Arizona, twice the size of Illinois, has only 15.

Loving County, Texas, has the smallest population -- 71, while Los Angeles County has the most -- ten million.

Travels With Family

Now, to resume the story. To meet the new self-imposed county quest, back in 1975, every trip took on a new dimension -- not only business or pleasure, but also, county counting.

Fortunately, my new job with a federal agency's Midwestern Regional Office took me all across the country over the next ten years, with special emphasis on the Great Lakes and central plains. I rarely missed an opportunity to add on a little side trip or take an indirect route if, by doing so, I could catch an additional county.

Very often I was able to have my wife, Judy and two pre-school daughters accompany me. In fact, my second daughter was in 25 states before her first birthday. While I used vacation days to add on to business trips to Boston, San Francisco or the like, I was often weeks (and weekends) on the road in the Midwest, roaming Kansas, North Dakota and such.

It was a great time to be with my family. Usually I was able to plan and schedule trips so that off-work weekends could find us in the Black Hills or the Twin Cities or other interesting places.

The kids easily adjusted to auto travel, even in the Sand Hills of Nebraska in winter, as long as they could reasonably expect a swimming pool in the Holiday Inn by evening. Their memories might differ today. They'd probably tell of being snowbound on Lake Superior's shores north of Duluth on New Year's. But, I like to think they enjoyed the travel.

As the girls grew up and went to school, sometime in the 1980s, I'd reached 2,000 counties and 48 states. No Alaska or Hawaii yet. But now the kids only wanted to go to Disney World. So we did. By car. But not by the direct route.

There was one particular county in south Georgia, near the Okefenokee Swamp that could be reached from the west only by a dirt road. Since our route would pass nearby, I decided to try it. It seemed to be about a ten mile junket and a little dog leg turn to the left -- relatively easy in and out.



During their trip to Seattle, Washington in 2011, Judy and John Fitzgerald posed with the "Space Needle" (left) and Mount Rainier (right) in the background.

After about 4 or 5 miles, the dirt road deteriorated into two parallel ruts, with occasional bumps and mud holes. It was hot and swampy and uninhabited.

But, unable to turn around, we pressed on to find the dog leg turn. Up ahead about 300 yards we saw an old pick-up truck that might be blocking our path. As we approached, it became clear that it was just at the side of the turn, with barely room to pass. However, it had loaded gun racks, rebel flag bumper stickers, and a couple of extras from the movie "Deliverance."

We were not amused. But we just glided past, Illinois plates front and back on our car, and gave a brief wave of "howdy" to the men. As we drove out, we never looked back. The road soon improved, and we sped up. But we got Charlton County.

Most county-counting junkets were now these in and out, 5-mile detours, with u-turns at the county line signs. The girls began to hate these detours.

There were lots of sighs from the back seat. So we tried to vary these side trips, looking for side roads that could capture several counties over 80 to 100 mile alternate routes.

Once we found ourselves in the North Carolina mountains going down twisty roads for miles on end. But it was all downhill. Our brakes were smoking. The kids were terrified. It was worth it though. We got three counties.

Notwithstanding their objections, we continued to travel like this until the kids got older, protested more emphatically, then, understandably, went away to college, leaving us as empty nesters. During the 90s almost all of our trips were to visit the girls away at college in DC or New Orleans. So, naturally, after a while, we got bored.

Then one day Judy suggested we could travel by ourselves, off season. If our kids left us, why not leave them? Such a brilliant idea! It was Fall in the year 2000.

We decided to focus again on county collecting and found a place full of uncounted ones -- Oklahoma! What better place to spend two weeks around Halloween? Although we'd done Route 66 several times, Oklahoma has 77 counties and Route 66 only covers about a dozen. We had over 60 Oklahoma counties to get.

First we got out our AAA maps and got info from the Oklahoma Office of Tourism, then plotted a route. Besides getting counties, we wanted sights and things to do. Two weeks in Oklahoma can be a L-O-N-G time, and we needed diversions. We found plenty.



Borden County, Texas was the 3,000th county reached by John and Judy Fitzgerald on April 5, 2012. Again, Judy took the photo.

The Cowboy Museum and Murrah Plaza memorial were newly opened in Oklahoma City. Tulsa had art deco skyscrapers, the praying hands of Oral Roberts, and the nearby Will Rogers Museum. We visited the Cherokee Museum, Indian arts and crafts centers and recreated villages, Frank Lloyd Wright structures in Bartlesville, the Chisholm Trail, Dust Bowl museums, bison at Wichita Mountains, Geronimo's grave at Fort Sill, and Osage County.

When we were in south-central Oklahoma, visiting the former Platt National Park, the only de-commissioned national park, we stopped in nearby Davis.

There we were interviewed by the local press and asked to tell our story.

Back home in Chicago, people would roll their eyes when they heard we vacationed in Oklahoma. But it was one of our best trips ever. Two weeks in Oklahoma? Loved it! We got 58 new counties, too.

It was a year later that my sister in San Diego called me about an article she'd read in *USA Today*. It was a "must read" about a group of geopathic obsessives like me who were county

counters. It was October 2001. I had found my group.

The Extra-Miler Club

It was a revelation to me. Here was an organization of over 300 members that had been around almost 30 years. I had to join and get involved. So I did. For \$10 a year I got an 8-page newsletter every few months telling of members' exploits, updated black-and-white county maps, state maps and national maps, illustrating only county perimeters, no cities or rivers or topography. There's also an annual meeting, held around the country in conjunction with the license plate collectors' association.

Besides the tales of member travels, every issue of the Extra-Miler newsletter contains a one-page Mile Post, listing all members in order of the number of counties completed. While this somewhat encourages competitive juices to stir, it is not designed to do so. However, when my name first appeared on the list, with over 2,500 counties, I was delighted to learn that I ranked in the top fifty, and was the second highest in Illinois. I also learned that, as of 2002, there had already been twelve people known to have completed all 3,100 plus counties.

Who were these people? Like me, they were overwhelmingly white, male, and AARP-eligible. Most were ex-military, federal or park service employees, often introverted loners, and a little strange. Maybe more than a little.

Our first annual meeting was in 2002 in Niagara Falls. My wife, Judy, was one of the few women in attendance among the 40-50 or so there. As the individuals rose to identify themselves and update the group about their personal quests, I learned a lot, including what not to do.



John and Judy Fitzgerald Fitzgerald went to San Diego, California in 2014. They were photographed in front of the Hotel del Coronado.

Some of these guys kept track of their counties on special maps and charts. Some would count a county only if they visited the county courthouse, and then only if they obtained the autograph or stamp of a county employee.

Some counters chose to count counties only if they'd stepped in them, barefoot, or had a Dairy Queen or Big Mac, or played a round of golf in them. Some had to visit the highest point in every county, or the lowest, or both. Or, had to enter the county from every possible numbered road. No one counted a county if one had merely flown over it. But most counted travel by train or auto, if one was awake at the time. Some needed proof, using a photo of a county sign, for example. But many county lines have no signs.

But the Extra-Miler Club has no rules. It operates on the honor system because, ultimately, who cares? It is not a competition. It is a personal journey of discovery. There's no prize to win. You can only cheat yourself.

In general then, counters agree that you must be physically present in a county to count it. No more, no less.

But counties change. Some disappear, some divide. If a counter has been in a county before it disappeared, it can still count in the overall total; and if the counter was in it before it subdivided, he does not have to return to visit the portion that is a new county. But if one was never in the earlier large county, he must go to each of the new counties. If a county disappears, you need not go to the former county. For example, today, you can't visit Yugoslavia, but you can visit five new Balkan countries.

When we first started, Alaska had four counties or boroughs, now it has 29. Had we gone to Alaska 50 years ago, it would have been relatively easy to get all four counties. Now, not so much.

Before my entry into the Extra-Miler Club, my local Lerner newspaper had done a story about my quest and published my picture holding my map. At my first convention, I showed my county map of the US, colored in with my counties in red. It looked somewhat like Swiss cheese because my wife and I liked to leave a county unvisited in places, guaranteeing that we'd have to return someday. We did this in Maine, Florida, California, Idaho, and other places. The other counters warned us that time was fleeting and travel cost money and that we should rethink our strategy. Some counties would prove especially difficult to get and, if we were close by, we should get them. Finishing all 3143 would prove difficult enough.

They told of Wade-Hampton borough in Alaska, Kalawao in

Hawaii, and others. Since we'd never been to Alaska or Hawaii, we hadn't known any better. But we paid heed and never again left any get-able counties behind.

We soon learned that there was an unofficial list of the toughest counties to get, with the continental 48 states treated as a separate unit. Alaska and Hawaii were inherently difficult, a category unto themselves. In the lower 48 a consensus built around counties like Loving in Texas, Piscataquis in Maine, San Juan in Washington, Luce in Michigan, Monroe in Florida, Daggett in Utah, Los Alamos in New Mexico, and Nantucket Island.

Depending on where you lived, any one of these could prove extremely difficult to count. Almost all were far off the beaten path, with few if any roads in and out.

There was a consensus among the few 100% completers that Hawaii's Kalawao County, Alaska's Wade-Hampton, Western Aleutians, North Slope, Northwest Arctic, Yakutat and Bristol Bay Boroughs were THE most difficult of all.

We took up the challenge.

Kalawao County is an isolated peninsula on the northern coast of the Island of Molokai (itself a part of Maui County). It is bordered by heavy seas on three sides and has a 2,000 foot almost sheer cliff or Pali, on the south side. Its 50 square miles are wholly a part of Kalaupapa National Historic Park, and still operates as it has since the 19th century when it was the Hawaiian Kingdom's quarantined leper colony, a place of lonely miserable exile. Since antibiotics ended the spread of disease in WWII, visitors are now allowed and residents may leave. But very few tourists visit and they are only allowed by special permit, for a few limited hours in daytime, with a mandatory four-hour guided tour of the premises on an old school bus. The colony can be reached by way of a slippery, muddy switchback trail down the cliff, on foot or muleback.

The mules have the right of way on the narrow trail. Hikers must allow the mules the inside track when passing. Boats arrive at the little village dock with supplies on a biweekly schedule. A doctor visits once a month for a few days.

A small airstrip, Kalaupapa "International," can be reached from Maui or Molokai itself, at a steep price. But there are no scheduled flights.

Our fellow Extra-Milers gave us conflicting advice as to which mode of entry was least bad. Finally, we decided to charter a small plane to fly us over from Kapaloa airstrip on Maui in the morning and return to pick us up six hours later for the return to Maui.



John and Judy Fitzgerald visited St. Mary's Lake in Glacier Park in 2013.

When we got to Kapaloa airport, a small plane landed, a flip-flop shod young man hopped out of the pilot's seat, called out our names and said, "Let's go." It was four-seater. My wife sat shotgun while I decided to use both back seats.

After quickly removing his flip-flops, the adolescent pilot zoomed down the runway and took off heading west across the channel.

We skirted the magnificent green of the Pali cliffs on Molokai's north coast at an altitude of 2000 feet. Stunning views and an easy 40 mile flight all the way. A quick landing at the deserted Kalaupapa airport and, after dropping us off, the pilot promptly flew off to Honolulu.

We were soon picked up by the elderly driver of a yellow school bus.

What followed was a wonderful tour for about two dozen of us altogether, including the cliff hikers and mule riders.

We saw a spectacular Hawaiian setting with scattered buildings, many of which were more than a century old, dating back to the time of quarantine.



John and Judy Fitzgerald on Lake Superior in August 2015.

We were not allowed to visit the little grocery store or the post office or the health clinic, lest we encounter any of the intensely private residents.

For there were still “lepers” here, people suffering still from the ravages of Hansen’s Disease. Though no longer quarantined, the remaining 17 residents were quite elderly, mostly blind, and had lived there in isolation for many, many decades. They had no desire to be objects of curiosity or pity.

As we toured around with the bus driver/guide, stopping at the occasional church or cemetery in Kalaupapa, we were told not to stroll far and to keep off the roads. For although blind or mostly so, many old residents still drove, just not very well.

When we visited Father Damien’s church (he was the Belgian priest who came to Molokai in the 1800s to minister to the lepers), we were inspired by his story. He later caught the disease and died from it.

When we heard of the cruelty and hardships endured during the quarantine, and when we saw the cove where the people were shoved off ships into pounding surf to swim to their exile, we were appalled.

The stunningly gorgeous landscape lost some of its appeal.

When we flew back to Maui, it was through quite a storm, especially in a little plane. But on our descent, we pierced through the arch of a brilliant rainbow, symbolizing our safe return.

Perhaps the most difficult task for any extra-miler is Alaska. We got plenty of advice on doing Alaska’s counties, some of

which are considered among the most difficult to reach in the country. The most obvious one is North Slope Borough. This county equivalent covers the northern 15% of Alaska.

It is 94,763 square miles (larger than Ohio and Pennsylvania combined) with a population of only 9,400 -- a density of one person for every 10 square miles. In contrast, Chicago has one hundred thousand for every 10 square miles.

It is entirely above the Arctic Circle with only one graded road to the outside world. That road, the Dalton Highway, runs unpaved for 500 miles alongside the Alyeska oil pipeline from just outside of Fairbanks all the way north to Prudhoe Bay and the ocean. Home to caribou, musk ox, and polar bears, the North Slope has a cold harsh climate with winter lasting over nine months of the year. To get there, you can take an Alaska Airlines jet or take the “haul” road.

We chose an over-the-road tour so that we could really earn the right to count this county. In summer the tour company we chose sends a nine-passenger van weekly up the Dalton Highway with an overnight stay halfway up at Coldfoot, a glorified truck stop. It sounded like a good, safe adventure for us. So we joined six other tourists and the driver. The driver was a handsome young man, an English major at the University of Alaska.

He reminded us that men far outnumber women in Alaska and that, while seemingly a good place for women to seek a mate, although the odds were good, the goods were odd.

We departed Fairbanks at dawn in early August. The pavement soon ended and we bumped along the gravelly truck road, the main supply route to the oilfields. It has been featured on the TV show “Ice Road Truckers.”

As we went north the scenery gradually changed from wooded green hills and lakes (moose country) to more barren, rock-strewn permafrost.

We stopped at a wayside to take pictures of the great sign indicating the crossing of the Arctic Circle. By evening we reached Coldfoot, had dinner at the truck stop and visited the nearby National Park Visitor Center for Gates of the Arctic National Park and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

There, a Ranger gave a fine presentation on the local fauna and related a personal story of being chased by a bear while she was cycling on the road.

After sleeping in a log cabin maintained for visitors by a local homesteader, we took off early the next morning in our van (nicknamed “the moosekiller” for some reason).

By this time it had a front windshield with cracks spider webbing across, and its body paint was nicked and dinged from incessant pebbles and rocks thrown up by passing trucks.

Soon after stopping to hug the northernmost tree in Alaska, we were approaching Atigun Pass in the Brooks Mountain Range. Since our weather was perfect, we had no difficulty climbing and passing over the steep pass, even stopping at the summit to view some snowy white Dall sheep just above us.

As we descended the pass, the great north slope stretched out before us; one hundred fifty miles of flat, almost featureless barren tundra, all the way to the Arctic Ocean. We paralleled the pipeline all the way now as it lay exposed above the permafrost. We spotted Arctic terns and the occasional fox amid the ground cover.

Pingos, and polygon-shaped ponds dotted the landscape.

In the distance, often a herd of musk ox could be seen. Plenty of caribou ranged about and every now and then one would choose to race alongside our van just for the fun of it. The caribou seemed to tolerate the pipeline easily.

Finally, after two days of washboard road and dust, we reached Prudhoe Bay and the town of Deadhorse. Since several of us wanted to swim or wade in the Arctic Ocean, we received permission from the oil company and were taken on their private bus to the seashore.

At the not-so-sandy shore, I waded in the 38 degree water while a few others dared to fully immerse themselves. At that time of the year the pack ice had receded beyond the horizon and a few stranded polar bears still roamed the shore, especially prone to ambling about at night.

We were warned not to stroll far from our lodgings, but we did enjoy a walk under the midnight sun.

The next day we flew back to Anchorage and had a magnificent view of Mt. McKinley below us.

We've actually been to Alaska three times now, averaging three weeks at a time. Our first trip covered central Alaska, our second, the southeast, and our last, the west. Using the state of Alaska's marine ferry system, Alaska Airlines services, and rental cars, you can get to most of the state, not easily or inexpensively, but it can be done.

In June of last year, we completed the ten western counties -- Alaska's most difficult. It took us ten months to plan, but fellow extra-milers gave many good suggestions on how best to accomplish it. First, they advised getting an Alaska Airlines Visa card. The sign-up incentives and triple miles plans would

prove most useful because in-state flights provided favorable terms to cardholders. Alaska Air also had a helpful travel service, which proved especially valuable because so much travel would have to be by air from Anchorage as the hub and with spokes leading to most points west.

There were few, if any, flights along the western perimeter, connecting the tips of the spokes.

We divided our western trip into three parts. The first would take us southwest from Anchorage to Kodiak and on to Dutch Harbor in the Western Aleutians.

An easy flight to Kodiak and a three day stay allowed us to get over our jet lag and enjoy the emerald island with its magnificent stands of Sitka spruce and its great brown bears.

As an indulgence, we took a float plane trip across the Shelikof Strait to see bears combing the beaches for clams in Katmai National Park. Unaccustomed to hunters, they did not seem to mind our viewing, as long as we stayed with the plane and off their beach. After three days roaming around Kodiak Island and visiting museums, parks and sights, we came to an old World War II fortress with a summer Ranger guide.

After a while she told us of a couple from the Lower 48 who were reportedly touring the island. Apparently this couple was intending to visit every county in the USA! She was delighted when we introduced ourselves as that same unusual couple.

Soon we embarked from the Kodiak dock on our 200 passenger ferry and stowed our gear in our little bunk-bedded cabin with its own large porthole.



Judy and John Fitzgerald with Andy Jackson re-enactor at 200th anniversary of Battle of New Orleans.

After a typically large Alaskan seafood dinner on board, we enjoyed the sights as our vessel navigated through and away from Kodiak towards the more open North Pacific.

Shortly after midnight we awakened in our bunks to significant pitching and rolling as the ship entered open water. Dramamine came to the rescue. In fact, over the three-day voyage, both in the North Pacific and the Bering Sea, Dramamine became our constant companion. Except in protected ports, it was definitely necessary.

The ferry route and ports of call allowed us to check off Lake and Peninsula borough as well as the Eastern and Western Aleutians boroughs. The schedule was very closely followed, unhindered by the usual heavy seas or fog.

We enjoyed two days in Dutch Harbor, inspecting the fleet of fishing boats featured on the TV show “The Deadliest Catch” and marveling at the abundance of eagles while realizing we were farther west than Hawaii.

Flying back to Anchorage from Dutch Harbor was reputed to be risky due to weather, so we had allowed an extra day, just in case.

In the event, the weather proved perfect, and we took off on a prop plane on a regional airline, since Alaska Air doesn't fly there.

The flight back proved stunningly gorgeous, with a highlight of being able to witness the eruption of Pavlov Volcano, which had started smoking only the day before. For the next several days, we learned later, all flights to Dutch Harbor from Anchorage



John and Judy Fitzgerald at Sylvan Lake, South Dakota, October 2015.



Judy and John Fitzgerald at Mason City, Iowa, September 2015.

were cancelled due to the ash cloud. We'd just made it out in time.

The second portion of our western Alaska travels, as expected, proved the most dicey. In fact, my wife had already opted to stay behind in Anchorage while I made two solo one-day trips into the Alaska bush and back. The easier one-day trip actually covered two days, due to delays and snarls loading hunters and fishermen and their gear back in Anchorage. It affected me adversely only by forcing me to stay six hours longer, past midnight, in a small terminal in King Salmon.

I had earlier flown there in another small plane from Dillingham and learned that all outbound flights from Anchorage were fully booked for the next two weeks, due to the salmon run. Anyone who missed their plane out was truly out of luck. Somehow this state of affairs resulted in my flying back to Anchorage as the sole passenger on a 40-seater. My wife picked me up in the wee hours at Ted Stevens Airport. Of course, there was still ample daylight at 2 a.m.

Incidentally, King Salmon has an unusual distinction for a county counter. Not only is it the county seat of Bristol Bay Borough, but also the county seat of Lake and Peninsula Borough. But since county offices were closed by the time I got there, I would have been unable to rightfully claim Lake and Peninsula Borough. Fortunately, I'd already been there, on the ferry.

Our quest to get Wade-Hampton County almost failed. The county has a few gravel airstrips, but no roads to the outside. The only way in and out is by boat on the Yukon River or by a puddle-jumping flight service. The flights are only loosely



Judy and John Fitzgerald on the big island in Hawaii, November, 2012.

scheduled, subject to weather delays, moose on runways, cargo, and postal priorities and pilot proclivities. The resident Yupik Eskimo population appears to prefer it that way, since they are isolated only in the brief summer months when their snow machines can't get them wherever they'd like to go.

For several months before leaving Chicago, I tried to get Era Alaska Airlines (now Ravn) to commit to fly me on a weekday from Bethel to Marshall or Russian Mission and back to Bethel.

It seems that they had a small plane that usually made a daily milk run circumnavigating Wade-Hampton, making a dozen or so stops along the way. Passengers were often accepted for short hops, cargo permitting, on the 4-seater Cessna. I signed up for a round-trip flight to Marshall, a hundred miles north of Bethel, with the understanding that I would be picked up by the same pilot five hours later as he looped back to Bethel.

I was warned, however that Marshall was a tiny Eskimo town with no services and that I would be left at the gravel runway five miles outside of town with only an orange cone to ward off local bears and wandering moose. A walk to town might not be possible, unless I was armed.

As I contemplated hours alone on a wilderness airstrip, an old guy in a pick-up truck met the plane with some cargo and picked up some parcel post. For \$5 he gave me a lift into town.

www.rpwrhs.org

As it happened, I had a great time meeting the pleasant townspeople and explaining the reason for my visit. I met with the mayor, the post mistress, and hung out a bit at the local grocery store. Most thought I was a federal agent reporting on violations of subsistence fishing regulations. My actual story seemed most unlikely.

True to form, the return flight was late. As I contemplated the consequences of failing to meet my 7 pm Anchorage connection back in Bethel, I hoped that it too might be late. As 5:30 became 6 in Marshall, the little plane finally appeared in the distance. Maybe the 45 minute flight to Bethel might yet work out. But I'd failed to calculate the family reunion that took place on the runway, and the need to shift cargo because of an unexpected load from the post office. But I was really dismayed to learn that we were to make a previously unscheduled stop at Russian Mission upriver on the Yukon. My friendly pilot agreed to contact the Bethel airport to hold my plane once we landed in Russian Mission. But he forgot.

Nevertheless, a quick turnaround at Mission and the use of afterburners or some such, enabled us to cut flying time in half.

We made it to Bethel just as my Anchorage plane had finished boarding.

My pilot taxied right up to the plane, signaled it to wait, and it did. There is no formality or security screening in these little places, lucky for me. So I just ran over and boarded.

The third portion of our western Alaska quest took us to Kotzebue and Nome in early June.

Flights were few, infrequent and subject to fog, storms, and musk ox near runways.

But we had a great time meeting Inupiat Eskimos and touring such remote landscapes just beginning to blossom with spring flowers on the tundra.

To make this long story short, I had completed Alaska -- all 29 counties.

Our Quest Status

After finishing Alaska, we completed 24 of the remaining 25 counties in October. Most of those counties were in southern Appalachia from Georgia to the Ohio River, with a few scattered in eastern North Carolina. A three-week driving trip from New Orleans through Virginia to Chicago easily captured them.

In preparing for our final significant county-counting trip, we did the usual.

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First, we got new AAA state and regional maps. Next we carefully outlined the needed counties on each state map with a pink marker. Then we did the same on a regional map, approximately imitating the actual county lines. Finally we planned our route and marked it in yellow, taking care to pass by places of historical or scenic interest.

Before actually setting forth on a trip, we make any ferry or motel reservations that might be necessary. Once on the journey, we recognize the entering of each new county with two beeps on our car's horn.

Occasionally we stop for a picture to commemorate the event.

As you can see from this latest Extra-Miler Milepost, we are now at the top of the chart, with 3142 counties completed. If you look closely at the list, you notice that our granddaughters have now joined us and have begun their own quests for travel immortality. Soon our new baby grandson will also appear on the list. We now have only one county to go and expect that, when we complete it, we will be the 41st and 42nd people known to have ever done so. Far more have climbed Mount Everest.

We chose Luce County, Michigan, as the final county, because of its location, relatively close to our family. Due to family interest in staging some sort of celebration, the collecting of Luce will wait until August. In the meantime, we will savor the anticipation and, perhaps, try to come up with a suitable comment like Neil Armstrong 46 years ago.

Luce County, At Last

Exactly at noon on Sunday, August 9, 2015, we became "Completers" as we walked across the line of Luce County, Michigan, our 3,143rd USA county entered. As such, we became two of the fewer than 50 persons known to have accomplished this feat of being in every county in the United States.

The weather was clear and warm as we held hands and waved small American flags in this heavily forested area adjacent to the shores of Lake Superior in the northwest corner of beautiful Luce County. We crossed together in unison, much as we have throughout our half-century-long quest to visit every American county.

While bears and moose have been seen in the area recently, greeting us on Sunday were only fifty plus of our family and friends, local news reporters and representatives of the Extra Miler Club. Assisted by our two daughters, Amy Galibois and Karen Boudreaux, and sons-in-law, Michael Galibois and Jude Boudreaux, and three granddaughters, we burst into song



John and Judy are about to enter Luce County as a crowd of friends, relatives, and locals wait to greet them. This was about 8 miles east of Grand Marais, Michigan. Local residents and family members welcome John and Judy to their 3,143rd county, Luce County, Michigan on August 9, 2015.

upon reaching Luce. Our six-month-old grandson (Charlie Boudreaux) only smiled. After an acapella rendition of the first stanza of "This Land is Your Land," we invited everyone to join in with a repetition. Our granddaughters, Bridget and Leah Galibois, and Lucy Boudreaux, were, by far, the most enthusiastic voices heard.

Many of the onlookers carried handmade signs, heralding the event, and cheered as we burst through the crepe paper barrier held across the road. All four of John's siblings and seven of Judy's ten were in attendance offering their kudos. Relatives came from as far as San Diego, Raleigh, New Orleans and Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts to get in on the fun. Local newspapers provided written coverage to supplement that given earlier in Chicago by radio, TV and print media.

Earlier that Sunday morning the entire group gathered outside the West Bay Diner in Grand Marais, Michigan to plan the crossing "ceremony." Then a parade of cars drove eight miles east to set the stage and await our arrival. In this sparsely populated semi-wilderness area, such a large group was a rare sight. Only deer had previously herded together in such numbers.

After the crossing celebration, the crowd split up and went their separate ways, only to gather that evening for a pizza party at the Munising Holiday Inn Express, where most were staying. The highlight of the evening was a 45minute presentation, which we prepared, entitled "Seeing America First." An earlier version of the slide and talk show had been previously given at the Spring meeting of the Circumnavigators Club in Chicago.

Our joy of discovery, wanderlust and love for America shine through, as well as our love for our Sweet Home Chicago.

Conclusion

As all of you know, travel is a voyage of discovery, for each of us, a very personal voyage. My wife Judy and I have shared our voyage with our girls and our granddaughters and now, with you.

As a lifelong city dweller, it has been especially enjoyable to experience rural and small town life, even though we merely pass through. As an amateur historian, we witness areas of the south where life goes on much as it did in the 1950s, in New England it can seem even earlier than that.

Visiting Hopi and Zuni lands in the Southwest, or Yupik lands in Alaska, life can seem almost pre-Columbian.

Such sensations are enhanced at re-creations like Plimoth Plantation, Williamsburg and New Salem and at historic sites.

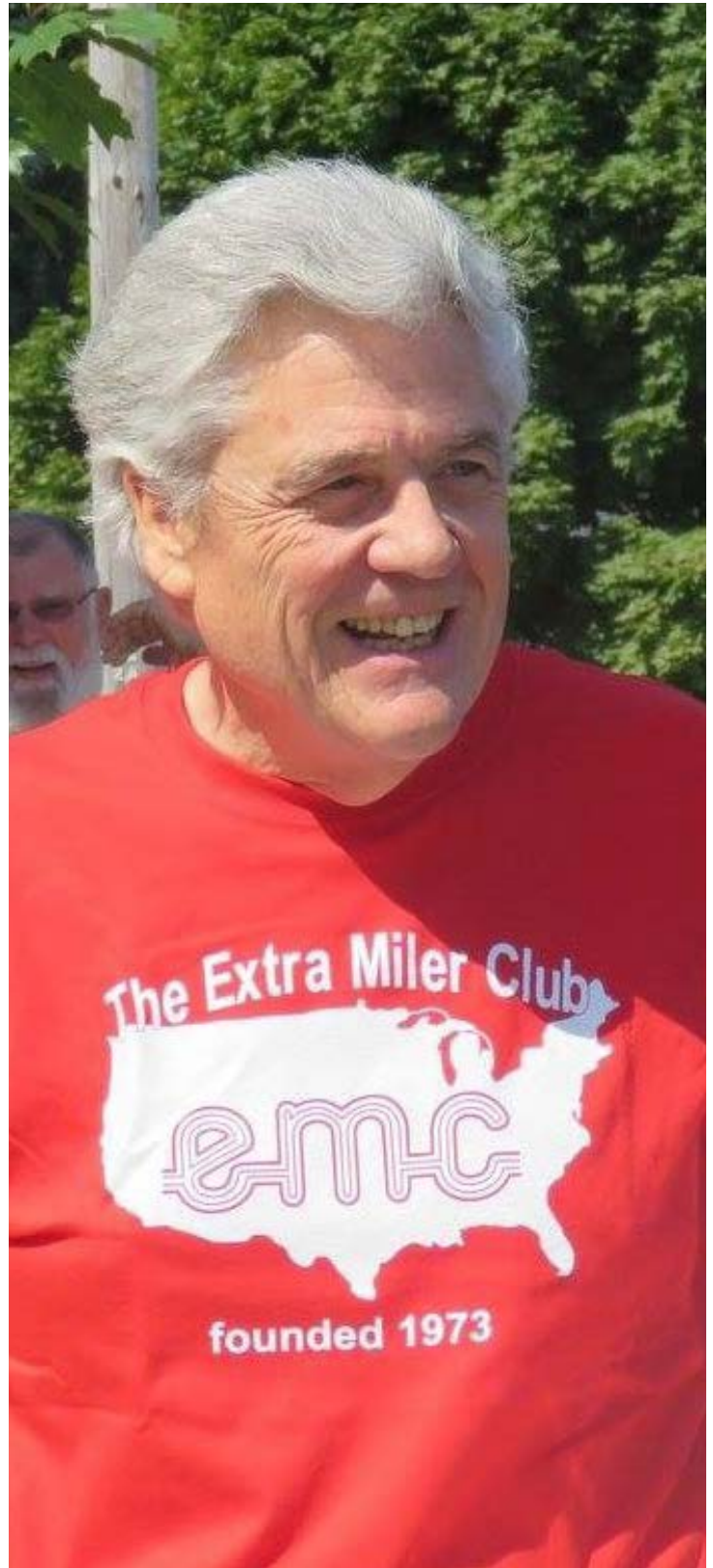
Small town museums like the Red River Museum in Oklahoma can be fascinating, while Dearborn's Ford Museum and Roswell's Alien Museum can be uniquely rewarding or disturbing.

The USA has beautiful scenery in tremendous variety -- glaciers, deserts, swamps, mountains, coastlines, and forests. Great cities with thrilling architecture and cultural attractions, splendid National Parks and Historical Preservations. The nation has abundant wildlife -- alligators, bears, moose and bison. The friendliness and rich diversity of the population is always a welcome revelation. While the variety of accents has seemed to diminish over the years, the quality of conversation seems to have risen as even the most remote Americans become familiar with the major issues of the day.

And while opinions on those issues differ sharply, everyone seems to be proud of their own locality.

And over our years of travel, we've learned to appreciate the viewpoints of others, especially with regard to their thoughts on the magnificence of their country. We've also experienced the enhancement of our love for Chicago, despite its many warts.

Even though it's nice to be on the road, it's always great to return to Chicago. There's no place like home. □



John all decked out in his Extra Miler Club tee shirt in Grand Marais, Michigan, en route to Luce County.