

Published September 2, 2021. Editor's headline: "Beating a Speeding Ticket"

I was on my way to family in Texas, happy to have Covid in my rearview mirror, when I had a run-in with the law. It was a January morning in the Texas panhandle, breezy but clear, with my canine companion stretched the length of my backseat. The detour to Palo Duro Canyon State Park had been the suggestion of a Wyoming friend.

"Palo Duro is fantastic, easily as impressive as the Grand Canyon," said Trevor on hearing of my travel plans. "Miles and miles of cliffs and ravines, multi-colored layers of rocks. Magnificent!"

"I usually travel through Kansas and Oklahoma to get to College Station."

"The Indian Museum in the Visitors Center is exquisite."

"Let's see if I can find an ATC family north of there."

"What's ATC?"

"The Affordable Travel Club. An inexpensive way to see the country. The only way I can afford going south in the winter."

The morning of my Palo Duro visit my travel-club hosts, who also recommended the park, helped me get an early start. My ten-year-old Subaru, license plate Wyoming, nosed southward on Highway FM 238 when a hamlet, Bushland, announced itself with an overhead sign, "School Zone: 35 mph when flashing." It was 9:30 AM, school in session, the sign turned off. Imagine my reaction when a sheriff stopped me on the half-mile stretch that seemed Bushland's downtown.

The Texas highway system allows speeds of 75 mph; unfortunately, many of these freeways transect towns that not only change the road names but also reduce speeds to 35 mph or

less. The name of the highway had changed to Simmons Street; less than half a mile later it became Bushland Road, a state highway, once again.

“I clocked you going 37,” says the officer. “This is a twenty-mile-an-hour school zone.”

“It can’t be. The sign said 35 when flashing, and it wasn’t flashing.” Behind me Abby, hooked to her doggie belt, kept mum.

“That’s for the high school. This zone here is for the primary school. The speed limit is posted with road signs, not overhead lights.”

He was lying, I learned later. There was a flashing sign—right behind him, greeting travelers entering from the south.

The officer wrote a citation for exceeding the speed limit by 17 miles in an “active school zone.” It made me look like an outlaw maniac high-tailing it through a crowd of children. The fine would be three hundred big ones.

I went ahead with my visit to the canyon, albeit with stomach roiling. January can bring freezing temps to the panhandle; nevertheless, in Palo Duro visitors arrived in RVs and even on bikes. I’d looked forward to a long hike with Abby but after the morning’s fiasco, I limited our outing to a three-mile trail.

After the walk, while Abby snoozed in the car, I visited the museum. True to my friend’s description, Paleo-Indian artifacts abounded, including information on pre-Clovis arrivals some 15,000 years ago. Still, the morning’s brouhaha left me so fretful and driven, I practically jogged though the exhibit. How on earth did I get myself into this mess? Was there anything I could do to lessen the fine?

Before continuing on my southbound journey I returned to Bushland to check out how and why I'd failed to take note of the roadside warning. Since it would delay my arrival, I called my next-stage travel-club hosts to alert them.

Entering the hamlet from the south, I passed under an overhead sign that flashed its lights with, "School Zone: 20 mph when flashing." Down the road I spied the "School Zone: 20 mph" roadside sign with a warning against cellphone use. Between the "20 mph" and the cellphone warning, "7 AM to 4 PM" appeared in small print.

Got it. On this stretch of the road "active school zone" meant 7 AM to 4 PM. It was 3:30 PM; presumably the sign had been flashing since seven this morning. Motorists entering the town from here are warned even if they fail to notice the roadside sign. Not so for motorists arriving from the north.

I drove to the high-school sign, turned around, and retraced my entry into Simmons Street. Sure enough, there was the roadside sign I'd overlooked earlier, partly because the inactive overhead sign put me at ease, partly because road-construction warnings caused me to scan for work crews.

I'd have to appear at "Precinct 3" in Amarillo to contest the citation. Chances are I could get it dismissed on grounds of the conflicting school-zone signs—but Amarillo lies a day's drive from where I'd be staying with my son and his family. Two days of driving and one, maybe two, nights in a motel, since no travel-club members were listed in Amarillo--the costs would exceed the fine.

I pulled out the citation and perused its message. What the—? The officer had dated it eight days previous! I checked my Palo Duro entrance permit. February 1, 2021, was stamped on

it. The traffic citation of the same day read January 24, 2021. On my android I ascertained that January 24 was a Sunday.

No doubt the officer was waiting in his vehicle for an ignoramus tourist, and I obliged. He must have thought he'd pull a fast one on a little woman from Wyoming who wouldn't waste a glance at the ticket he handed her. Well, he was wrong.

A few days later I called the Amarillo traffic court from College Station and read off the citation number. The clerk informed me she received it. On my inquiry she said she entered the date of January 24, 2021. I'd wondered if the officer had corrected the date before lodging the document with the court. He had not.

"Forget the ticket," said Trevor when I mentioned it on the phone. "They won't come after you in Wyoming."

"I don't know about that." My friend's solution seemed a poor option.

"I'll bet you can get the ticket dismissed," said my daughter-in-law the lawyer. During the years she and Walter resided in Wyoming I looked after their daughter before and after school and whenever they were on the road. Now the girl was a teenager with no time for Grandma—well, she'll be an adult someday.

From College Station I mailed a plea of Not Guilty to the court, then called to make sure the clerk has received it.

"The citation is without merit," I told her.

"I'm not the one to hear it," she said. "You need to tell that to the prosecuting attorney, but you'll have to wait until trial is set. Sometime in late March, I should think."

"Late March? I'll be back in Wyoming by then."

"Once you have the date you can send a fax to explain your side of the case."

When I had the date I sent the fax as instructed, with a request that the citation be dismissed.

“Deputy Morris cited me for exceeding the speed limit in an ‘active school zone’,” I wrote. “The citation is dated January 24, 2021, which is a Sunday. There are no active school zones on Sundays.”

I called the court repeatedly to make sure my fax had arrived. The first time the clerk said the trial date had been reset for April. The last time she gave me the phone number of the pertinent attorney’s office—I imagine it’s the precinct’s District Attorney—where, she said, the citation, my fax, and all case information were lodged.

When I called the law office, I was lucky to get the attorney in person. “The case has been dismissed,” she said.

Case closed. I celebrated with a glass of wine.

Naturally I wondered why an officer would falsify the date on a citation. Was he involved in something illegal on January 24 and needed to establish he could not have been near the scene where the malfeasance was linked to him? Did he need to meet his quota for the previous week? Whatever the reason, it saved me a hefty fine.