

Making Good Time(s):  
Driving the Pan American Highway  
Bart Fleener

## PROLOGUE

"I'm not sure exactly where we are going, but we are making really good time".  
- Unidentified Men – (countless centuries)

It seems that men are naturally wired to hit the road and one of the favorite topics of conversation between men, even those who don't know each other, is how long it took to get from point A to point B. Go to any family reunion where people have traveled from long distances to attend and right after "Hey, it's great to see you again, your kids have really grown up", the real conversation starts with "What route did you guys take?" Responses include feigned amazement at the distance covered in the time allotted ("Wow, you guys didn't leave until 10 this morning – you must have missed all the traffic") or shared sympathy at uncontrollable events like the construction on the interstate or the wreck that completely stopped traffic for a solid hour (Hey people, someone may have died!). Anyway, back to my original point. Men love to hit the road and I find that desire fueled by junk food opportunities, a sense of adventure, and the opportunity to conquer something while traveling at high rates of speed. What follows is a tale of one such adventure told from one traveler's perspective. But before I get to the real story, let me give you the back-story.

I often think back to my first real road trip and the memories that still resound. It was the fall of 1987 when five of us (Jim, Stu, Jim, me, and Jim – different Jims, same car) we rode in a station wagon to Athens, Georgia to see our beloved UK Wildcats lose to the mighty Georgia Bulldogs. We left on a Friday night about 10 P.M. (I can't remember if one of had to work or we just thought 10 at night seemed like a good time to leave), drove through the night, stopped by a lake for a picture at sunrise (someone fell in), got to Athens, painted our faces, watched the game, and drove straight back to Lexington (eight hours away). I remember taking the first driving shift right after the game. I think I made it about five miles in forty-five minutes in postgame traffic before giving in to fatigue (the adrenaline of the trip and the game had worn off) and almost falling asleep at the wheel. I had to switch out from behind the wheel, a common occurrence to this day (ask my wife when we are traveling who does most of the driving). That trip started a road trip tradition in which we went to an opposing SEC stadium every year for the next 10 years or so to see our Wildcats play some mediocre football (I think the Cats went 2-8 on our trips) but we had some lifetime memories. Bottom line, road trips are usually worth the effort.

Like any other activity though, the more proficient and experienced you become, the more challenging that endeavor has to become to reach the same level of excitement. That is where the "Road Trip of Road Trips" came to the surface. I remember a brief conversation in the summer of 2009 with my friend Steve Rehner that referenced a trip he had just taken with 15 other men (lots of dads and several sons) down the Pan American Highway from Mexico to Costa Rica. Like many other people, I really didn't know you could actually do that but since I was a Geography minor and former social studies teacher, I just shook my head and acted like I knew

you could. I think I vaguely remember thinking it sounded cool and I said something like “Hey, if you do that again, let me know and I think I’d like to go and take my son.” It’s one of those things you say to be nice in a conversation but you really don’t think it will ever come to fruition.

Fast forward to the summer of 2012. My son Zach was now 13 and acting like a lot of 13 year old boys (I’m surprised more of them aren’t given away at this age). Actually, he is a likeable normal teenager but when Steve brought it back up that he was doing the trip again next summer (2013) and he indicated that I should make plans to go, I really couldn’t resist. Over the next twelve months, I fielded lots of questions as I recruited other dads and sons to go on the trip with Zach and I. Those questions ranged from “Can I pack heat?” (i.e. take a weapon if you don’t know the lingo) to “What do you do with the cars when you get on the ship?” (geography-challenged questioner) to “You think my son wants to be in the car with me for seven days straight?” (No, but that is the point – quantity time often leads to quality time).

The most repeated question of all, while posed in different variations, was simply, “Why?” Well, the why is this: Men for Missions, a branch of One Mission Society, wants to raise money to help spread Christianity throughout the world. In this particular case, the goal is to help plant churches in a country whose governing power has been adamant about resisting Christ thus far. In the year 2013, \$30,000 of that amount will be raised by the sales generated from six vehicles at a car lot in San Jose, Costa Rica. Carlos, a friend of Steve Rehner’s from his days as a missionary in Costa Rica, will sell the vehicles but they have to be driven there first! Those vehicles came from various sources and had to fit various specifications (relatively low mileage, affordable (less than \$5,000), preferably stick-shift, and in good working condition for a very long trip). Also, Steve was looking to connect men of like mind and faith along with their sons to form a group willing and able to make a long and arduous journey of over 3,000 miles to deposit the cars safely in San Jose for resale. As it turned out in the end, God had plans for 17 men ranging in age from 14 to 76 to make the trip which included four father-son combinations and that is exactly what happened.

Many people at this point, even after I explained my reasoning for doing the trip and in some cases, even more strenuously, would say things, like “Why don’t you just raise and send the money directly to MFM rather than going through all that trouble?” I simply replied with a phrase we use with our basketball team quiet often – “The Joy is in the Journey”. In other words, it’s not always just about the end goal or the destination, but the journey itself is what brings about growth in many ways not to mention the creation of memories and stories for a lifetime. So, in March of 2013, after basketball season ended for my teams (Asbury Eagles WBB, West Jessamine Colts, and UK Wildcats), the planning began in earnest. We started looking for a vehicle and eventually purchased a White 2000 Mitsubishi Montero Sport that had only 126,000 miles (you’ll hear lots more about the Tortuga later). We started sending out mission fundraising letters (thanks to all who made the trip

possible and covered us in prayers) and we converted our small Mulch Men business into Mulch for Missions this Spring (people wrote checks to Men for Missions on behalf of our trip when we completed their landscaping projects). We assured our friends and family that it was safe (my mom always said “You can break your arm walking down the street” whenever someone asked her why she let her boys play football) so I went with that answer a lot. We started praying and planning and meeting with Steve Rehner on several occasions to nail down the particulars and before you knew it, June 2013 was upon us.

*Making Good Time(s)* gives credence to the famous man-phrase while also alluding to the fact that this trip turned out to be loads of fun, believe it or not.

So without further ado, in classic Paul Harvey voice, it’s time for you to hear *the rest of the story*.

Cast of characters:

Steve Rehner (56) – Wilmore, KY

Daniel Rehner (24) – Wilmore, KY

Jonathan Rehner (22) – Wilmore, KY

Bart Flener (44) – Wilmore, KY

Zach Flener (14) – Wilmore, KY

Frank Jones (68) Nashville, TN

Mark Stanifer (50) – Greenwood, IN

Pete Cates (48) – Waynesboro, GA

Peter Cates (17) – Waynesboro, GA

P.D. Childers (76) – Converse, IN

Mike Baker (56) – Calhoun, IL

Hayden Baker (15) – Calhoun, IL

Ben Lynch (15) – Olney, IL

Don Farmwald (70) – Goshen, IN

Sam Bean (56) – Greenwood, IN

Willy Matson (51) – Asheboro, NC

Randy Smith (51) – Elkhart, IN

Cast of Cars:

2000 Frontier Pickup Truck (White), hereafter referred to as the "Beamer".\*

\*Sam Bean made a comment on the first day when asked to speed up that the pickup was not a "BMW" and the name "Beamer" was born.

2005 Hyundai Tuscon (Black), hereafter referred to as the "Black Mamba".\*

\*Mike Baker from Illinois, along with Hayden Baker and Ben Lynch, drove the only black vehicle in the group and it took on Kobe Bryant's nickname as a lethal snake on the move through Central America.

2002 Mitsubishi Montero Sport (Blue), hereafter referred to as the "Bulldog".\*

\*Pete Cates drove this one from Georgia, so it took on the Nickname of his beloved University of Georgia (the Bulldog will sometimes be called UGA in the story).

2005 Hyundai Tuscon (Green-Blue), hereafter referred to as the "Chameleon".\*

\*Nobody could decide if the color was green or blue so since it kept changing colors, we went with the Chameleon.

2003 Suzuki Grand Vitara (White), hereafter referred to as the "Marshmallow".\*

\*Lots of cars had tough sounding names so we went with a "softer" name for this square-shaped Pam Rehner vehicle that resembled a jumbo marshmallow. There's Smore where that came from if you like our brand of humor☺

2000 Mitsubishi Montero Sport (White), hereafter referred to as the "Tortuga".\*

\*A funny turtle sticker on the back window and the delay caused by the need for a new alternator for this vehicle on the very first day of the trip back in Tennessee led to this vehicle called the turtle in spanish. Sometimes just called the Tooga.

This story takes place from Thursday, June 26, 2013 to Monday, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

The setting is ever-changing so to try and mention all the places would be counterproductive but if you read along, you'll get the general idea.

The story begins in McAllen, Texas but features countries (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica) along the Pan American Highway. Actually, it began long before but as far as recent history goes, the traveling portion of the trip began this week as follows:

Steve, Daniel, and Jonathan Rehner, along with PD Childers, Don Farmwald, and Randy Smith, took off from Wilmore, Kentucky early Tuesday morning, June 25<sup>th</sup>. They picked up Frank Jones in Nashville, Tennessee on the way to Texarkana. They ran into a bit of trouble with the Tortuga as Jonathan Rehner notes:

*We were about 80 miles from Memphis, Tennessee and I noticed that the clock in the car turned off. Not thinking anything of it, I dozed back off to sleep. 5 minutes later, I felt a jolt and woke right up to Don (driver) saying we had just run out of gas! Then he said, "I have no power!" Miraculously, we made it across three lanes of interstate traffic to the shoulder with a completely dead car. Emergency lights and everything was dead. The tow truck arrived 45 minutes later, and three hours later and \$575 lighter, a new alternator and a new battery had the Tortuga off and running again.*

Pete and Peter Cates left from Waynesboro, Georgia on Monday, June 24<sup>th</sup> and picked up Willy Matson along the way at the Atlanta Airport.

Mike and Hayden Baker along with Ben Lynch left from Calhoun, Illinois on Monday, June 24<sup>th</sup>.

Mark Stanifer and Sam Bean left on Tuesday morning, June 25<sup>th</sup> from Greenwood, Indiana.

The majority of the gang met up at Texarkana, Arkansas on Tuesday, June 25<sup>th</sup>. The only exceptions were Pete, Peter, and Willy, were taking a southerly route from Georgia to McAllen, and Bart and Zach Flener who had a flight scheduled for McAllen, Texas on Wednesday, June 26<sup>th</sup>. Basketball camps prevented the Fleners from leaving on Tuesday, but don't think they minded for a minute not having to drive 1,300 miles before the trip even began.

On the morning on Wednesday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, the gang of 12 headed south and the Cates gang headed west with plans to meet up in McAllen by Wednesday afternoon. The Fleners flew to McAllen, Texas where they were picked up in the Bulldog by the Cates gang at 6:15 P.M. Everyone met up at 6:30 P.M. and it was on from there.

Wednesday night saw the gang of 17 head to the Mexico border to process car paperwork. It turned into an adventure when Steve's name appeared on three of the car titles. Immediately, he went into Salesman Steve mode and talked Daniel and

Randy into “buying” two of the cars in his possession. That forced them back to the McAllen business district to get the titles transferred. They found a notary who usually leaves work at 6 P.M. but who happened to be in her office at 8 P.M. tonight. Thankfully, they were able to get it done, report back to the border where we processed some time-saving paperwork and then headed off to dinner. Dinner turned out to be Little Caesar’s at 10:30 P.M. and then a short group meeting outside the mission center where we were staying ended Day 0 (depends on how you are counting) of our journey.



Thursday, June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013 (Our Lady of Mission Center)  
5:00 A.M. Wake up Call  
5:45 A.M. Departure from McAllen, Texas

The NBA draft is tonight in New York City, USA, but we a world away in Mexico. I know they say the NBA is a “global game” and I’m hoping Nerlens Noel goes #1 to the Cavs but I doubt that many of the people I’ll come in contact with over the next five days will really care who goes #1 so I’m really not as concerned as usual about the draft. The adventure of this trip has taken temporary precedence over my fixation with all things roundball. After four hours of sleep (a late night Walmart run last night to get some vital snacks for the road and some breakfast fixins for this morning pushed our lights out time back to 1:00 a.m.), we arose at 5 A.M. and hit the road after breakfast at 5:45 A.M. We crossed the border at around 7:00 A.M. and continued south, stopped briefly for gas and a nature leak (this was necessitated by the fact that the bathroom facilities were for Oxxo employees only), and were back on the road by 8:20 A.M.

1:32 P.M.

Two bathroom stops later we are rolling through Tampico, a big city in Mexico (500,000 estimated population) with a strong Sam Walton showing, boasting both a WalMart and a Sam’s Club. At this point, Beamer leads, followed by Bulldog, Marshmallow, the Tortuga (with no A/C due to strange belt noises that promise a breakdown if used), Chameleon, and the Black Mamba, driven not by Kobe but by Mike from Illinois. Lunch promised soon. Can’t wait for PBJs, Lay’s Salt & Vinegar chips, and pretzel M&M’s. Great day so far with Veracruz on the distant horizon (5 hours and 260 miles away). Zach is sleeping in the back seat and I’m cruising with PD Childers as my co-pilot.

5:32 P.M.

Tuxpan on the way to Poza Rica. Lunch was good back when and it was totally cool of Randy to marry off his daughter on the Saturday before the trip so we could have enough left over ham from the wedding to make spectacular ham sandwiches for the trip. Looking for the leftover wedding cake, but not seeing it so far. Guess you can’t have your cake and eat it again five days later... or so the saying goes. Corona seems to run the show in Mexico (lots of factories with boxes of bottles stacked high- you can see it in the outdoor storage areas) like PD Childers runs the show in Converse, Indiana. Veracruz seems to be getting further away instead of closer but everyone is hanging tough though. However, I bailed out on my driving shift due to fatigue and Daniel Rehner took over the Tortuga. As of now, Randy and Steve lead the way in the Beamer, followed by Mello, Bulldog, Tortuga, Black Mamba, and Chameleon bringing up the rear. For what it’s worth, my personal food consumption so far today includes two bananas, Cheezits, Kelloggs cereal bars, Chex Mix (cheddar), Pepsi, 2 Randy Smith’s daughters wedding ham (the good kind) sandwiches, multiple bottles of water, Lay’s Salt & Vinegar Chips, Pretzel M&M’s, and a shot of Gatorade.

9:29 P.M.

Rolling into Veracruz..... what a sight... actually, it's dark and while I'm sure it's pretty, just getting here makes it the most lovely city even if it has its beauty spots like we all do.

10:30 P.M.

Hotel parking lot (killed the truck's stick shift twice trying to get into the covered parking lot – smooth), hotel registration (thankfully speedy and uneventful), wonderful rooms, and fifteen minutes later (having taken the greatest shower ever), down to the lobby to walk around the square to head to Café De Parraquia (est. 1908). Empanadas, Cuban sandwiches (representative of our ultimate trip's goal), enchiladas, and some live Mexican music wraps the night up.

12 Midnight

Back to our hotel to conclude a great Day 1 down the Pan American Highway.

BTW, Nerlens went 6<sup>th</sup> to the New Orleans Pelicans before being traded to the 76ers. Guess the imposing Noel-Davis front line won't come to be after all and I also guess that my fixation with the roundball hasn't totally gone away.

Thursday, June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013

621.4 Miles Traveled

0\$ Dollars Spent on Borders (On Wednesday night, we had already spent \$25 per person and \$45 per car for a total of \$695 at the US-Mexico border)

15 hours and 45 minutes on the Road

Friday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013

6:00 A.M. Wake up Call

6:45 A.M. Departure from Veracruz, Mexico

Veracruz Hotel Diligencies

The caravan rolls through the water-filled streets of Veracruz with PD Childers at the wheel of the Tortuga and me as his co-pilot. Zach is asleep in the back seat (again). Heading south today for 499 miles (probably actually more than 500 miles but Steve is playing mind games with us again – everyone knows 499 sounds like so much less than 500 – Hey it works on my wife at the store sales!). On a personal note, the Flener family is “all spread out” today as my youngest son Avery (9) noted. Zach and I are rolling through Mexico, with no A/C in the Tortuga, but a pleasant morning breeze, my wife is in Nashville, TN, home of Frank Jones, at a dental convention, and my daughter Embrey is on a plane to NYC to spend the weekend in the “Big Apple” with my sister-in-law Heather. Pete Cates is experiencing similar feelings of dispersement as his three children are currently in Mexico, Italy, and Dominican Republic and his wife, Texas (the name, not the place), is in Georgia.

Anyway, the caravan is on the way in the following order this morning:

1. Marshmallow (Steve driving with Randy and Hayden in tow)
2. Tortuga (Pd driving with Bart and Zach (still asleep) in tow)
3. Beamer (FreeWilly driving with Mark in tow)
4. Black Mamba (Mike driving with Frank and Don in tow)
5. UGA (AKA Bulldog) (Pete driving with Sam and Jonathan in tow)
6. Chameleon (Daniel driving with Peter and Ben in tow)

\*Editor’s Note: Nothing to do directly with our trip but BTW, if your last name is Poo, as in Ramon Poo, don’t run for Municipale Presidente, or change your name before declaring your candidacy. Way to easy for other candidates to say things like, “Don’t vote for Ramon, he ain’t worth POO!”

10:14 A.M.

Rolled for three good hours on mainly “interstate” type roads. A few more potholes than the United States interstate system and trees placed in the median and right on the side of the interstate which is different, but construction crews maintain the same ratio at least. 1 guy working for every 4 guys standing around watching him. Pemex is the gas station of choice in Mexico. In fact, it seems to be the only choice and perhaps there is a monopoly on gas stations in Mexico. They all seem to belong to Pemex. The gas station attendant and I had a brief and unproductive conversation. I asked for oil check and pointed to the engine while she said “Agua”. Jonathan Rehner hurried over to save the moment and miraculously, the Tortuga didn’t need any oil so far for today. So forget what Pete Cates said about “filling her up with oil and checking the gas”. If you’re not careful, Pete, hurtful comments like that about my little Mitsubishi can get your little Mitsubishi Bulldog in trouble later.

\*Editor’s Note: FORESHADOWING.

God is definitely humbling me on this trip about my ability to do all things through me. Clearly, picking out a roadworthy vehicle for a 3,000 mile trip is not one of

those things. Also, God is showing me how love is done through my 76 year-old co-pilot P.D. Chiders, who incidentally, reminds me of my dad Lonus Flener. While P.D. can't speak Spanish worth a lick either, he was able to provide the gas station attendant, who I couldn't communicate with, a Nuevo Testamento (which he had thoughtfully considered to bring along) and speak the language of God's love, which is universal, to her quite clearly. Thanks for the language lesson, P.D.

BTW, the gas attendant (I think she was still ticked at me) handed me the bill for all the cars which came out to a number like 5,320 something – I hollered for Steve-O, the Godfather when it comes to finances and smooth negotiations, to work it all out.

1:54 P.M.

Pulled over for lunch & gas... at a Pemex no less. 20 minutes later, 18 people fed, including the guy with the shotgun (a guard walking around), a common sight south of the border yet still somehow unnerving. Tuxtula Guittenazor or something like that with less than 3 hours to go to Tapachula where we stop for the evening. We might be in the hotel by 5 p.m. for a nice dinner and a restful evening. Of course, I was the same optimistic one who believed Veracruz was only 237 km (I know I saw a sign!) when it was actually 450 km away at least yesterday so we shall see if 5 p.m. is a real possibility or just wishful thinking. Either way, a great day of driving and riding so far with beautiful natural scenery and meat being cooked on the grills on the side of the road. BTW, anybody have any idea who's winning at Wimbledon? We are gloriously DISCONNECTED on the Pan American Highway. My son Zach (yes, he is awake for a very short time) says he wishes it was like this with me and my phone back home...might be worth listening to and pondering when we return to the states and our world of sound and fury.

3:38 P.M.

Afternoon showers accompany us through the mountains as we exit Tuxtla and head to San Cristobal. UGA (Bulldog), Black Mamba, Tortuga, Beamer, Chameleon, and Marshmallow in that order. I'm taking a nap in the backseat...Don from Goshen is piloting the Tortuga with God and Zach (awake for time being) as his co-pilots.

11:15 P.M.

So much for a 5:00 P.M. arrival at the hotel, or for that matter, a 6:00, 7:00, 8:00, 9:00, or 10:00 P.M. arrival at the hotel. We took a northerly route which turned out to be difficulty to say the least. Finally, after miles and miles of mountain roads, landslides (I'm not kidding –ask Mark from Greenwood), rain, more rain, and more rain, we arrive sleepily at the car title exchange place on the other end of Mexico. Steve works his magic, cars are processed, the Lord is praised for the amount of time this will save us in the morning, and we proceed to our hotel (Don Miguel something or other) for a midnight check-in and late, late dinner. It took more convincing from Sopranos Steve, but we enjoyed a reopened kitchen which served Coca-colas, fruit, and nice grilled ham (it's no Randy's daughter's wedding's ham) and cheese sandwiches with jalepenos, tomatoes, onions, and mayo....SOLID! After

that, off to bed to watch some ESPN Deportes and figure out who's winning Wimbledon. Goodnight☺

Friday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013

584 Miles Traveled

\$0 Dollars Spent on Borders (Thankfully)

16 Hours and 30 minutes on the Road

Saturday, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013

5:00 A.M. Wake up Call (Provided by Steve – smooth move, Don Corleone)

6:00 A.M. Departure from Tapachula, Mexico to race to the Guatemalan border which doesn't actually open until 8:30 a.m. but there were some things God and Steve wanted and/or needed us to see to make us ponder. More about that later.

5:30 A.M.

Breakfast and Devotion in the hotel restaurant.

Celebrating my 22<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary with my beautiful bride Candee. The sound of our muffler which actually fell off on the way to our honeymoon cabin in Georgia 22 years ago today reminds sounds hauntingly familiar to the screeching of the air conditioner belt on the Tortuga. That is, sounded, until Free Willy mercifully unhooked it all together so no one else could turn on the air and risk the belt breaking thus potentially causing serious damage within the engine.

6:30 A.M.

Hurrying up and waiting at the Guatemalan border after another sandwich of ham, cheese, jalapeños, tomatoes, onions and mayo (awesome sandwich BTW) for breakfast. Yes, I know it was the same meal we ate less than 6 hours ago for a really late supper but who cares. If it ain't broke, don't fix it☺ I meet and get my picture taken with the Guatemalan version of Tommy Lee Jones, a money changer at the border. We are waiting for the bank to open at 8:00 to process some car paperwork. We have hired Hector Torres (#9 from the Spanish national soccer team), or at least that's what his jersey says. Speaking of jerseys, in the interim between when we arrived and when we will depart, we did some shopping and came away with several soccer jerseys (\$10 buys the jersey and matching shorts!) and some sweet Adidas shoes (\$20 for an \$90 pair of shoes!).

7:45 A.M.

Back to the other things we saw which God intended by guiding Steve to have us leave incredibly early...We are standing atop the bridge between Mexico and Guatemala watching people cross rapids from Guatemala to Mexico with at least 150 pounds of gear wrapped up waterproof to avoid the duty tax up top across the bridge. (see video for evidence). These "human pack mules" probably do this on a daily basis and it makes me think of the burdens we carry around with us from our past. God asks us to lay our burdens at his feet - forgiveness is forgiveness lest we should forget.

Shopping and waiting at the border. What we thought was going to be an hour wait became a two hour wait because we "gained" an hour at the border. Not one of those times when you appreciate a time change.

10:15 A.M.

On a roll through Guatemala....have consumed some mangoes, pineapples, and watermelons (3 bags for 2 American dollars or 14 Guatemalan quetzals – whatever you prefer). Potentially, "hairy cherries" are next on the fruit list. We try to save our

6 quetzal Coca-Cola to trade at the intersection for a bag of “hairy cherries”, but alas, Steve is pushing the pace once again and we can’t consummate the deal. Caravan is stacked as follows this morning:

1. Chameleon
2. Black Mamba (driven by Mike\*) \*Editors Note: Anytime you see Black Mamba mentioned in the caravan, you can assume Mike is driving. He drove the entire way from Illinois to Costa Rica (over 3,000 miles) so here’s a shout out to Mike for the MCD (Most Consistent Driver) award.
3. UGA (AKA Bulldog)
4. Marshmallow
5. Beamer
6. Tortuga

5:59 P.M.

Entering El Salvador! Reached the border at 2:30ish and three mind-numbing hours later, we are headed out with Patrick and Jeanine, former Kentucky residents on their way to retirement in Central America and not new Caravan members. A few minutes later...actually, we are not on our way because the new caravan members and their car (AKA Wildcat or AKA Snowman – Big, White, and appears in special circumstances) do not possess the requisite temporary \$10 El Salvadorian vehicle insurance card (see photographs). Free Willy may have to commandeer the Snowman to help us make up time at this point. Looking back to when we got our \$10 cards a few hours ago, it was a memorable and a learning experience. Steve wanted the whole group of six drivers to sit in the “insurance waiting room” at one time but a guard with a gun (more common than rice & beans) named Miguel dissuaded us from doing so with a mere Dikembe Mutombo finger wave. My learning in this situation and my subsequent advice is this: When you have to choose between listening to Steve and listening to the guy with the gun, listen to the guy with the gun. PBJs for lunch and now we are on our way to our fabulous beach hotel in La Libertad, El Salvador. The sunset is supposed to be a magnificent view. Maybe someone can share their recollection of it when we arrive because we won’t be there to see it. Nonetheless, I’m sure it will be beautiful. Poll in our car indicates that our goal is an 8:00 P.M. ETA. We’ll see how that goes.

9:00 P.M.

Checked in....finally. One funny final barrier turned out to be the stop bar that was laid on the hood of our car by a very determined parking lot attendant at the hotel entrance. Apparently, there was a \$1 voluntary contribution to enter the area where our hotel was located. Steve, who had been shedding money like a pelt, decided this was “ridiculous” and informed everyone behind him in line in no uncertain terms – “Don’t PAY it!”. Jonathan, driving the Tortuga at this point due to writer’s cramps on my part, attempted to heed the advice but was denied by the hyper aggressive attendant. Eventually, after the police officers were called over and Jonathan negotiated a settlement (\$1 for two cars – not just one☺), we were able to proceed to our final destination. Jonathan, they say the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Anyway, our room is quite special. It is a suite overlooking the Pacific

Ocean no less – and now, we are sitting down to eat a real dinner at a real restaurant on the hotel property. 45 minutes later, we have consumed lobster, guacamole & chips, calamari, and other fine foods and the night is good. But I’m wiped out and can’t wait to hit the sack.

10:30 P.M.

Wrap this day up and put a bow on it.

Seeing Jonathan provide our El Salvadorian/Guatemalan passage guide with a Bible and walk him through Juan 3:16 and present Christ’s opportunity to him is a memory that sticks out for today. All in all, it’s been a memorable 22<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary. Being at the beach in a “honeymoon” suite listening to the surf crash against the rocks is so romantic on your anniversary, especially when your suite mates are Zach Flener, Pete Cates, and Peter Cates. Goodnight!

Saturday, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013

284 Miles Traveled

\$307 Dollars Spent on Borders (Mexico to Guatemala & Guatemala to El Salvador)

13 Hours on the Road (several of these hours were spent hanging out at the Guatemala border and El Salvador border)



Sunday, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013

5:30 A.M. Wake up Call

6:00 A.M. Eating breakfast at the restaurant (Steve is stepping up his game)

6:25 A.M. Departure from Roca Sunsal Hotel

The rain is coming down...HARD. The beach is beautiful in the light of day, but very wet. Just finished an awesome breakfast of fried plantains, frijoles, eggs, rolls, cheese, and juice. It beats the Kellogg's cereal bars we've been munching on for 3 days for breakfast.

10:25 A.M.

Four hours later, we have traveled across El Salvador & are now at the Honduran border. Here comes the hurry up and wait technique. Pete Cates and I rode together this morning & traded our life stories for four straight hours. I drove first and talked nonstop while he listened and monitored the radio. My story, which is way too long for this journal, had some twists and turns like the roads we were traveling on, but it definitely had a happy ending. My telling ended at the gas station and we switched drivers so Pete could launch his story. While his story was shortened by our arrival at the border, to be continued later, I know his has a happy ending as well. For what it's worth, our stories had several commonalities which might be worth sharing:

1. Childhoods impact futures (worth remembering when raising our kids).
2. Jesus is actively involved in our lives if we simply allow him to be.
3. Trying to be in the world and of the world is exhausting.  
Matthew 6:24 says "No man can serve two masters."
4. This life will have many ups and many downs.
5. Our stories will have happy ending if Jesus is the Star (of David).

Order of Travel and Vehicle Occupants (6/30/13)

1. UGA – Daniel driving with Jonathan, Peter and Zach (asleep) riding along.
2. Chameleon – Mark driving with Sam and Don riding along.
3. Marshmallow – Steve driving with Randy and Frank riding along.
4. Wildcat (AKA Snowman) with Patrick driving and Jeanine riding shotgun.
5. Black Mamba – Mike driving with Ben and Hayden riding along.
6. Tortuga – Pete and Bart switching off drivers and stories.
7. Beamer – Free Willy driving and PD riding shotgun.

We arrived at the Honduras border at 11:00 A.M. We'll get back together later....lots of copies to be made in the meantime.

2:45 P.M.

It's been a fun afternoon 100 yards across the border in Honduras waiting for paperwork, but I'm ready to roll. We just keep WAITING. Supposedly, the paperwork is being "worked out". I hope someone is "greasing the skids" effectively. Who really knows all the connections between the officials on both sides of the borders along with the guides who have promised to help us in return for monetary

providence. I appreciate but don't envy Steve's role as negotiator, because you really have to go by feel and nuance which God seems to have provided him with in spades. Basically, without Steve, this trip doesn't happen. Randy (AKA Rico Suave – because he's so smooth) has provided a huge role as assistant coach. He usually finds his way to the back of the caravan where he stays connected on the radio and keeps Steve from going into hyperdrive with calm guidance and assurance. This afternoon, we've played football, basketball, street bowling, and soccer in the streets at the Honduran border, all the while dodging taxis, buses, and speeding cars. We made up a street bowling challenge in which I offered a monetary reward for any kid who could bounce/roll a basketball from a railing 40 yards away across the street and knock down five pins (empty plastic drink bottles). The contest lasted approximately 45 minutes before the littlest guy of the bunch (Samuel) who had actually been the pinsetter was encouraged to come over and try. On his first attempt, he didn't even get the ball there. But on try #2, magic occurred. The wind was right, the bounce was right and when it caromed off the wall behind the pins and came back, the ball landed smack in the middle of the pins, knocking down seven or so. We celebrated with Samuel on our shoulders like we had just won the World Cup. He took his quarter and I hope he took away a lifetime memory. On the soccer pitch that is the blacktop border lanes, Zach managed to kick a soccer ball in the air, off a small red taxi, back to him on the rebound, in the air again (higher this time) where it eventually came down on top of another red taxi. The crowd was in awe at this supposed example of superior ball control, but Zach says it was absolute coincidence. What the crowd doesn't know won't hurt 'em, right? We've met kids named Zach (not kidding), Steve (you can't make this stuff up), and Samuel (lengthy for Sam), along with countless others. We've shared our lunches of PBJ and turkey sandwiches (a poor substitute for Randy's daughter's wedding ham) in the heat of the street under a wooden shed. Daniel, Jonathan, and Peter actually tried out a chicken platter from Pollolandia (Como a mi me gusta!). It has stayed down in their stomachs so far so I think we are safe for the time being. Hoping to be rolling by 3, but our hopes may turn into another dream deferred.

3:07 P.M.

On the road! Steve got fleeced....a LOT. 60's per car for this fee and 50's per car for another "fee" and some other fees (see daily detail), but he remembered his last trip into Honduras three years ago when he didn't process the "right" papers and got pulled over forty miles into the country and forced to go back to the border for "repapering" so this time he just decided to pay the MAN!

5:30 P.M.

After racing across Honduras (90 miles across the country), missing 437 potholes and hitting 132, we arrive at the Nicaraguan border. Steve hires one guy, which quickly turns into four guys, and the paper chase begins in earnest. Copies, copies, and more copies. Every transition person at every border has to make "special" copies, all the better to charge you with, my little pretties☺ (Wizard of Oz reference for those who are wondering). We could have save lots of time and money if we had a set of golden copies that would work at each border, but that would be way to

efficient and unchallenging. Lots of kids needing help at the border. Hard to know where to start and impossible to know where to stop if you begin helping one with food, drink, or money. So we just say lots of no's, which is necessary but difficult nonetheless. Waiting for entrance into Nicaragua. We'll keep you posted.

10:00 P.M.

Rolled into the Best Western Leon. Pete Cates drove an hour and a half with no lights on the dash and no headlights but only the time clock showing him that the Lord was in control of this trip. We actually pulled over at a vehicle checkpoint and Pete had enough juice in the battery to turn on his headlights and get through the checkpoint. They clicked off soon after than but we are here and God is good. No dinner provided but the rice & beans at the border was quite sufficient. We bought several plates from a concession-type stand set up just outside the doors of one of the countless offices we had to visit to get paperwork completed. Hmm, I wonder if the people selling food know that sometimes people will have long & hungry waits at that office?

Hotel registration, shower, a Longmire episode on the DVD player, and blessed sleep.

As I reflect on today before hitting the sack, a couple of things stand out. One, the opportunity to provide Christian hospitality that Steve displayed on Saturday when he invited Patrick and Jeanine was special and I don't think it was coincidence tonight when we would have been absolutely stuck at the Nicaraguan border without their jumper cables. Yes, we had six vehicles without them and none of the occupants brought jumper cables. Apparently, Steve texted me with instructions to bring some, but I missed the memo. Anyway, the point is that Steve's blessing was returned within 24 hours in a big way. Secondly, time spent with kids at the Honduran border was time well spent. Zach, Steve, and Samuel (the Hondurans and the Americans) created some memories for a lifetime. At the border last night in Nicaragua, we had a meaningful and lengthy conversation with Julio. He lives at the border, is eighteen years old, speaks very passable English (much better than my Spanish), has four sisters including Rapines who works at the aforementioned concession stand, and professes to be a Christian. We gave him a Bible (Neuvo Testamento) and shared a meal of rice & beans. He didn't ask for anything but seemed to enjoy the conversation more than any material blessings we might provide. I know God brought this intersection of people about through his timing, which is always Providential. Goodnight☺

Sunday, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013

344 Miles Traveled

\$900 Dollars Spent on Borders (\$700 at the El Salvador/Honduras border & \$200 at the Honduras/Nicaragua border)

15 Hours and 30 minutes on the Road

Monday, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

6:00 A.M. Wake up Call

6:30 A.M. Breakfast and devotional at Best Western Hotel in Leon

7:00 A.M. Ear-piercing alarm designed to wake up the city

7:15 A.M. On the road again!

June 2013 has come to a close. It's been a very busy month for me personally but the ending has been fantastic. Bring on July and all the adventures that await!

Allright, back to the action.....

We are rolling out of Leon with the caravan back down to six vehicles today as Patrick and Jeanine have decided to stay in Nicaragua for a few days. While their were known as the Wildcat, I prefer Snowman (Big, White, materializes in a special situation and then disappears a couple of days later). Snowman, we enjoyed you. On the Bulldog update channel, a new battery was purchased and installed (Glad they have 24 hour auto parts stores in Leon) and it is running right as rain, for now.

We are only five minutes into our travels this morning when the unthinkable happens. Actually, with all the people on and in the roads and all the bicycles we've encountered on this trip, it is actually fairly thinkable, but anyway, as we moseyed through one of the endless tight intersections in this city, a guy and his gal on a one-seater bike totally rammed us right in the side of the Tortuga. Bicycle, as in motorbike, thankfully not moped or motorcycle or it would have spelled trouble for us. As it was, seeing them come right at us in what seemed like slow motion and watching how big the guys eyes got and how many times he tried to apply his bike brake (there was no bike brake - it's like PD hitting the floor brake on the passenger side when I am driving the Tortuga too fast - it doesn't work) was totally surreal. Finally, the inevitable collision occurred right in the side of the back passenger's door and the guy failed in his attempt to grip the window frame (it was open) of the Tortuga before going down to the pavement with his gal. We pulled to a stop as we moved through the intersection and immediately, a female Nicaraguan cop (where did she come from so fast? Was this staged☺?) appeared out of nowhere and was at PD's driver's window. We don't know what she was saying, but C-Note (a \$100 bill for those of you who don't know) Steve was there at the intersection just as quickly negotiating an out-of-court settlement with the bicycle riders. We had the right of way but we weren't about to get in an argument with the referee on their home court. Some money was procured for a new cell phone which was damaged in the collision, then Steve placed the guy's shoulder bag back on his shoulder, said "Adios, Amigo", and then we were wheels up flying out of town before anyone changed their minds and decided further questions or investigations were needed. PD remained unflappable throughout the incident, BTW. Not uncaring, just unflappable. Approximately five minutes later, his first comment following "Bicycle-Gate" was simply, "Man, that breakfast was good!"

Get ready for Steve's incessant "Come on, it's clear, snuggle up, stick together, nothing around this curve, you can make it" chatter for the next two hours over the walkie-talkie.

8:30 A.M.

Traveling down the Pan-Am Highway which actually became a semi-dirt road for about 30 km. We stopped and ask a guy on a horse for directions (I kid you not). Steve said local sources have the best information. We were going so slow at times that we issued a \$5 challenge for any youngster (non-driving age) to get out and run beside the cars for 5 minutes, but no one wanted to invest the sweat equity it would take for the payoff. Anyway, we came out of the dirt road, rolled for a while, and finally stopped for gas. I spent 30 Cordoba on a candy bar and even though I know it's only a dollar and a half in American money, it's still hard to drop a \$20 and a \$10 for a Hershey bar. Oh, well, you only travel through Nicaragua every once in a while, so we should probably splurge. Anyone want a Coca-Cola for \$40 Cordoba?

11:00 A.M.

Left gas station and rolled through some towns, a legit cattle drive (at least 100 beasts of burden) , passed two legit volcano islands off to the west, saw at least 50 huge windmills and arrived at the border at 11:30 A.M. I vow to quit drinking Steve's Kool-Aid when he says "Oh yeah, we'll be at the border in two hours" (it turned out to be four) or when he says "If we get enough of an early start in the morning, we'll be at the hotel before 7 P.M. eating dinner" (ain't happening).

12:30 P.M.

Now we are waiting in the Costa Rican passport line to ride a really exciting roller coaster (at least that's what the line feels like). No "Fast Pass" from Steve on this one (you'd think with his Costa Rican connections that we would be in like Flynn)...The legend of C-note Steve took a hit at this border. We'll get back to you later when we are on the road to the beach. Our wives, daughters, and friends (the 11 females joining us for the rest of the trip) are apparently either already at the beach or very close. They drove 5 hours to get there this morning and we drove 5 days through 6 countries and they get to the beach first. Seems fair, right? But before we near the beach, let me backtrack (we've done some of that on this trip along with some U-turns and some alternate routes) to the border and tell you how I almost didn't make it. Back at the hot sweaty border, we waited for what seemed like a long time in the passport line to get em stamped. Following that came the car paperwork. One window got us a completed form, That form sent us to another window where we got copies.....SURPRISE, SURPRISE! Leaving that window, we went to another small building and began to fill out car inspection forms (more on that later). Once those forms were completed, we went to another window and got there just in time to get in line in front of a groupo (gango) of bikers (the motorcycle kind with leather jackets and Harleys - not the run into your car bicycle kind). Had they asked to go first, I'm not sure what Stone Cold Steve would have said, but I'm glad we didn't have to find out. All went well for the first two drivers in line, but when I got to the front of the line, it did not go so well to say the least. First of all, I came from the side rather than directly behind the person in front of me who was finishing up and apparently that is a Costa Rican No-No. Then, since I was listed as the secondary driver on another form, my man at the window indicated in no uncertain terms (even I could understand his Spanish body language) that I could

not be the primary driver on my car. He then shooed me away from the window and proceeded to start on Daniel's paperwork. While I began to contemplate what to do at the border for fun in the next 7 days, Steve sprang into action. While rebuffed initially, he regrouped and got Mike who had me listed as the secondary driver to go back to the window, renounce me as his secondary driver (who would dare try such a thing?). Eventually, after standing directly behind Daniel in line in military formation, I was allowed to move forward literally and figuratively. I in turn renounced Pete as my secondary driver to save him the embarrassment and the tongue-lashing and to save the guy at the window from a coronary.

3:47 P.M.

We are pulling into Costa Rica! No more car paperwork at a border forever unless I choose to subject myself to the journey again. I'm pretty sure I would if Avery (my youngest son who will be 14 in four years the next time Steve considers this Olympic event) wants to make the journey but now is not a good time to ask me ☺. Three Tootsie Roll Pops later (I was really sleepy and cigarettes were not an option), we took a final right and now I see a sign that reads Playa Tamarindo – 37km. It's a beautiful road sign if there ever was one.

5:51 P.M.

One more time, I made an ETA that was naively optimistic, only to have it shattered, or in this case, slightly cracked because we have almost made it to the beach. According to my calculations, we would have made it at Steve Andretti's breakneck pace, but alas the Bulldog (UGA VI) couldn't bear the strain anymore. I remember a time when Pete Cates made fun of my Tortuga and I would say "What goes around comes around", but I won't say that here (did I just say that?). Anyway, Pete guided the Bulldog mercifully into a roadside store, where tomorrow, Free Willy will no doubt build an alternator from scratch and replace the old alternator using only his teeth for tools ☺. Pete, Peter, and Hayden (Bulldog occupants) piled themselves and their luggage into the other cars and we hit the road again, only 13 km from our beachfront destination.

6:01 P.M.

So much for my ETA, but at this point, I can smell the Pacific Ocean as we near the end of what seems like the Cannonball Run (70's movie reference for the youngsters who have no idea what I am talking about). At around 6:20 P.M., we hear a cheer from the sidewalk to our right (we are in the open air Tortuga and we hear everything) and I look out the window to see my lovely wife along with the other wives and the Playa Tamarindo staff there to greet us. WE MADE IT!....

7:30 P.M.

Hotel registration and a real shower later, cars mercifully parked away for the next 36 hours, our group of 28 heads across the street to the GALLO FINO restaurant for a Costa Rican celebration dinner. Introductions were made, live music was played (where do these guys with instruments come from – it's like the Nicaraguan cop....they just appear), and a deliciously large amount of food was consumed. For

the record, here's some of the fare: Cassava, rice & beans, ceviche, rice & beans, guacamole, rice & beans, fish (snapper and sea bass), rice & beans, a hamburger for Frank Jones (missing the Music City grub), and you guessed it, rice & beans.

9:23 P.M.

LIGHTS OUT! Literally. Candee & I set out to watch a movie on our laptop in bed and 1 minute and 48 seconds into the movie (I checked when I paused it), we were awakened when the laptop slid off the pillow and woke us up. That was a sign that it was time for a good night's sleep.

Monday, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

248 Miles Traveled

\$282 Dollars Spent on Borders and the \$75 bicycle customer satisfaction fee (Leon)

11 Hours and 5 minutes on the Road

## EPILOGUE

Tuesday, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013

5:58 A.M. Wake up (no wake up call, just waking up and realizing we don't have to get in a vehicle and drive anywhere today☺).

8:00 A.M. Breakfast buffet with no rush to get in a car. GLORIUS.

11:30 A.M.

The saying "What a Difference a DAY makes" has never been more apropos than today. Except, of course, for the day we receive our salvation. That day leads to the greatest difference of all in our lives. But for an earthly example of the phrase, today is it for me. 24 hours ago, I was sweating it out (literally and figuratively) at the Nicaraguan/Costa Rica border, and now, I am sitting on a lawn chair at the beach watching the waves crash against the shore. I woke up in bed with my lovely wife, watched the next hour of the movie we started the night before, and then the breakfast buffet and the beach came a callin'. At 8:00 A.M. we were eating a wonderful breakfast and enjoying the ocean breeze and best of all, the Tortuga, the Chameleon, the Black Mamba, the Beamer, the Marshmallow, and the Bulldog (a little further away than the rest) were out of sight and out of mind. No Mexican tollbooths, no border crossings, no guards with big guns, no runny PBJs, no smelly dirty men (although my dirty clothes in my suitcase are still generating a powerful odor), no bicycles kamikaze-ing at me, no negotiations from Steve, and no walkie-talkie chatter. Just the ocean, family and friends, and a day of total relaxation, including but not limited to picture-taking, ocean swimming, pool lounging, lawnchair sitting, Spike-ball playing, massage getting, journal writing, book reading, movie watching, souvenir shopping, and food devouring. As normal, the agenda is packed so I'll get back to you later. We need a break from each other, my friend.

Things to consider:

Father -Son togetherness and growth

Closeness like between us and our father