

## Ann Arbor Recollection: “Return to Campus”

*12-10-06* I drove out to Brighton today, along I-696 to the west. Much of the drive mirrored the route we’d make during the college commute from my home in Orchard Lake to Ann Arbor. In those days, the route was invariably I-696 west to 23, and 23 south to Ann Arbor.

What made today’s recollection surprisingly strong was the fact that, since the advent of I-275 about 30 years ago, I haven’t used the 696-to-23 approach very often. So I was driving the route that I used to drive when I was a collegiate, and it elicited some rare and nostalgic reactions.

In those days, driving from the metro area west of Wixom was truly getting out into the country. When I’d return to campus on a Sunday evening, it was often dark. The fact that it was sparsely populated at many points along the way made my return seem darker still...

That darkness lulled me, in a way. It caused me to entertain vaguely philosophical thoughts. I remember thinking during those return 1968-72 drives that I was on a kind of long distance mission, the goal of which was to once again cover the ground that had been covered by all returning Ann Arbor students over the generations and across the years. As the University had been “founded in the wilderness back in 1817”, it seemed fitting that the ground I covered on my return was a dark and sparse wilderness of sorts, too.

There was a feeling that the miles I covered were lonely miles. That feeling was magnified by darkness, a late hour, and/or low temperatures. (*If I were making this same drive by daylight in July, there were no such isolating sensations!*)

About the time I’d made the turn south onto 23 and covered 4 or 5 miles, the return trip had become pitch black. The headlight beams on my 1941 Dodge cut narrow paths through the darkness with each passing road marker. With each remote exit I passed – and there weren’t many - I’d wonder... “*How far is the next one?*” And what seemed to be long moments would pass before another country exit would appear. *Brighton.... Whitmore Lake..... Hamburg.* At one point as I headed south, I would make out an indistinct yet lighted smudge in the distance....dim at first, but growing larger with each passing mile. Soon the smudge would organize itself as an upward reflection, the kind that emanates from an illuminated city in the night. And then I’d recognize the city as Ann Arbor. That special city beckoned and my fond heart beat quicker.

How appropriate, I remember thinking. I had once again made the long drive cross country from my home to this University town. The bright lights of Orchard Lake had receded quickly, to be replaced by the unfamiliar lights of other suburbs, and finally by the pervasive dark of the Michigan countryside. On the other side of this dimming progression – almost as a reward for being willing to make this important yet uncertain

return trip – were the inviting lights of that penultimate experiential mecca, Ann Arbor: the city of gold (*and blue, of course*).

And in the warm glow of those city lights along Main Street, Packard and Huron, I was rewarded with the knowledge that I was home again...out of the darkness and home.

Modest relief was quickly superceded by a brief flash of joy...and then quiet satisfaction settled in.