

THE SOUTHWEST  
DROUGHT PROJECT  
**6.29.2013 - 7.15.2013**





**THE SOUTHWEST DROUGHT PROJECT**

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**June 29, 2013 - July 15, 2013**

# DAY ONE/ PROLOGUE: **6.29.2013**

~~The plan here is simple: go to some of the most drought ridden locations in the American southwest, and document the carnage to attempt to bring about reason, awareness, and change. Twenty-seven sites in fourteen days.~~

**Greetings from the road! Tonight is our first update of the *Southwest Drought Project*, coming to you from Copper Break State Park, in who-knows-where west Texas. It was an unbelievable hassle in the prep, but we made it. One used and quite shoddy minivan, a lot of help from the boys at Maso's Texaco in west Dallas, and an insane plan from a young photographer brought me back out on the road once more. The plan here is simple: go to some of the most drought ridden locations in the American southwest, and document the carnage to attempt to bring about reason, awareness, and change. Twenty-seven sites in fourteen days.**

**Day one was not so far from home, a state park and two other lakes in the Wichita Falls area. The first of these was Lake Bridgeport. The amount of consumption and waste from neighbouring towns brought the water levels down over eighteen feet! Docks are resting in the sand and grass has started cropping up in the center of this once majestic spectacle. The boat ramp lays abandoned some one hundred feet from the water's edge. The new shorelines are so hardened and dried that the day trippers and vacationers park their sedans and family wagons within a yard of the water's edge. In countless places, once deep underwater, there is only stagnant, marshy swampland.**

**After seeing just how bad Lake Bridgeport had become, we felt we had geared ourselves well enough for what was to come. We could not have been more mistaken. Lake Arrowhead State Park should have been declared a disaster area. The brown, brackish water was bathtub hot, and the bloated, dead carcasses of over fifty fish border the shoreline. The only thing to keep them company is scores upon swarming scores of scavenging insects. There is a lack of color there. All is red, brown, and scorched. To think that men made this lake, stocked it, then had no options but to watch it die, is unconscionable. The last stop of our trek today was Lake Kickapoo. Funny name, serious issues. The place was seemingly entirely void of human interest. The dock and "pier" were resting in the sand, even partially buried by such a long duration of not being relevant. So now we bunk down for the night at Copper Breaks atop the van whilst a ridiculous number of raccoons party below us. Tonight, we showered with scorpions.**







# DAY TWO

## 6.30.2013

~~We saw several rabbits, howled back at coyotes on the ridge opposite, and even startled a couple of deer while following game trails down in the lakebed.~~

**Today was a real eye-opener as to the extent and duration of Texas drought conditions. In the town of Lockley they have begun shipping water in by the truckload. In Plainview we stopped to get a bite of lunch and pick up some incidental gear. The town is so depleted of fresh water! The surrounding ranches have slowed their output so drastically that the Cargill meat processing plant had to shut down. Ten percent of the town lost their jobs, and yard sales and the giving up of possessions are set up all along the main drag. The monolith of a plant sits derelict in the hot sun of west Texas summer, and I sincerely wish we could capture the fantastic and downright asphyxiating reek emanating from the place by either camera film or felt-tip pen!**

**All this was found out on our way to the main attraction of the day: the Lake Meredith National Recreation Area. This, once a huge lake, can now only justifiably be called the most beautiful tragedy I have ever seen. The lake itself has become no more than a very large pond, but it has left in its place an absolutely breathtaking canyon. The cracked and broken and long since forgotten boat ramp ends **THREE MILES** from the nearest edge of water, and for a brief period I imagine it was lush and green all around, and a full and healthy lake would only have made it more captivating. Now, while still having an abundance of fresh foliage and greenery, there is also an overwhelming majority of tumbleweed and scrub brush cropping and dominating what was once the deep lake floor. A few small and scattered fires have killed many of the small trees that have grown in. Walking across one of the canyon's meadows, we were shocked to come across a buoy, still anchored to the ground. Climbing up the canyon walls, we found shell fragments at every step of the way, even up to the crests of the ridges. Wildlife, thankfully, has still found many means to survive. We saw several rabbits, howled back at coyotes on the ridge opposite, and even startled a couple of deer while following game trails down in the lake bed. Really and truly, a most tragic and beautiful landscape, and it really must be seen in person to be believed. *(Also, if you do make the climb to the crest of the canyon walls, do give out a hearty yodel.)***



# DAY THREE

## 7.1.2013

Day number three began with a furious and still incoherent slapping and scratching of mosquito and spider bites. But when I finally extracted myself from my sleeping bag and opened my eyes, I lost myself. Andrew had driven us over state lines while I slept, and I awoke to a cool breeze my eyes were reflecting the panorama of my favorite divine design, the Rocky Mountains. We enter Alamogordo, New Mexico by way of the Lincoln National Forest, and stumble upon the first shop we see for provisions. By sheer happenstance, the man working the shop is a lifetime resident of the town, knowledgeable of its affairs, and a really gifted storyteller. He told us of how the town was formed, about a prehistoric underground lake that supplies it with all the water Alamogordo needs, and how the town recycles its entire water system. It was well and refreshing to see the adaptive and resilient nature of the people in this community, and I hope that their example can serve as an inspiration to other towns in the region.

Our main stop today was the Elephant Butte Reservoir, also known as Elephant Butte Lake State Park. As we enter the town of Elephant Butte, a dilapidated sign reads: “New Mexico’s Diamond in the Desert.” Even with the absolute ravaging of drought area-wide, we can still see this is true. We first thought it was a ghost town. Everything was extremely sun-bleached, and the cars were all entirely stripped of clear-coat, and the window tint was all so dark that in Texas it would have been illegal. Scenes from “The Book of Eli” came to mind. We saw neither cars driving on the road, nor pedestrians. Truly, these were people who knew how to survive the desert. We shot some footage around town for a spell, then descended the dunes for a look at the lake. Dark brown hills and buttes surrounded the stark white basin, sandy and rocky, as white and bleached out as the cars and single wide trailers above. Unlike the previous lakes we had encountered, the organization in charge here had really tried very hard to adapt to such an unbelievable loss of water.

While this dried and sad lake bed had no flora or fauna to speak of, that's not something that can be put on the shoulders of a parks and recreation department. They did some serious work over the first drought years. While there is a gap between their boat ramp and the water, you can tell they have extended it down multiple times over the ever-lengthening expanse of sand. Originally it looked to be around 75 yards long, now it looks to be over three hundred. They moved the entire marina down their shoreline so as still to be useful. The parks department also has laid out a newer parking lot closer down, although that too is now too far displaced to be really relevant. Tire tracks run haphazardly along, criss-crossing one another all across the new beach and between two and three dozen recreational vehicles have set up semi-permanent residence right at the edge of the water.

As we were finishing up today's work, there came upon us a massive rush of clouds from over the long ridge line, and fifteen minutes the area got absolutely hammered by tropical storm force rain and winds. We eagerly chased the instantly formed flash flood streams down the hills, screaming like banshees and laughing, but much to our dismay, the thirsty surrounding earth drank it all down long before it ever came close to the lake. Still, I think the town's population, as well as Andrew and myself, will gladly take any sign of rain in this area as a good omen and a good start.

~~Day number three began with a furious and still incoherent slapping and scratching of mosquito and spider bites.~~







# DAY FOUR

## 7.2.2013

~~Exploring and wallowing around the warm shallow streams took us back to boyhood, nostalgia, and good feelings of seeking adventure wading through the creeks back home.~~

**Tonight I write you from a rest area on the southern outskirts of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The bulk of today was spent in a massive bit of housecleaning, editing, uploading, writing, and an enthralling drive through a good chunk of desert. Turns out shooting photos and jotting down notes all day amounts to a whole lot of work to be gone through. To be positive, however, we had a record on gas conservation today, four hundred and forty point eight miles on the tank for a whopping twenty nine point seven miles per gallon! Not bad for a clap-trap nineties minivan!**

**As we made it into the beautiful village of Los Lunas, NM, we did our only shoot of the day, an in-depth exploration of the Rio Grande. It did not, unfortunately, live up to its namesake. The picnic areas and surrounding parks with access were closed, so we had to post the van in the lot of a nearby convenience store and bushwhack our way to the riverbed. Much to our own chagrin, we immediately found the root of this river's misfortune before we even got to it. Bordering the river on both sides were full flowing irrigation channels, litter and mosquito breeding puddles skewed across the riverbed instead. Immediately upon our entry, we saw signs that last night's blitz storm had flash flooded the main drag, unfortunately not sticking around. We saw scenes such as a well-graffitied bridge with no more than a few sandy trickles running through and a stoner's sofa for company. Already the mosquitoes were back in force, remaking their breeding grounds and sadly doing a great job of it. Exploring and wallowing around the warm shallow streams took us back to boyhood, nostalgia, and good feelings of seeking adventure wading through the creeks back home. But reality came back when we saw true sadness. The increased depth and current from the night before had brought down much larger fish than the shallow waters and drained ecosystem could support, and we found carp at least fourteen inches long and five inches tall in barely a trickle of water that couldn't have been more than two inches high! How they had made it so far, I can only imagine. Andrew carefully worked them back to a deeper hollow near the bank. I hope they make it. We saw many other fish in similar situations, and for the time they'll be alright, but I know they will be in my mind for a good long time to come, resilient fish. And on a side note, further down river the irrigation canals and a few dams dump back into the Rio Grande, and she flows proudly once more.**







# DAY FIVE

## 7.3.2013

**We pressed north through the desert today, and received multiple tidings of goodwill and fantastic works of good networking. Before we left the Santa Fe rest stop to continue on, we stopped in the visitor's center and found the staff to be family-style friendly, giving us maps, advice, and all the free coffee we could possibly slog down (impossibly better than the instant stuff I'd been forcing myself to consume thus far). Armed with the new knowledge they had bestowed upon us, not to mention over-revving like nobody's business from the caffeine, we set off at a brisk pace down Route 550, looking to get some good photographs of the recently quenched fire in the Jemez (pronounced HAY-mezz, they were very adamant about that) Mountains.**

**We stopped at town hall in the small village of San Ysidro to inquire about drought conditions and see what we could shoot or write about. The one person in the whole building was a Mrs. Christina Lucero, and upon bonding over our apparently equal appreciation of the great Luther Vandross, she allowed as to the fact that the town was truly suffering, and that a photo snapped in any direction would illustrate such. She told me, as had the ranger in the visitor's center earlier, that all of the entrances into every major forest in the Santa Fe area had been barring their gates due to such extreme fire hazards. Nonetheless we had to press on. Thankfully these kinds of shots don't come around too terribly often. We stopped at a forest administration building halfway along the mountain route and a kindly elderly woman gave up the scoop of the day. She informed me, down to a few yards, exactly where to go that was still accessible to get decent work done at surveying the fire damage. She also gave me all kinds of info on how this particular fire had started, and how others had occurred in the area and how we could capture the residual damage from fires even two years past. With this in mind, we set out**

to find some fires. True to her words, we found the burned sites exactly where she said they would be. The mountains in the distance looked like toothpicks stuck into an anthill, slender aspens thoroughly torched to the barest of spines. While prevented from passage into the heart of the terror, we were able to get into the outer rim fairly well, and I must say the smell of torched and blackened pine is beauty in pain. From the base of the crater in Valles Caldera we had full scope of the sad panorama of what befell the Jemez Mountains.

In the interest of inspiring hope however, we did find beautiful proactivity in Santa Fe. Two Mile Reservoir was an absolute train wreck from the seventies through the eighties, and in 1994 they shut her down. Stopping in and walking the trails today we found that it had become a flourishing ecological preserve, thanks to the wonderful conservationists at Audubon. Beaver happily splash, there are capivaras, and birds and plant life abound also. In addition, we received a great commendation today from “Fix the Future.” And thanks to them, and all the people who are following and supporting us on this, and those who helped us today.

~~The mountains in the distance looked like toothpicks stuck into an anthill, slender aspens thoroughly torched to the barest of spines~~





# DAY SIX

# 7.4.2013

~~Homes burned to the foundations, forests reduced to ash, animal bones visible in the black rubble, and these good people still held to hope and faith.~~



**To begin, happy two hundred and thirty seventh birthday to this beautiful nation of ours! You get a great new appreciation of the American landscape when you spend so much time driving through it and taking it in! We woke up on the side of interstate 25 and got our bearings, then rolled north through Raton, NM to get to our most dramatic place to see: The great state of Colorado, namely to see what had happened in Colorado Springs.**

**Nothing in the world can gear you to the absolute devastation of a wildfire, even more so if this wildfire is the worst in the state's history. Rolling through the town of Colorado Springs we saw signs everywhere; giving thanks to first responders, firefighters, military aid, and God. Homes burned to the foundations, forests reduced to ash, animal bones visible in the black rubble, and these good people still held to hope and faith. This, above all, was probably one of the most moving experiences of my life. The trees not completely incinerated still were robbed of all their limbs, and we walked in a dead silent, gray field of black spires. I wish we had tomorrow's technologies, a way to capture just the right odor of singed stucco and masonry, burned pine, and melted rubber. I wish I could transcribe wind to ink, how when the wind blew for the first time in my life I heard no leaves or grass rustling, nor the chirp of birds, or the minor humming of restless insects; just an empty whoosh through a completely destroyed place. I feel ashamed to admit I cannot convey the kind of heartbreak that must have occurred. Families banded and left together, abandoning their homes and almost all their possessions. Even cars and quite valuable farming equipment was left behind to burn, and the fire greedily consumed this just the same as the pine and aspens.**

**The carcasses of torched automobiles lined the roadside, and here and there in the distance smoke still lingered. No ending comes without a new beginning, however, and insurance companies and debris removal crews have already sprung into action. Tonight the town had a fireworks show, however subdued, and the general citizenry seemed to be in decent spirits. This quiet mountain town will recover, as will the lost acres of wilderness, with good time, effort, and hope.**





# DAY SEVEN

## 7.6.2013

~~A large storm rode up quickly from the western horizon, but I get the impression that a short blasting storm, such as it was, would only serve to do as much harm as good.~~

**Long time, no post. Our bad there. We spent a much needed and very unproductive day off driving up to Fort Collins. Along the way we took the opportunity to enjoy what the mountains had to offer, taking in a great hike through a forest still recovering from a fire a few years back, having a very intense and painful pine cone fight, and sifting a river for gold. That night we bunked down in a real and bona fide house, and what a lovely house it was! We owe the Harris family huge for the hospitality. We awoke refreshed and ready to dig back in.**

**With a good breakfast under our belts we headed south for Baca County, Colorado, where the people and the livestock are enduring what some have touted as a “Second Dust Bowl.” Driving along the dirt county roads through farms and the Comanche National Grasslands, we saw many a dust devil and kicked up so much dust and silt and such along our back trail that when we stopped to shoot we had to wait a good minute just to exit the van, even with unnaturally strong winds. A large storm rode up quickly from the western horizon, but I get the impression that a short blasting storm, such as it was, would only serve to do as much harm as good. With the grasses died and dried out as they were, we were encountering more arid, desert plant life, and an abnormal amount of tumbleweeds. Without its previously sound root structure, I don’t know what’s to keep all that dried and parched earth of the topsoil in place when such storms keep blasting it. But the region still has its farmers and ranchers, trying to make a go of it, so it must still be maintaining on some level. Brave folks though. The area looks bare and primed for a tornado or major dust storm.**





# DAY EIGHT

## 7.7.2013

~~We climbed the rocky, haggard cliffs of what used to be but a tiny island in a massive lake, and it really brought out how much water had been there, and how much had been lost.~~





**Day number eight found its way back to us back in the canyon formerly known as Lake Meredith once again. Such an expansive loss of water, followed by the recovery of so much greenery and grassland was just too beautiful to pass on a second visit. We got stuck knee deep in muddy hollows and shallow quicksand, but pulled through and made it into the lake itself. The most striking feature here was the insurmountable decades of forgotten trash and beer cans. The cans ranged from this summer's American flag Budweiser cans clear back to the late seventies/ early eighties thick, pull tab jobs, some of them actually pretty close to being in collector condition, preserved by the mud. We climbed the rocky, haggard cliffs of what used to be but a tiny island in a massive lake, and it really brought out how much water had been there, and how much had been lost. With sunburns, insect bites, and a feeling we were back on track for the project, we headed north once more, this time with Wichita, Kansas in mind, and some outlying reservoirs. Along the way, we met with an old coworker of mine from Dallas. He had hung his own shingle, and opened the Bella Roma Italian Restaurant in Lawton, Oklahoma. Like a proper Albanian host, he loaded us down with food and drink. With full stomachs, aloe on our shoulder, and well-earned drowsiness coming on, we pressed forward towards Kansas.**



# DAY NINE

## 7.8.2013

**We woke up sweating, and it only got hotter from there. Waking up in North Central Oklahoma, we quickly made tracks up Interstate 35 to Wichita, Kansas. We drove laps around town, attempting to get good footage of the reported ten thousand dead or dying trees in the greater metro area. It seems not even the bigger cities are immune to the devastating might of drought. Over ice cream cones in the air conditioning, we plotted our next move. We had two reservoirs in the area to document, and we decided first to go to the Cheney Lake Reservoir, just outside city limits, about forty five minutes down the road. It was so scenic and beautiful that at first we couldn't believe it was in any form of peril, but then we rounded the curve and saw that this place too was drying up. The marina slips closest to the shore resembled private gardens, with variant beautiful greens and deep flowering color. The floating dock shop, providing gas and beer as well as bait and information, lay abandoned and forgotten in the sand.**

**While we were exploring a dried up swimming area, we met a lovely elderly woman who lived on the lake by the name of Jan Ewen. Mrs. Ewen made this dried up paradise even more unbelievable, telling us where to go for the shots we needed and such. She also told us of a major flood that had risen the lake above the level of the road, and it had only happened three years before, in 2010! I can't believe that the level of depletion could be so heavy in so short a time! Enjoying the coming sunset, we pressed on towards the Marion Lake Reservoir. As we were about to enter a site to bunk down for the evening, we saw a massive plume of smoke rising into the sky. So of course we slapped spurs to the sides of the old van and rocketed off down gravel backroads to the scene. As we drove on to about a quarter of a mile from the smoke, it all suddenly disappeared.**

**We saw an older gent leaned up on his pickup truck, and a young man on a four wheeled ATV. We inquired as to what was burning, and they enlightened us to an unfamiliar concept, which they called burning out the wheat stubble. Bonding with the old man in the twilight, he told us of how he ran his farm and told us straight up and out that he reckoned the Yankees were just about the worst bunch in baseball, and that the Rangers had great potential. He then said we could stand alongside and that Andrew could shoot the process and the flames to follow. As Andrew busied himself with the photography and the equipment, I began to interview the wheat farmer. He said that the point in burning the stubble was to make the ground more easily tillable, and that the ashes did a great job of refreshing the soil.**

**Also, to prevent an uncontrollable blaze in the midst of a drought, there was a good deal of science and analysis involved. There is a certain amount of pre plowing and back-burning to prevent the spread, as well as checking for proper wind speed and clearing it with the fire department. It certainly was a grand spectacle! A fast moving wall of winding fire, heavy smoke, and a hell-for-leather, devil-may-care young man on an ATV sporting a genuine propane flamethrower! We thanked them for their time and information and made our way to camp, now quite chilled after the flash-fire searing. All in all, a great and very productive day.**

~~The marina slips closest to the shore resembled private gardens, with variant beautiful greens and deep flowering color.~~











# DAY TEN

# 7.9.2013

~~We got down to the water and saw strangely colored algae, looking more like Technicolor mold upon the surface.~~

Today we woke up to a nice cool breeze on top of the car, and a magnificent view of Lake Marion Reservoir, Kansas. Driving down one of the lakeside roads, we reached a point where the bridge was out. What else could we do but explore in that situation? As we hiked closer to the water, we both began to detect an unsettling reek, sickly-sweet and thick. We got down to the water and saw strangely colored algae, looking more like Technicolor mold upon the surface. A good sized and surely regal Monarch butterfly had become stuck in the strange, moldy, algae trap, and Andrew saved it with a bit of twig. Upon leaving the area, we saw posted warnings at most entrances that all of the beaches were closed due to poisonous or harmful algae developing. I guess we slipped through the cracks there somewhere.

This lake also, like Cheney, is being overrun by the Zebra mussel. With information obtained by yesterday's Jan Ewen, we went south to Guthrie, Oklahoma, and got some guidance towards drought sites in the area from her son, Ken. We settled on going down and shooting the Cimarron River in South Central Oklahoma. The first thing we took note of were the wide expanses of sand, and shallow, narrow, warm waters. Clean and warm, but completely devoid of fish. There were one or two families playing in the sand, and a pretty good smattering of locally produced graffiti. The surrounding greenery was teeming with wildlife, and it seems as though the ecosystem is at least attempting to balance what remains in the area.





# DAY ELEVEN

## 7.11.2013

~~One family was at the water's edge, the small children climbing the bridge's supports to swing from a rope and drop into the two foot deep hollow in the shade.~~

**Yesterday we took another day off. This sort of living can wear you down. We've been averaging four hundred miles per day, literally making a home and living within the confines of the un-air-conditioned minivan, venturing away from it only to capture photographs of the barren and ruined landscapes and to buy gasoline. The sites, states, roads, and faces all become distorted and run together like a child's inexperienced watercolor painting. You start yearning for a familiar location or person, or for nothing but a temporary anchor to save you your psyche for a brief bit. Burdened by such as we were, steered our internally combusting land travel vessel towards Paris, Texas, and the house of his grandmother. While the person and location were unfamiliar to me, I can assure you that even that form of connection worked wonders. After Mrs. Woodfin properly spoiled and fed us both, we took a short trek up to the northern border of our home state, the Red River.**

**Our approach to the river was quite ominous. A desolate, one-lane country road. While there was greenery, there was still an abandoned and hopeless feeling hanging in the air, as if the area's best days were long since past. Vacant homes, for quite some years in disrepair, permeated the landscape and this was exemplified when we reached the river's crossing. A run-down shut-down corner store preceded a one-lane bridge, aged and showing its well-earned rust.**

**Running parallel to it are the ruins of the formerly used wooden bridge, swollen and gapped, missing planks like busted teeth exposing the stark, shallow river below. We put her in park and stepped out to survey the scene. One family was at the water's edge, the small children climbing the bridge's supports to swing from a rope and drop into the two foot deep hollow in the shade. As has become our society's sad norm, there is more graffiti than concrete to be seen on the bridge pylons, and the most common feature about the sandy beach was the trash. Beer cans, Gatorade bottles, and charred remains of illegal campfires were everywhere; and you couldn't step without crunching on the forgotten remains of expended fireworks. Some thoughtless, disrespectful, and un-American individual discarded and disgraced an American flag on the shore. A sign of the times, and dark foreshadowing, to be sure.**





# DAY TWELVE

## 7.12.2013

**With rising spirits, Andrew drove us into Dallas. Old Caroline was needing an all-points inspection and an oil change something awful. We pulled up in front of our friend Danny Rose's home, and over a good fresh meal we laid out our battered old map and planned our weekend for our last sites in Danny's hometown of Altus, Oklahoma. With full bellies and a full agenda, we slept; with a roof over our heads, a warm breeze through the window, and an early start in our minds.**

**After the oil change and some much needed showers, we drove west with the sun to our northern neighbor state, to meet a man in the know: Mr. Danny Joe Rose II, our chum Danny's father. With his detail and his son's knowledge of the area, we set our focus on Lake Altus and Quartz Mountain. The lake levels upon first sight were precariously low. Apparently in Danny's childhood times the shores were well over one hundred yards closer to where we parked. Whacking through the brush we saw incredible sights. About fifteen yards from the shore and bordering the entire expanse of the lake were thousands of dead and decaying fish carcasses, all lined up straight, all roughly the same distance from the shore. It was almost as if, fed up with the depleting water levels, rising temperature of the water, and the emergence of new bacteria; the lake, in its last dying breath, heaved its living contents to the sandy brush where its waters once gently ebbed.**

**We also learned from Danny's father that this now stagnant water had developed new forms of algae so harmful that humans were urged not to swim, as well as their pets, that people were encouraged not to eat any fish caught there, and apparently that this algae was so harmful that many farmers**



were no longer using it for their crops. We saw dried, cracked, and forgotten irrigation canals later in the journey. As if the place weren't shellacked and beat down enough, Danny navigated us around the short mountains to show us the peak we would be climbing to make camp, and as it came into view, we found it ablaze! Torrential smoke filled the sky, and we had no choice but to look on in horror. The rangers hastily closed off all roads towards Baldy Point immediately, but Andrew, not to be dissuaded from the task at hand, had me park at a nearby trail, and for a few sweaty hours the three of us climbed ancient lava walls, bouldered, and hiked our way across three peaks to a good vantage point.

He got the shots he needed, and we had a hard time of it, but we made it back down from the sun-scorched rocks safely. We made camp lower down in the park later that evening, and after Danny prepared us a hearty and healthy dinner, we went to capture the boat ramps, diving platforms, and surrounding docks, all of them are now laying useless in the sand, the closest buoys barely staying acquainted with the water. We returned to camp and slept the special sleep that occurs only after the completion of a long and difficult project, and the next day we headed on back home.











EPILOGUE:  
AT THE END  
OF THE  
JOURNEY  
**7.15.2013**



**We got back to Dallas a few hours ago. Andrew thought it best to have an epilogue of sorts, something or another of an overview, or recap. These past seventeen day and 4900 miles have been an incredible adventure, both hellish and beautiful, the hardest job I've been on and the best vacation of my life. The scars, both in body and in memory, will stick with me for a long time to come, and reviewing this whole grand gig site by site brings certain striking pictures to mind clearer than others.**

**To begin, Lake Meredith National Recreation Area: a staggering loss of water, of life, and of history. But still, amidst all the trash on the lakeshore, there is still undeniable beauty from what once was. The great green canyon, following the game trails of deer and coyotes through the brush. The unceasing hum of insects wending their implausible paths through the air, scaling the canyon walls and the peaceful solitude within the sad circumstances is a heavy example of finding your silver linings. And shortly thereafter we found that short storms, no matter how intense, aren't going to be enough to pull a losing reservoir from the brink. This we found at the "diamond in the desert": Elephant Butte, where the surrounding town was probably more damaged than aided when a fast moving storm cell ripped through, and only a superficial amount of the torrential downpour made it into the lake.**



**I also learned a little of empathetic heartbreak and reverence in the blackened tree trunks and crumbled foundations left behind in Colorado Springs. The lack of color, people, birds, animals, even insects or leaves rustling in the wind, still haunts me. The sight of charred shells of what used to be cars, what remained of a canine mandible in a pile of ash, the unthinkable heartache in these people's burned lives! Everything they had worked for, owned; gone up in smoke in the blink of an eye, literally overnight.**

**I still catch myself throughout the days since, reminding myself that these folks are still suffering, and that it doesn't end just because our camera and notepad have gone on. I also learned about hope and being thankful, and I don't think I'll ever forget the handpainted sign in the rubble, reading simply: "Thank you God and firefighters. You saved our lives." Having Danny Rose with us on the Altus expedition, I learned about the perspective of loss and of change. I saw firsthand how brutal changes of external factors can crush childhood nostalgia. The sight of a developing wildfire eating away the place where you camped in younger years, not being permitted to swim in the lake where you learned to swim because of the birth of new harmful algae. Being twenty four years old, and recalling when the lake was full, really helps to put a timetable on the rapidity of such a destructive drought. I wouldn't pretend to have a clue as to how to go about restoring or repairing today's levels of damage. I can only hope that as a society, we can begin to realize our levels of consumption, and that we can start working on conservation, at the very least on personal levels.**

~~I still catch myself throughout the days since, reminding myself that these folks are still suffering, and that it doesn't end just because our camera and notepad have gone on.~~



# SWDP

