Pumpkin Rollers in No Man's Land

We drive a Smart to Oklahoma's Panhandle and become an object of vast and lingering amusement.

BY JOHN PHILLIPS of Car & Driver
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Look at a map and you'll notice that Oklahoma resembles a human hand with an index finger pointing west, as if suggesting to occupants that a U-Haul adventure in the direction of California might be a swell idea. Not one inch of interstate freeway intrudes upon the Panhandle, and the towns are minuscule and named as if the founders had no time for reflection: Hooker, Eva, Felt, Gray, Straight, Mouser. At the eastern edge of the Panhandle is a town called Slapout, population 8. At the western edge is a town called Wheeless, population 0.

Photographer Greg Jarem and I had never met anyone who'd set foot in the Panhandle—it seemed as alien and uncharted as Neptune—so we naturally drove there in an alien car. The Smart ForTwo is 8.20 feet in length, not much longer than my living-room sofa. Feel free to correct me on this, but I feel confident we were the first persons in intergalactic history to drive a Smart into the Oklahoma Panhandle.

The Panhandle was created by happenstance, fuzzy federal edict, and general misunderstanding, demonstrating that the government of the 1800s ran pretty much like the government of 2005. Okie historians still debate the particulars, but the creation of the Panhandle went something like this: The land originally belonged to Texas, but the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850 plus God knows how many other federal "land adjustments"—whose stated purpose was to establish the border between free and slave states—forced Texas to cede its claim to any real estate north of 36 degrees, 30 minutes. After Kansas defined its southern border and New Mexico defined its eastern border, a so-called neutral strip of land lay orphaned in the middle. This unclaimed rectangle—34 miles north and south, 167 miles east and west—fell

outside the jurisdiction of any government. No laws, no cops, no courts. General drunkenness and interpersonal chaos ensued, starring a dissolute troupe of shepherds, disturbed loners, first-time farmers, and transient gold-rushers inching along the Santa Fe Trail on their way to becoming impoverished California '49ers. Squatters and homesteaders who ventured into the strip called it No Man's Land, and for more than 40 years that's what it was. The feds weren't even certain who lived in the region. Mostly dangerously excited Indians, they guessed. Texas ranchers knew otherwise and often galloped north to graze their herds on the Panhandle's grasses—big and little bluestem, skunk brush, prairie ragwort, Indian grass, buffalo grass. The Texans referred to the sod-busting Panhandlers as "pumpkin rollers." It was not a term of endearment.

It wasn't until 1890 that the U.S. government, still not sure what to do with this three-million-acre island of reportedly useless land, simply attached it to the Oklahoma Territory, calling it County Seven. *Voilà!*—the Panhandle.

I don't want to make the Panhandle sound like a harsh place, but life for the pumpkin rollers was (and, to some extent, is) a festival of filth, a dour daily thicket of dust, disease, depression, and death. But don't take my word for it. Here's an incomplete list of hurdles that hounded the homesteaders:

Home Implosion: Because there were so few trees, the pumpkin rollers built homes of sod, which, in times of heavy rain, collapsed, crushing or smothering the occupants. Especially amusing at about 3 a.m.

Troubled Neighbors: First there were agitated Indians with flintlocks, then the Cole and Dalton gangs, then homegrown vigilantes whose grasp of the U.S. Penal Code matched Bonnie and Clyde's.

Painful Burns: When lightning struck the prairie grass, fire traveled at the speed of wind, which raises the subject of . . .

Wind: In the spring of 1895, the wind blew at a bracing 84 mph. *For two days.* Because all but the western edge of the region is nearly as flat as a trailer park, the gusts were relentless, which leads us to . . .

Memorable Snow: Minus-20-degree temps were common in the winter, as were 10-foot drifts that buried chicken coops and pig pens, asphyxiating the livestock before the unfortunate beasts could freeze.

Hot Flashes: More than once the thermometer has registered 120 degrees, which, combined with slovenly farming practices and as little as 8.75 inches of annual rainfall (in 1956, for instance), brings us to the region's true hallmark . . .

Peculiar Cloud Formations: Most settlers knew to dig storm cellars, from which they often emerged to find their barns and neighbors missing. Remember Dorothy and Toto? Both hailed from Liberal, Kansas, right on the Panhandle's northern border.

Hip Replacements: No Man's Land was pockmarked by a zillion abandoned wells—many dug by hand—into which persons riding horses regularly plunged, but only if the horse wasn't already lame from tripping on unseen strands of illegally strung barbed wire.

Did I mention floods? Hail the size of American League baseballs? Rattlesnakes? Raptors large enough to kidnap pet cats?

On the other hand, there's virtually no traffic in the Panhandle. For the first time in recent memory, I was driving daily on roads that were sometimes empty to the horizon. And there's precisely no one selling grandé decaf frappuccinos, plus it's as quiet as a mausoleum, if you can imagine a mausoleum with a steady 30-knot wind and a herd of polled Herefords. Throughout history, the Panhandle has been a place that would either kill you or make a man of you, especially if you were a woman.

Jarem and I entered the Panhandle exactly as most homesteaders did—through Gate, the first town established in County Seven and the site of No Man's Land's first post office. When we arrived, nary a soul was milling about, so we drove to the train depot, built in 1910. It now houses a museum and the town's library. We were greeted by the curator, Audrey Willson, 79, who peered at the Smart as if it were a kitchen appliance assembled by Estonian elves. Willson works solo in the museum six days per week. When I signed the guest register, I noticed that her previous visitor had presented himself 10 days prior. Willson confirmed this was so. She said it was common to pass a 48-hour week alone and in utter silence and that it bothered her not one whit. "I read books," she explained. "Every book in the library. Maybe twice." Usually, her only companion is a black border collie named Pinnie who trots to the museum daily except for three days last month "on account of I ran over her with my car," Willson confessed. She showed me a photo of a cop holding a scorched chunk of Russian booster rocket that tumbled to earth north of Gate in the '60s. It was evidently the town's last thrill.

Audrey Willson insisted we drive to her birthplace in Knowles, a few miles west. So we did. Here's what's in Knowles:

1. A grain elevator.
2. 2. A country store with a Bud sign.
3. 3. That is all.

The Panhandle looks like a mix of northern Texas and Montana's Big Sky Country, which makes sense because all three are part of the Great Plains. While driving between towns, you can sometimes scan the horizon 365 degrees and not clap eyes on a trace of human habitation, apart from telephone poles tipped by huge kestrels and red-tailed hawks, who malevolently contemplate the mice and rabbits cowering in the dead weeds below. Many of the Panhandle's trees—stunted cottonwoods, hackberry, and elm—are actually living snow fences, some of which the county has named after the farmers who planted them. Otherwise, a clump of trees—bent in the direction of the wind—indicates a moist culvert or a farmhouse. Here's how to identify a ranch: clunkety windmills, dipping-donkey oil wells, and galvanized-steel water tanks crushed and twisted into fabulous shapes by tornadoes. One such tank, six feet in diameter, was wrapped around a telephone pole, as if it were as pliable as Reynolds Wrap.

Bulging up through the center of the Panhandle is a low, hummocky spine of dirty-yellow sand dunes, scarred here and there by the tracks of ATVs and pimpled with beige sage and black tumbleweeds. To describe the Panhandle as desolate is inaccurate and unfair—in some places, the winter wheat is as lush and perfectly manicured as the greens at Augusta—but the place *does* resemble the exterior scenes shot for the movie *Fargo,* which, come to think of it, was filmed on the Great Plains as well.

We continued southwest to Beaver, the Panhandle's original county seat and, as it turned out, the only town that was both pretty and populated by humans who dared to venture outdoors. Beaver, home of the Dusters, features a handsome main boulevard flanked by a bank, two '50s-era motels where Tony Perkins would have felt right at home, a NAPA store, the *Herald-Democrat* newspaper, the Correct Beauty Shop, an American Legion post, Ned's & Darlene's Café, Panhandle Motors, and Duckwall's Variety Store. There's also a 12-foot-tall replica of a beaver chewing on what appears to be a doughnut. It is not. Instead, it's a giant cow turd, promoting Beaver's World Cowchip Throwing Championship. That's what they told us.

Near Turpin sprawled a feed lot, one of a dozen we passed, where the cattle stood motionless in a morass of mud and manure. It smelled like a toxic and possibly flammable amalgam of mold, Purina dog chow, and ammonia. On the way into the village of Hooker, we passed a mailbox that a farmer had attached to a piece of porous rock into which he somehow discovered he could drive nails. And we saw another mailbox that had been affixed to a roadside cross whose original purpose was to denote a traffic fatality. "People here are practical," Jarem noted.

We drove the Smart down the quarter-mile main street of Hooker, where a 30-year-old woman informed us that the American Legion's baseball team was called the Hooker Horny Toads and T-shirts could be purchased bearing the legend "All My Best Friends Are Hookers." But the store wasn't open. In fact, nothing was open, except a hardware store. In a stretch of four blocks, we counted 17 businesses that were definitely abandoned and seven more that were as dark as a cow's colon. So spacious are the plains that, following a business failure, there's apparently no reason to tear down the building and rebuild. The owners just walk away.

We ate lunch at Jo Ann's Country Restaurant in Boise City (rhymes with "voice"), near a limestone courthouse in the center of an unexpectedly British-looking roundabout facing the Style Shoppe and a Ford dealership. Jo Ann's special that day was chicken-fried steak on white bread. Boise City offers a museum simply teeming with photos of the citizens' favorite dust storms. Sometimes the dust mixed with snow to create what locals called "snusters" or "snirts," one of which descended in the '30s on a day when the temperature fell 74 degrees in 18 hours. "You'd remember that," the curator said.

"I observed the hills north of town fade from sight, then the river bridge disappeared," wrote Fred Tracy, a pumpkin roller who recalled the dust storm of April 14, 1935. "I started for the house, but before I could reach it, I was enveloped in total darkness. My son-in-law was downtown in his car. When he saw the bridge disappear, he made a run for home. He was driving 65 mph, but the storm overtook him. He could not see the road with his headlights."

After the dust storms of the '30s, one-third of a million Great Plainers fled to California, becoming the long-suffering heroes in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.*

The Panhandle is crisscrossed with unnamed secondary roads and mile-long private drives that aren't shown on our atlas or state map. Near Balko, we found ourselves bumping along a mystery road that was dangerously crowned and impossibly narrow, yet the posted limit was 65 mph. Most of the side roads were clay, as red as iron ore, which

turned into viscous goo when it rained. The slime yawed our Smart six feet toward a ditch, as if the tires were on ice or ball bearings. I got out and held the tail straight—the car weighs only 1610 pounds—as Jarem cautiously backed it all the way to a paved surface. Pig and cattle trucks exit such roads and, when they attain speed on asphalt, fling red clay clods 50 feet skyward. At day's end, the Smart looked as if it were bleeding from machine-gun fire.

In the Panhandle's northwestern corner stands Black Mesa, offering a panoramic view into New Mexico and Colorado. At 4973 feet, it's the highest point in Oklahoma and is easily the most scenic, a region of mesas and buttes and volcanic boulders as big as Winnebagos—a setting for a John Wayne movie, dotted with cactus, juniper, and pinyon pine. Within two miles of the town of Kenton, whose principal attraction is the Tell-A-Tale Diner, we saw meadowlarks, magpies, bluebirds, lark sparrows, ravens, quails, two prairie chickens, at least 20 male pheasants, and a lone roadrunner. At Black Mesa's base, there's a sign that warns: "Prairie rattlesnakes have the most toxic venom of all the poisonous snakes in Oklahoma. If bitten, stay calm. Medical assistance is in Boise City." But Boise City was 45 minutes away.

Then we headed south to Wheeless, which certainly was. "Is it free of wheels," Jarem asked, "or free of whee?" In fact, we could locate no living soul to confirm that the town was uninhabited, yet it contained one firehouse, a white clapboard Baptist church, a one-room schoolhouse, a red limestone garage, and a graveyard. We tried to walk to the cemetery but were stymied by six inches of mud. In the schoolyard lay toys that might have been dropped 30 years prior. Wheeless appeared to have been abandoned one day at about 2 p.m. and no one could think of a reason to return. As we departed, the Smart hit a tumbleweed the size of a dishwasher. "That really cheered me up," said Jarem.

In a bone-chilling rainstorm, we drove into Felt, on the edge of the Rita Blanca National Grasslands, where we spotted an abandoned '58 Ford Country Squire wagon and a '49 Chrysler Windsor coupe that Jarem wanted to buy. As we climbed out to examine the Chrysler, its 70-year-old owner screamed at us from a nearby cinder-block garage. When he realized we weren't vandals, he sauntered out to study the Smart.

"You guys must be Martians," he said.

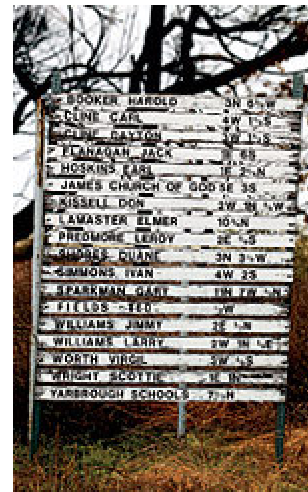
He pointed to his car's license plate, scoured unto brilliance by blowing dust.

"Last time I registered this was in '72," he informed. "But cars here are okay sitting outside. We average five-percent humidity." Then he pointed to the dimples in the

Chrysler's black roof. "That was 1988," he said. "Hailstones four inches in diameter. Bounced off the ground and busted all the windows outta my house. Killed all the birds, turned 'em into mincemeat. One hailstone flew through the window of my son's schoolroom. Landed on the chalk tray. Put a dent in it."

He told us he sold potato diggers, but, he added, "For the last two decades, you can't make no money here." Then he spit a brown stream that dripped off his own car's bumper. Neither he nor his son asked what Jarem and I were doing in Felt, Oklahoma—never asked our names or occupations or where we came from or why we were driving a car he'd already described as "a plastic go-kart." It made me wonder if Panhandlers are much interested in the outside world.

That night, at the Pop-A-Top lounge in Guymon, the Panhandle's largest town, a bartender named Wendy Ward told us, "This is the most judgmental place in the U.S. We have harsh opinions of *everyone*." I asked her the Panhandle's population. "Don't know, don't care," she shot back. Then a man we'd never met before walked up and showed us a rock he'd found a few years prior. It was shaped like an item of female anatomy. "It's not for sale," he cautioned, although we hadn't asked.



In the town of Straight—a church and an elementary school—Jarem said, "I think I know how they voted on gay marriage in Straight." And on entering the town of Goodwell, home of the Oklahoma Panhandle State University, a state trooper pulled me over for going 52 in a 45 zone and for driving an apparently insane car. But he was polite and cheerful and explained he'd recently graduated from OPSU—whose campus stood deserted 100 yards to our left—and he eagerly directed us to Goodwell's No Man's Land Museum, which he guaranteed we'd enjoy.

It took three 10-hour days to hit every berg and hamlet in the Panhandle. It was never boring. We finished in Slapout, whose eight residents live opposite the town's only business, a gas station. Two cowboys ran out to greet us, eager to lay hands on the Smart. They grinned at first, then smiled, then laughed until they were emitting wet pig snorts and their faces turned red. The taller guy took off his cowboy hat and began beating it against his thigh, as if putting out a small fire. Then they took turns photographing each other in front of the car. "Proof," one said, "for Friday beer night."

"At the Pop-A-Top in Guymon?" I asked.

"*Guymon?*" he asked in reply, saying it as if he'd never heard of the place, as if it might be a town in eastern Romania. "For beer we drive to Texas."

Smart ForTwo

Yes, it's about as big as your golf cart. No, it won't fit in the back of your F-150.

The Smart isn't yet for sale in America—and it wouldn't surprise us if it's *never* for sale in the Panhandle—but the plan, somewhat uncertain at press time, was for Mercedes-Benz to begin importing these microcars in the second half of 2006. The first model will be the ForMore, a miniature SUV along the lines of a Toyota RAV4. The second model will be the replacement for the two-seat ForTwo, as shown here. Both will be sold through 70 to 85 "select" Benz dealers nationwide.

Our Euro-spec ForTwo coupe (about €10,000 on the Continent) featured a three-cylinder turbo producing 60 horses. The engine is mounted in front and on top of the rear axle, and it drives the rear wheels. At full throttle, this 0.7-liter engine makes a lovely snorty growl, like that of an old Subaru Justy.

The ForTwo rides on a 71.3-inch wheelbase, almost a foot-and-a-half shorter than a Mazda Miata's. Not one inch of the hood is visible from inside, but you sit up high, which diminishes your sense of vulnerability. In the cockpit, you can simultaneously touch the windshield with one hand and the backlight with the other, yet the interior *always* feels sufficiently roomy, like sitting in the front of a Honda Civic. In fact, there's actually a surfeit of legroom and headroom—the ForTwo is taller than a Ford Crown Vic—and an unexpected sense of airiness results. Entry and exit are superb, because each door essentially comprises the whole side of the car. It's only when you step out that you grasp this car's Lilliputian proportions. The "trunk" is a 21-inch shelf abaft the seats, good for two medium-size duffels and a bag of pretzels. There's actually 5.3 cubic feet of storage space, but if you carry more than three grocery bags, you'll have to stack them. Or use the passenger seat.

We found the seats to be firm and all-day comfy, but the ergonomics are otherwise peculiar. There's a Saab-like ignition switch between the seats. Five tiny liquid-crystal dots denote fuel status. Switches for the A/C, rear hatch, odo, and sunroof are scattered hither and yon, defying logic.

The steering is light and accurate, but the front and rear tires are so close together they tend to act as a unified quartet. An impact that jars the left-front wheel jars the entire left side of the car. There's noticeable body roll, and understeer is the order of the day. But just before the push manifests, you'd swear the Smart was going to go into one of those spooky go-kart-style four-wheel drifts. The ride is firm.

By far, the biggest drawback is the Smart's six-speed manumatic. Tip forward for upshifts, rearward for downshifts—a pattern many folks consider backward. More problematic, there's a frustrating delay as each new gear is selected. It's as if the ECU were *insisting* the engine return all the way to idle before a fresh cog could be summoned. In the full automatic mode, the delays are even longer, and because the engine makes so little power, there's a *whole lotta* shiftin' goin' on. We never warmed to

the transmission, even after 3000 miles. To be fair, the Smart guys have heard all these beefs before, and the U.S. version, they promise, "will address every one of them."

Mercedes intends the Smart as a city car, and we generally didn't deploy it that way. We were nonetheless a tad disappointed to obtain 37 mpg, shy of the claimed 50-mpg highway/city figure. Perhaps that's the upshot of driving perpetually at 84 mph, the Smart ForTwo's top speed.—*JP*