



ON THE ROAD WITH FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT BY PATRICK SISSON

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Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin in 1956.

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The architect's annual pilgrimages between Wisconsin and Arizona combined his passions: cars, architecture, and the American landscape

The caravan left on January 23, 1935: 30 people loaded in cars, station wagons, and a red truck, setting out from Spring Green, Wisconsin, for the promise of a desert in Arizona many of them had never seen before. At that point during the brutal winter—the temperature was 40 degrees below zero, and the roadways were canyons carved between snow drifts as high as telephone wires—anywhere else sounded like a perfect destination.

Like many making cross-country journeys in the depths of the Depression, this small band of travelers was equipped with supplies: home-canned vegetables and fruit; winter vegetables from the root cellar; and barrels of sauerkraut, ham, bacon, and eggs straight from the Central Wisconsin countryside. These travelers, however, also made plenty of space for drafting supplies and architectural models amid their provisions. The 2,200-mile trip Frank Lloyd Wright and his apprentices took to Arizona that winter represented a new chapter in his career. From humble beginnings, including a stop at Etta Hocking's grocery and meat market in nearby Dodgeville, the journey hopscotched west along a primitive, mostly unpaved version of Route 66, pausing at a series of low-cost hotels and tourist cabins, eventually ending at a site near what would become the architect's famed Arizona home and studio, Taliesin West.

This was the beginning of the migration (occasionally called the trip or even *hejira*), the twice-yearly journey between Taliesins that became a ritual for the architect and his apprentices. While he didn't write about or discuss the trips very often, many of his apprentices wrote of them in books and diaries. The trip was a distillation of Wright's passions for architecture, cars, and the American landscape.

Wright's career was redeemed in the desert, and this trip, and the many that followed, were a crucial part of refreshing the architect's perspective and vision.

"Perhaps Wright's tendency to romanticize both Taliesins was encouraged by periods of absence and the fact that he spent the most pleasant season in each," wrote landscape architect and professor Anne Whiston Spirn in the book *Frank Lloyd Wright: Designs for an American Landscape*. "They came to resemble summer cottage and winter camp rather than year-round dwellings."

Gene Masselink, Wright's longtime personal secretary, recalls the end of that trip to Arizona in 1935, as the cars of the caravan "came down from the mountains as the sun was nearing the horizon." He marveled at the landscape before him, the "tall, graceful saguaro and wavering ocotillo [shrubs]" lit by "long, low streaks of sunlight." It was "a desert like something that I had never dreamed."

These journeys began at a time when cross-country driving was still time-consuming and difficult (the first continental roadway, Route 30, was only completed in 1925). A motorcade of architects would follow a circuitous route often dictated by Wright—who, riding in one of his fancy convertibles, sports cars, or coupes, such as a regal Jaguar Mark IV, would floor it across the country. Occasionally stopping at Wright-designed sites, these road trips to and from the desert camp gave Wright a front seat to the country's changing landscape, and a view of how automobiles were shifting society. It was certainly a repeated theme in his work, as he designed numerous car-influenced structures, including a roadside filling station, standardized gas station, a service station/restaurant, a butterfly wing-shaped bridge, a drive-in national bank, a self-service parking garage, a "paradise on wheels housing project," and, of course, his Jaguar showroom in New York City.

"He saw [the automobile] become the greatest agent for social, economic, environmental, and personal change that the world has ever known," wrote Richie Herink in his book on Wright's automobile obsession, *The Car Is Architecture*. "America had become a car-culture nation almost overnight and became a country whose people were always on the go traveling somewhere by car."

And Wright loved to move. A news item in an April 1940 issue of *Architects' Journal*, under the heading "Uncovered Wagons," described the annual pilgrimage as being staged with "a Hollywood-esque exuberance." An excerpt from a letter described the scene as "a safari consisting of five or six trucks full of boys and girls, pots and pans, grand pianos and concrete mixers."

Wright began at the back of the caravan "in a handsome new Cherokee red Lincoln Zephyr. As he never drives less than 60 miles an hour, he starts a few days later than the others and of course arrives ahead of time."

Wright's long history with Arizona, which began nearly a decade before the migration kicked off, suggests why the desert represented renewal and rebirth for the architect. In the 1920s, he went through a series of false starts, health scares, and experimental plans before recalibrating to reclaim his place as the country's pre-eminent architect by the end of the '30s.

At first, however, the desert represented desperation. Wright's first trip to Arizona came during one of the lowest periods of his career. In 1927, after finishing a string of commissions in California, the architect was desperate for work, and even began driving through the Midwest giving lectures. The lack of jobs and income at the time almost meant the loss of the place he held most dear: Taliesin, the home, studio, and compound he had designed and rebuilt over the last few decades, was nearly at the mercy of creditors (the

Bank of Wisconsin seized the property and almost auctioned it off). Wright was only bailed out by the generosity of his patron Darwin Martin, a New York businessman who devised a scheme to raise “stock” (and much-needed capital) for “Frank Lloyd Wright Incorporated” by selling interest in his future projects to investors. (Imagine a GoFundMe page for the world’s most famous architect.)

When a former student, Albert McArthur, invited Wright to consult on the design of the Arizona Biltmore hotel in early 1928, he was in no position to refuse. The terms of the deal show the dire straits the proud architect was in; he would be paid for his expertise, but not given credit for the final design, seemingly anathema to the arrogant Wright. The trip also foreshadowed Wright’s later experiences in Arizona; during the visit, his third wife, Olgivanna, met a doctor who told her that if she brought her husband out to the desert every summer, it would prolong his life by 20 years.

During that initial stay, Wright met a local real estate developer, Alexander J. Chandler, who convinced Wright to work on the San Marcos Hotel, a project that would be doomed by the 1929 stock market crash. The architect leapt at the opportunity, building a small tent village called Ocatilla for his staff and planning a vast series of new buildings for his patron. Wright was expecting a \$40,000 pay day, but after the crash, he ended up taking on \$19,000 in debt. His only real reward came in the form of publicity, as photographs of his desert camp were included in a few international magazines. Despite his financial straits, he returned to Taliesin in style, purchasing a luxury Packard Phaeton convertible for the drive back to Wisconsin with fees from a client in New York City.

In 1935, Chandler invited Wright to stay at the Hacienda, a polo stable-turned hotel, to escape that year’s brutal winter and get work done under the desert sun. The architect had founded his Taliesin Fellowship, an apprenticeship program for aspiring architects, in 1932, and decided to bring the entire group. During their stay, Wright and the apprentices would develop his Broadacre City concept, Wright’s vision of a pastoral, suburban, car-centered lifestyle. Apprentices, who constructed a huge wooden model of the scheme outdoors during the day, crashed in sleeping bags at night.

The trip to and from Arizona that year would establish the blueprint of Wright’s annual migration. On the way out West, frugality ruled. As apprentice Cornelia Brierly recalled in her book *Tales of Taliesin*, apprentices drew straws every night to determine who would sleep in the beds of crowded hotel rooms and who would take the sleeping bags. They spent one night in a rickety old hotel near a railroad, which rattled with every passing train. The itinerary included plenty of stops with friends. Henry Allen, the governor of Kansas, took in the Taliesin gang and treated them to dinner in the Prairie-style home Wright had designed for him in 1915. In Tulsa, Wright’s cousin, publisher Richard Lloyd Jones, hosted them, showing them around his own spacious, well-designed home.

Fred Langhorst, who joined the fellowship in 1933, lagged behind the main group due in part to his “enjoyment of tales told by old-timers,” recalls Brierly. He would stop often along the way, chatting up American Indians, cowboys, gas station attendants, and characters at trading posts. He would show up in Chandler with a 10-gallon hat, cowboy chaps, silver-studded boots, and Native American jewelry. Brierly joked that the trip west turned “an Illinois Mark Twain buff to a dedicated westerner.” Langhorst would be unceremoniously kicked out by Wright weeks later because he stayed up late reading Western lore and missed the morning wakeup call.

The return trip was more memorable, beginning with the sendoff. The caravan, four cars and a stake truck, was pressed for space, as everyone had acquired new possessions, such as American Indian blankets and souvenirs. Wright simply repacked the truck himself, unpacking bags and stuffing personal items into the gaps between the stakes.

Their route, a meandering journey through the Southwest, would find them basking in the scenery of the American West while indulging Frank Lloyd Wright’s childhood fantasies. They rolled through the Grand

Canyon on the first morning, past outcroppings of red rock and juniper, and camped out on the rim of the natural wonder. The following day, their sleeping bags were covered in snow.



Frank Lloyd Wright and his wife Olgivanna in 1948 at Taliesin West.

“While cooking breakfast, we had a glorious view of the sunrise flooding the canyon with changing patterns of light and shadow that spotlighted buttes, pinnacles, and rock castles of awesome dimensions,” wrote Brierly. “Architecture of the master builder!”

The next move showed just how rambling the journey would become. Wright began talking about the excitement of gold rushes in the region, and, while scanning the map, happened upon a town in Nevada called Goldfield. That became the next destination. On the way, the crew pitched camp on a dry Death Valley lake bed, waking up to a sandstorm that forced them to change clothes inside their sleeping bags (breakfast was bacon and eggs, “true grit style”).

When they arrived in Goldfield, they found tall grass and abandoned homes. A single Victorian hotel still operated, with grizzly old-timers cluttered around the red velour seats of the bar (which once went for \$100 a night for a big concert), true believers who felt there was still gold in the hills. The owner of the hotel, Brierly recalls, was a voluptuous blond woman who wore a gold belt from which hung a clutch of gold keys nearly a foot long.

Next, Wright declared the group needed to see Zion National Park and Bryce Canyon in Utah. After a detour through Vegas, they arrived at the parks, where a park ranger told the architect that the best view of the Grand Canyon was in a small town called Tuweep. Wright turned the caravan around and the apprentices got separated and lost, eventually ending up at a small log cabin in the middle of nowhere. At one point, Betty Barnsdall, an apprentice (and daughter of Aline Barnsdall, who commissioned the famous Hollyhock House), had just about had it. She jumped out of her car, marched toward Wright’s vehicle, and yelled, “God damn you, Mr. Wright, I’m not going any further!” which set off a shouting match. After Olgivanna calmed his frayed nerves, everyone settled down and the car charted a course back to Wisconsin.

That tumultuous Taliesin trip was the first of many journeys to Arizona. Wright would get sick the following year; he spent the summer at the Jokake Inn in Phoenix recovering from pneumonia. Wright and Olgivanna decided it would be best for him to make Arizona a permanent winter home. They scouted out locations in North Phoenix for a house and studio, finally finding several hundred acres up against the McDowell Range on the Maricopa Mesa. He immediately sent a telegram to his secretary, Gene Masselink: WEATHER WARM. BEAUTIFUL SITE IN HAND COME JOKAKE INN SOON YOU ARE READY. BRING SHOVELS, RAKES, HOES, AND ALSO HOSE. EIGHTEEN DRAFTING BOARDS AND TOOLS. WHEELBARROW, CONCRETE MIXER, SMALL KOHLER (ELECTRICAL PLANT) AND WIRE.

MELODEON, OIL STOVES FOR COOKING AND HEATING. WATER HEATER, VIOLA, CELLO,
RUGS NOT IN USE AND WHATEVER ELSE WE NEED.”

The adventure of camping out and traveling throughout the Southwest prepared the early fellows for the rigors of building a permanent camp in the desert. They lived on the margins; the encampment was initially called Sun Trap. Tents were put up for living quarters. There was no heat, electricity, or water; that was ferried back from Scottsdale, a trip over the open desert that was hazardous at best, and during desert rain storms that flooded the valley, treacherous.

The landscape would come to have a mythic hold on him, and he routinely dropped the Victor Hugo quote, “The desert is where god is, and man is not.”

Wright designed a series of “sleeping boxes” for himself, his family, and the apprentices: small wood and canvas structures with barely enough space for a bed and closet. A concrete slab would eventually connect the boxes, and over time, the structure became more civilized and less tent-like. The entire first year at Taliesin West was about landscaping and digging; Olgivanna remarked that “the whole opus looked like something we had been excavating, not building.”

Wright, however, found the rough lifestyle invigorating, drawing inspiration from the new landscape and environment. A story from the *Frank Lloyd Wright Monograph* illustrates the appeal of the barren landscape. During the early years of Taliesin, the very wealthy mother of an apprentice came to visit the site, staying at the Biltmore Hotel and driving out to visit during the day. When she first saw the sleeping boxes, she was aghast, unable to believe anyone would choose such “uncivilized circumstances.”

Mrs. Wright informed her that, while the hardships are severe, her husband could “plunge himself into the desert with enthusiasm” (she also suggested that “all the great philosophies in the world, you know, derived from a desert environment or a mountainous one”). Intrigued, the woman then asked to sleep in one of the tents. She ended up staying for 10 nights, and would later write Olgivanna that although she had traveled in luxury the whole world over, booked rooms in only the finest of hotels, and saw all the usual sights one should see, “the memory of those days in the tent stay with her as the most memorable and wonderful in her life.”

As Taliesin took shape and Wright’s career was reinvigorated by a series of showstopping designs in the late ’30s, such as the SC Johnson Wax headquarters and Fallingwater, the architect, now on top of the world, settled into a familiar routine, leaving for Arizona around Christmas and returning to Wisconsin after a massive annual Easter party. “My office is wherever I am,” he would remark.

The road trip caravans also became routine. Wright would set off in one of his high-end cars, almost always sporting a custom Cherokee Red paint job (which he first used on a 1935 Oldsmobile). Wright had a love affair with cars ever since he started driving his friend’s yellow Stoddard-Dayton Roadster around Oak Park, Illinois, in 1909 (Wright’s son wrote that “the citizens of Oak Park called his dad’s car the Yellow Devil, and not many days passed before the police department threatened to confiscate it”). Wright would purchase 85 cars and trucks for himself and the Taliesin Fellowship between 1911 and 1959, and spoke of them frequently. In her 1959 book *Our House*, Olgivanna said that the topics at the dinner table at Taliesin were “moving pictures, foreign cars, and third in line, and very sparingly, architecture.”

The apprentices would usually pile into “blue-collar” cars, such as Bantams, Crosleys, and Hillmans, both roadsters and station wagons. On many trips, the caravan also included a Bantam Panel Truck that was converted into the Brock Dinky Diner, which served meals out the back. They set off when “the winter hit Wisconsin hard,” wrote apprentice Donald Hoppen, with two big trucks packed with plans, models, and plenty of food, including farm-cured hams and rounds of cheese. Wright occasionally had a thing about packing; John Howe recalls Wright pulling everyone’s suitcases out and trying to repack them. The

apprentices stood aghast until Mrs. Wright called her husband inside for coffee and cookies, at which point the apprentices repacked their belongings.



Frank Lloyd Wright and his wife Olgivanna enjoy a 1949 Crosley Hotshot.

The ride down was rushed, with apprentices only getting a week or two to make the trip. They'd cover 400 mile a day, a big accomplishment before interstate highways. The end of the migration was always an exciting, celebratory moment, in part because the last leg was so treacherous. Brierly wrote that, at the time Taliesin West was first settled, Camelback Road was the only paved road in Phoenix. The entire area was an open range, and could flood in a moment during a rainstorm.

After turning off the pavement onto unpaved desert roads, the apprentices would begin to see signs of Taliesin life. Wright designed and installed a series of abstract signs along the way: thin posts with a trademark square spiral indicating the encampment was approaching. Hoppen recalls weaving down dirt roads, past forests of saguaro and cholla cactus and ironwood trees, and suddenly catching a glimpse of the canvas roofs and outer walls. A large stone tower on site, draped with red bougainvillea, might as well have been a flag. The final approach crossed over a gravel "moat," a barrier erected to discourage rattlesnakes. Hoppen remembers one reunion celebrated with bottles of cheap Mexican rum bought in El Paso. He got so drunk raising toasts that evening that he almost hugged a cholla cactus before finding his tent at 2 a.m.

The ride back was a more leisurely affair. Stops were often made at Wright buildings or projects. Wright's longtime photographer, Pedro Guerrero, remembers one such trip in 1940. The caravan made its first stop at an Indian trading post in Tuba City, Arizona; he was told the route had been planned to give apprentices the experience of traveling through American Indian territory in Arizona and New Mexico (Wright also enjoyed stopping at trading posts and buying Indian rugs). In an open field in Dodge City, Kansas, the crew gathered around the Dinky Diner for breakfast.

The trips back followed more creative routes, says apprentice Edgar Tafel—each one different. The apprentices slept outdoors in sleeping bags, weather permitting, and traveled as fast as they could, despite breakdowns, flat tires, and other mishaps.

They also could be more entertaining. One year, apprentice David Dodge, who was taking the wheel on the way back, told everyone in his car there was absolutely no eating or smoking while driving. Fellow apprentice Wes Peters decided to play a prank on him, freezing a block of limburger cheese and hiding it under the driver's seat. By the time the midday sun hit after they left Taliesin, the car reeked, and Dodge turned on his passengers, who repeatedly denied breaking his rules. Dodge eventually turned off the road, investigated, and discovered that Peters had gotten the best of him.

"He saw [the automobile] become the greatest agent for social, economic, environmental, and personal change that the world has ever known."—Richie Herink, *The Car is Architecture*.

Over the years, the caravan would see the landscape change, as roadside diners, highways, and gas stations began to sprout up along the route. Wright and his apprentices witnessed Phoenix grow before their eyes. By

1950, the road to Taliesin was paved, and Scottsdale wasn't a cow town, but a fast-growing resort community. Wright would eventually watch from the back seat.

The apprentices also saw the impact of the Depression. In 1937, on the drive back to Wisconsin, they were caught in the middle of the Dust Bowl, a period of severe dryness and dust storms that ravaged the middle of the country in the 1930s. During the trip, Brierly recalled that dust surged into the hubcaps of cars and entered through every crack of the station wagons. Driving through Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, and Illinois, they saw devastation everywhere; they placed wet cloths over their mouths to block the incessant dust. Bloated, dead cattle lined the fields. "No greenery appeared anywhere, just expanses of scorched earth," she wrote.

While there were a few years when Wright didn't go to Taliesin West—including the winters of 1942-'43 and '43-'44, and in 1940, as Tafel remembers, when he took the train and let the apprentices make the journey on their own—he upheld the annual pilgrimage even as his stock continued to rise. During the last nine years of his life, he executed 300 commissions and traveled overseas to London, Italy, Zurich, Wales, Paris, and Iraq, as well as to New York City to oversee the Guggenheim. But he still found time to hit the road.

Why did the migration matter? On one level, as Herink wrote about the potential relationship between Wright's car collection and his architectural designs, "a car is just a car." Perhaps these trips were simply a fun means of getting from point A to point B. But there's a case to be made that the change in scenery, and the influence of a new landscape, was an inspiration. The fallow desert was fertile for Wright's imagination, especially during the last few prolific decades of his life.

"In Wisconsin, everything is softened by erosion," he wrote. "Out there [in Arizona], everything was sharp, savage. Everything was armed in the desert, and it was an entire new experience, and so following out the same feeling for a structure ... it had to be absolutely according to the desert."

Wright, after all, was obsessive about landscapes and integrating his designs into their surroundings. He constantly tinkered with both Taliesins, especially in Wisconsin. He reworked and redesigned his farm—his wife said "he would often study the fields where the grains made patterns, on the landscape, as he had laid them out. There was not a square of earth that escaped his constantly alert, creative eyes." He built dams and lakes, whose shorelines he would reshape, and when he expanded his property, he would continue to add new items, including a pine grove and a snack bar overlooking the Wisconsin River.

According to Spirn, he was obsessed with the roadways around his central Wisconsin home, and would even play with the road grader. "His attention to the alignment of the roads reflected his fascination with automobiles and movement," she wrote.

And, after his Broadacre City plan laid out his anti-urban ideas, he would spend decades railing against cities (he famously quipped that the modern city was good for "banking and prostitution"). Maybe his firsthand experience with cars and how they changed the landscape reinforced his beliefs.

Perhaps it was the symbolism of that journey that meant so much. The self-made man had fallen from grace, wandered off the path, and finally found salvation in his two Taliesins at the end of a long, winding career. It isn't a jump to imagine that may have helped fuel his romance with the open road.