

The Route and Roots of *The Road*

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## The Route and Roots of *The Road*

Placing Cormac McCarthy's new novel, *The Road*, in geographical and chronological perspective are among the first challenges to an inquisitive reader of the book. This paper will address the geographical question by attempting to trace the route followed by the father and son. Bounds on the time period in which the novel is set can be estimated through an examination of the dates of introduction of some of the artifacts and details encountered.

Among other attributes, Cormac McCarthy is known and admired for his careful research and close attention to the details of physical settings in his novels. Those readers familiar with the general terrain described in a McCarthy novel can usually identify multiple specific locations in each of his earlier books (with the possible exception of *Outer Dark*). One might expect that this generalization would hold true for *The Road* as well.

However, reviews by a number of apparently geographically challenged critics and commentators have suggested some novel (no pun intended) locations for the route. Mike Shea in the *Texas Monthly* said that "...the man and the boy could be anywhere..." But that the "See Rock City" sign "...suggests Georgia" (Shea, 2006). Jerome Weeks of *The Dallas Morning News* placed the pair "...in a barren Southwest" where "[t]hey seem to be headed for the coast of California..." (Weeks, 2006). William Kennedy in *The New York Times* maintains the pair "...are heading to the Gulf Coast..." (Kennedy, 2006).

I first presented my ideas about the route of the road on the Cormac McCarthy Forum in a thread titled, "First Look at The Road" on June 28, 2006. The ideas presented there are elaborated in this paper.

The location of the beginning and end of the trip are unclear to me, but I believe the trail can be picked-up fairly early in the novel in Middlesboro, KY.

**"A raw hill country. Aluminum houses" (*The Road*, p. 12).**

In Middlesboro, KY, along the route of the old Wilderness Road (US 25-E) and the old Dixie Highway, there are a large number of mobile homes, euphemistically called "aluminum houses," just north of the Cumberland Gap tunnel. It seems safe to assume that the father and son passed through Middlesboro, KY on their way over Cumberland Gap.

**"Just beyond the high gap in the mountains they stood and looked out over the great gulf to the south where the country as far as they could**

**see was burned away, the blackened shapes of rock standing out of the shoals of ash and billows of ash rising up and blowing downcountry through the waste. The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk” (*The Road*, p. 12).**

The high gap is Cumberland Gap. The saddle of the gap itself was on US-25E before the Cumberland Gap Tunnel was opened in 1996. Wonderful views to the south are indeed to be seen from the Gap and Pinnacle Overlook.

Descending the south side of the Gap, US-25E enters Harrogate, TN. One then turns west on TN-63 toward Arthur, Speedwell, Fincastle, La Follette, Jacksboro, Caryville and Lake City, TN.

**“At the crest of the hill was a curve and a pullout in the road. An old trail that led off through the woods. They walked out and sat on a bench and looked out over the valley where the land rolled away into the gritty fog. A lake down there. Cold and gray and heavy in the scavenged bowl of the countryside.**

**What is that, Papa?**

**It’s a dam” (*The Road*, pp. 16-17).**

The lake is Lake Norris and the dam is Norris Dam. The dam, the first built by the Tennessee Valley Association (TVA), was completed in 1936 to provide flood control, recreation, and to generate power. The place described is the Norris Dam Overlook, and a bench is still there.

It is presumed that the pair continued to follow US-25W through Bethel and Clinton toward Knoxville. Evidently, they did not cross-over the dam and take US-441 into Knoxville:

**“Can we go down there and see it?  
I think it’s too far” (*The Road*, p. 17).**

**“By dusk of the day following they were at the city. The long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse against the distant murk” (*The Road*, p. 20).**

The “city” is Knoxville, TN, and the interstate exchanges are likely that of I-40 and I-75 or now I-275). For years that particular interchange was known as “malfunction junction.” The more recent construction of new interchanges and I-240 were intended to reduce the traffic problems. It does look like a “funhouse” from the air.

**“They crossed the high concrete bridge over the river. A dock below” (*The Road*, p. 21).**

The “high concrete bridge” is the Henley Street Bridge over the Tennessee River. A dock and marina can now be seen looking east from the bridge. The bridge figures prominently in *Suttree* (pp. 11, 89, 364) and is mentioned in *The Orchard Keeper* (p. 211). Suttree’s houseboat would have been tied to the bank where the docks are located, and the character, the ragpicker, lives under the south end of the bridge and is visited there by the characters Buddy Suttree and Gene Harrogate. And it is also on this bridge that Marion Sylder’s car stalls causing his arrest for bootlegging in *The Orchard Keeper*:

**“--It quit in the middle of the Henley Street Bridge” (*The Orchard Keeper*, p. 211).**

Cormac McCarthy and his family of origin lived for many years in south Knoxville and would have traveled over this bridge on the way to work, shop, church or school.

**“The day following some few miles south of the city at a bend in the road and half lost in the dead brambles they came upon an old frame house with chimneys and gables and a stone wall. The man stopped. Then he pushed the cart up the drive.**

**What is this place, Papa?**

**It’s the house where I grew up” (*The Road*, p. 21).**

Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Michael Chabon suggests that the father and son “...seem to repeat the visit that Cornelius Suttree, the hero of the novel who leaves his rich family to become a river fisherman, pays to his ruined childhood home” (Chabon, 2007). But the description of Suttree’s home, “the old mansion” “on a promontory” “above the river” with “tall fluted columns” does not fit the description provided here. The house where Cormac McCarthy grew up is located at 5500 Martin Mill Pike. It is a frame house with seven gables that has seen better days situated on a now overgrown lot. And there are the remains of a stone wall made by the McCarthy boys near the drive. It fits the description and location given in *The Road*.

**“Three nights later in the foothills of the eastern mountains he woke in the darkness to hear something coming” (*The Road*, p. 23).**

**“They passed through the ruins of a resort town and took the road south” (*The Road*, p. 25).**

The route to the Smoky Mountains and Gatlinburg has been mentioned several times by McCarthy in his earlier works. The road passes through the towns of Sevierville and Pigeon Forge before reaching Gatlinburg.

**"And far in the distance the long purple welts of the Great Smokies" (*The Orchard Keeper*, p. 55).**

The town of Sevierville was mentioned in both *Child of God* (pp. 96, 166) and *Suttree* (p. 195), and Gatlinburg appears several times in *Suttree*.

**"He made himself up a pack from old sacking and rolled his blanket and with some rice and dried fruit and a fishline he took a bus to Gatlinburg" (*Suttree*, p. 283).**

**"They took a cab to Gatlinburg and stopped at a service station to have chains put on the tires" (*Suttree*, p. 399).**

On their way into the mountains father and son stop briefly.

**“He stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurrled into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he’d watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath” (*The Road*, p. 25).**

This is reminiscent of a scene from *Suttree*.

**"Suttree lay on a warm rock above the river and watched the trout drift and quarter over the cold gray stones" (*Suttree*, p. 283).**

**“Leaning into the cart, winding slowly upward through the switchbacks” (*The Road*, pp. 25-26).**

Another place along the route of *The Road* that can be specifically and unambiguously identified is Newfound Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park on the Tennessee—North Carolina border. The giveaway detail is its altitude.

**“The pass at the watershed was five thousand feet and it was going to be very cold” (*The Road*, p. 25).**

**“It didn’t snow again but the snow in the road was six inches deep and pushing the cart up those grades was exhausting work” (*The Road*, p. 28).**

**“The wind in the dead black stands of hemlock. The empty parking lot at the overlook” (*The Road*, p. 28).**

**“It was very cold. Toward the afternoon it began to snow again and they made camp early and crouched under the leanto of the tarp and watched the snow fall in the fire” (*The Road*, p. 29).**

The altitude of Newfound Gap is 5,048 feet and is the lowest gap in the Smoky Mountains. The earliest road over the mountains went through Indian Gap at 5,271 feet. The current route is lower, and shorter and was called the new found gap after its discovery. There is a large parking area at the gap, and it was the site of President Roosevelt’s dedication of Park on Labor Day, 1940. Because of its scenic views it is a popular stopping point for travelers along US-441 and for hikers along the Appalachian Trail. According to the National Park Service, Newfound Gap is on average 10° F degrees cooler than the nearby lowlands and receives on average 69-inches of snow each year. The nearby stands of hemlock have been decimated in recent years by an infestation of the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (*Adelges tsugae* Annand), an invasive species introduced on the east coast in 1951.

The parking area at the gap had been visited earlier in McCarthy’s fiction by Suttree and his girlfriend, Joyce, during their cab ride to the mountains.

**“At Newfound Gap there were skiers, a bright group bristling with their poles and skis about the parked cars” (*Suttree*, p. 400).**

After crossing the mountains, the pair would have gone through Cherokee and on to Franklin, NC via one of several routes. I believe the most likely would have been through Bryson City (the place where Suttree (*Suttree*, p. 291) emerges after his six weeks or so in the mountains) and then taken NC-28 through Wests Mill and Lotla. From Franklin they would continue on NC-28, US-64 southeast toward Highlands, NC.

**“They came out along the rim of a deep gorge and far down in the darkness a river.”**

. . .

**High rock bluffs on the far side of the canyon with thin black trees clinging to the escarpment. The sound of the river faded. Then it returned” (*The Road*, pp. 31-32).**

This sounds like a description of Cullasaja Gorge and the route along NC-28, US-64 southeast of Franklin, NC. The river does become significantly separated from the highway at several points and alternates between wild rapids and lethargic drifting at others.

**“They left the cart in a parking area and walked out through the woods. A low thunder coming from the river. It was a waterfall dropping off a high shelf of rock and falling eighty feet through a gray shroud of mist into the pool below” (*The Road*, p. 32).**

The waterfall mentioned is likely Dry Falls. It is located in Cullasaja Gorge about 20.5 miles southeast of Franklin on the way to Highlands, NC, along NC-28, US-64. There is a small parking lot just off the highway and a trail that leads a short distance down to the falls. The river falls 75-80 feet and is a popular tourist attraction. It is named Dry Falls because one can walk behind the falls and remain relatively dry.

After the father and son swim in the pool below the falls, the reader is told,

**“They dressed shivering and then climbed the trail to the upper river. They walked out along the rocks to where the river seemed to end in space and he held the boy while he ventured out to the last ledge of rock. The river went sucking over the rim and fell straight down into the pool below. The entire river. He clung to the man’s arm.**

**It’s really far, he said.**

**It’s pretty far.**

**Would you die if you fell?**

**You’d get hurt. It’s a long way.**

**It’s really scary” (*The Road*, pp. 33-34).**

Do you think that McCarthy (or the father) might have read the sign in the parking area near the river above Dry Falls that says:

## **DANGER**

Stream rocks are slippery. A slip above a waterfall can be **FATAL**. Stay off the rocks and away from the edge. People have died here.

**“We have to keep moving. We have to keep heading south. Doesn’t the river go south? No it doesn’t”** (*The Road*, p. 36).

The Cullasaja River is to the northwest of the Eastern Continental Divide and indeed flows northwest into the Little Tennessee, Tennessee, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to drain into the Gulf of Mexico. Highlands, NC, is located on the Divide.

An ancient mapmaker indicated the end of the known world by stating, “Here be dragons.” I will have to admit that I become lost after Highlands. However, there are some interesting clues to places that someone more familiar with the Carolinas might be able to identify.

For example, after glassing the valley below them with binoculars the pair spotted a pale wisp of smoke.

**“If it’s a commune they’ll have barricades”** (*The Road*, p. 67).

According to their promotional material, the Boone-Douthit House, now the Rocky Retreat Bed & Breakfast in Pendleton, SC, served as a commune during the 1960’s and 1970’s. Could this have been the commune that the father had in mind?

**“Well. I think we’re about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies”** (*The Road*, p. 132).

One could draw a line parallel and two hundred miles from the coast to identify possible locations. That line would pass about 40-miles south of Pendleton, SC.

(Pendleton, SC to Charleston, SC = 244 mi.)

**“He found a phone directory in a filling station and he wrote the name of the town on their map with a pencil. They sat on the curb in front of the building and ate crackers and looked for the town but they couldn’t find it. He sorted through the sections and looked again. Finally he showed the boy. They were some fifty miles west of where he’d thought” (*The Road*, p. 153).**

This town that they could not find on the map may well have been either Ellenton or Dunbarton, SC. During the period 1950-1951 the Federal Government condemned or bought land consisting of some 300 square miles for the Savannah River Project that completely eliminated these two towns as well as a number of other unincorporated communities. Some 6,000 people and 6,000 graves were relocated in the process.

If they continue south, keeping near streams and rivers and traveling generally downstream, they would eventually reach the South Carolina coast. The mention of the Piedmont reinforces that speculation.

Now to the question of when the novel is set. Following Mr. McGuire’s one word of advice in the film, “*The Graduate*” (1967), the key to bounding the time frame of *The Road* may be “plastics.” According to my research, the first disposable plastic safety razor (p. 128), the “Good News!” razor, was introduced in this country by Gillette in 1976. Similarly, Kendall Motor Oil seems to have introduced the first plastic bottles of motor oil (p. 6) in 1978. Barring anachronisms, this would suggest that the road trip takes place at the earliest in the late 1970’s.

The latest that the trip could have taken place, again barring an anachronism, would seem to be the late 1990’s. On October 18, 1996, the Cumberland Gap Tunnel was opened and the old route (US 25-E) through the Gap was closed and eventually dismantled to return the route of the Wilderness Road to its early Nineteenth Century wagon road state. The pavement removal was completed in 2002. Since the father and son went over the Gap on a road rather than a trail, it would have to have been before that date. Had the tunnel been open, it surely would have been a shorter and probably a more attractive route for the pair since they were pushing a loaded grocery cart.

In 1998, Robert Droz took some photographs along the old US-25E route through the Gap after the tunnel was opened but before the pavement had been removed. On May 27, 2002, the National Park Service opened the restored trail to the public.

Interestingly, there is a nearby railroad tunnel under the ridge to Cumberland Gap, TN, built by the L & N Railway in 1892. That tunnel is still operational and might have been easily used by the walkers had they been aware of it.

Why would the father choose this particular route to travel? The route chosen would hardly be the most direct way to the southern coast, and it was not accidental as the father had an oil company map that he frequently consulted. Early on the father picks-up a telephone and dials the number of his father's home. Why did he do that? Surely he was not expecting anyone to answer. It seems to me that he had planned the trip through Knoxville, and nearby places, as a way of acquainting his son with his roots. There are personal references to the father's childhood experiences at Norris Dam watching a falcon (p. 17), at his family home in Knoxville remembering Christmas, the yellow brick hearth, and his childhood dreams (pp. 21-23), looking into a pool below a stone bridge in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where he had watched the trout's shadow on the stones beneath them (p. 25), and at Newfound Gap where he once stood with his own father (pp. 28-29).

It seems to me that the importance of the route is that McCarthy is fictionally returning once again to his own roots in Knoxville and the southeast, to some of the places where the author spent the earlier years of his life. I believe that it is no accident that these places are the ones that are described in the most detail. Observations such as these would seem to make other autobiographical interpretations of the text more plausible.

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