

## The Best Way to Pick a Cantaloupe

By Dennis Payton Knight

You've heard the story of the old Mainer trying to tell a tourist how to get to Millinocket. He pondered and rejected several possibilities before concluding, "Come to think of it, you can't get there from here."

That was, of course, before the development of our system of interstate highways connecting us to Muskogee, Minnetonka, Malibu *and* Millinocket. It deliberately avoids towns and villages, and it will speed you right to Millville. But if you want to enjoy the fun of getting there, take the next exit. Drive the byways to see towering grain elevators and courthouses in the centers of towns and junkyards and feedlots on the outskirts. Some people will tell you they all look the same, but they aren't really paying attention.

Yesterday, I, my sister, a friend and a pair of happy little dogs climbed into a van dubbed the 'Tree House' with no objective other than to buy some melons in a town 128 miles away as the crow flies. We went south out of Denver through Parker and Franktown, meandering through the Castlewood Canyon area, past rolling green ranches, through the Black Forest and into Colorado Springs.

For breakfast we found a joint I knew with the kind of grub connoisseurs of diner food all over America awaken to dreams of. My benchmark for breakfast in a diner is the hash browns, and they generously hit the mark.

We drove south to Pueblo to pick up US 50, following the Arkansas River fifty miles downstream to the town of Rocky Ford, famous throughout the world for its sweet melons. The growers there survived a scare a few years back after a careless producer ninety miles away shipped listeria-tainted melons under the guise of being Rocky Ford cantaloupe. The local farmers banded together to trademark and reclaim their name and restore their reputation.

We shopped at Knapp's, a busy stand on the west end of town. It's a prideful family operation. In the back they're crating and shipping melons all over the country, but out front, they're happy to show you how to pick the readiest, sweetest fruit in the bins. I learned when picking a cantaloupe to look for bright, orange background coloring in the webbing.

We moved on to explore La Junta to the east, past Bents Fort, driving north across the dry prairie to look over the sacred site and think about the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864. Then we went through Eads and Kit Carson, places where my grandfather had ministered during the Great Depression.

We adhered to our principles, winding west and north to get home by the slowest way. I picked a road going through a place with the compelling name of Punkin' Center and met my only disappointment of the day. It turned out to be the center of nothing, and I had been counting on a fat slice of pumpkin pie. So I ate the cantaloupe.