Loneliness of the Long-Distance Hauler

NOTES ON TRAVEL PLAZAS, TRUCK STOPS, AND OTHER IN-BETWEEN PLACES

BY LISA GRAY

As travel plazas come to dominate the interstates, even the phrase "truck stop" is disappearing. The largest full-service truck-stop chain in the country used to be called Truck Stops of America. Now it's TravelCenters of America. The industry's national lobbying organization used to be called the National Association of Truck Stop Owners. Now the group identifies itself only as NATSO. The acronym no longer stands for anything.

I wondered whether truckers would mind the disappearance of truck stops — and, in a way, their own disappearance, the destruction of their native habitat, the loss of a place they could claim as their own.

Until recently, the story of truck stops was almost entirely the story of trucking. Long-distance hauling existed in the 1930s and 1940s, but the industry came into its own in the 1950s as new interstate highways made driving fast and cheap, allowing trucks to compete with trains. Food was easy for a trucker to find — he could stop at any cafe with a big parking lot — but fuel was trickier. Because diesel was cheaper than gas, most trucks used the hard-to-find fuel. Fleets opened refueling terminals along their routes, but not every trucker belonged to a fleet. And besides, there weren't terminals everywhere a trucker needed to go.

PEGGY GIANGROSSO MANAGES the Cigo Travelcenter at I-10 and Main Street in Baytown, Texas. It's open 24 hours a day. It sells tattoo magazines, sparkly Confederate flag stickers, and an astounding array of beef-jerky products. A room labeled "Professional Drivers" offers pay phones and free trucking magazines. The establishment looks for all the world like a truck stop, but Giangrosso corrects people who call it that. "When you think of truck stops," she says, "you think of little dives."

More than 80 percent of truck stops now call themselves either "travel centers" or "travel plazas." The phrases mean the same thing: a place that sells diesel to truckers, but at the same time attempts to lure customers in cars, buses, and RVs. Compared to truckers, "four-wheelers" spend freely. But because they have more options on the road — they can park anywhere they please — they're choosier about where they stop. Travel plazas try to assure four-wheelers that they're welcome, that they'll find familiar food, that the place is as safe and sanitary as any other convenience store. At a travel plaza, gas pumps, not diesel, stand in front of the building, and the parking spaces in front can hold nothing larger than an SUV. Truck services — diesel pumps, CAT scales, and parking for the big rigs — are relegated to the back of the building. Truckers enter through the back door.

Country Pride restaurant, Baytown TravelCenters of America: Old-style buffets attract old-style truckers.
Pappa Truck Stop, Baytown: Not a trucker in sight.

Though truck stops exist in rural landscapes, they bring the city with them. Full-service stops operate at all hours, and at night their lights glow on the dark horizon. (The industry calls drivers’ attraction to bright-lit gas pumps “the moth effect.”)

In the parking lot at night, the trucks form a residential colony of their own, more densely settled than many parts of Inner Loop Houston. But in terms of urban anomic, cities have nothing on a truck stop. A trucker might know another trucker, a mechanic, or a truck-stop evangelist, but unfamiliar faces always dominate the little settlements. Soon after sunrise, most of the truckers will be gone.

Recently, I read Alain de Botton’s book *The Art of Travel*. In it, he describes a harshly lit service station this way: “The chairs and seats, painted in childishly bright colours, had the strained jollity of a fake smile. No one was talking, no one admitting to curiosity or fellow feeling. We gazed blankly past one another at the serving counter or out into the darkness. We might as well have been seated among rocks.”

De Botton found a strange comfort in the place: “I felt lonely, but for once it was a gentle, even pleasant kind of loneliness, because rather than unfolding against a backdrop of laughter and fellowship, which would have caused me to suffer from the contrast between my mood and the environment, it had as its locus a place where everyone was a stranger, where the difficulties of communication and the frustrated longing for love seemed to be acknowledged and brutally celebrated by the architecture and lighting.”

Such places, he says, serve as balm to the lonely. He invokes Charles Baudelaire’s poetry and Edward Hopper’s “Night-Hawks” paintings. Wrote de Botton: “The 24-hour diner, the station waiting room, and the motel are sanctuaries for those who have, for noble reasons, failed to find a home in the ordinary world.”

I liked that passage. I wondered how it applied to old-fashioned truck stops and spanking-new travel plazas. I imagined that truckers preferred old-line truck stops as comfortable places to be lonely: Free of cheerful families on vacation, full of fellow truckers. The opposite, I suspected, would hold true at the newer truck stops. Lit by big sunny windows and surrounded by car-driving clientele, a trucker’s loneliness would lose its dignity.

“Pappa Truck Stop,” announced the begoggled yellow billboard on the north side of I-10 in Baytown. “Adult Movies.” I stopped to see what an unabashed “truck stop” looked like.

Pappa offered diesel pumps and room for a truck or two to park, but at 10 a.m. I was the only customer. A few forlorn picnic tables sat on pavement outside a building that appeared to have grown whenever someone found a few extra pieces of corrugated metal. A sign proclaimed the picnic tables to be an ice house.

One door led to a room for viewing X-rated movies. Feeling particularly female and unwanted there, I tried the convenience store. Dusty boxes of truck parts occupied the prime shelf space. A sign identified a food-prep area as a “Barbecue & Deli,” but the refrigerator case held no food, and no one was behind the counter.

I fished a Coke from the drink refrigerator, then realized that I hadn’t seen either a cashier or a cash register. “Anybody here?” I called. “Hello?”

Someone knocked. The sound came from what I’d thought was a wall. Over a low-slung counter stocked with Spanish fly and nude playing cards, I saw a thick sheet of Plexiglas so scratched that it was barely transparent. Back there the cashier, a young woman with dark skin and smooth dark hair, was safe from me.

“Seventy-five cents,” she said. The Plexiglas muffled her voice. She appeared in no mood to talk.

I left.

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Service station owners noticed the market. When some added food, a diesel pump, and a truck-sized parking lot to their regular operations, the truck stop was born. Many of those early stops offered truckers a barracks-style bunkroom and group shower — bare-bones amenities of the sort some drivers had known as soldiers during World War II.

Truck stops varied wildly. Some looked like service stations. Some looked like diners. Some were friendly mom ‘n’ pop places. Some were filthy, crime-infested, and served coffee that had stewed on the burner for days.

Almost all truck stops, though, had similar locations. They hugged the interstate and avoided cities. It’s easy to see why. A full-service truck stop needs a giant parking lot — TravelCenters of America now requires at least 20 acres for a new site — and land, of course, is cheapest in the middle of nowhere. Besides, truckers hate cities. Even in sprawling Houston, a car-sized urban scale makes few allowances for an 18-wheeler. Trucks get stuck in parking lots, unable to turn around; on small roads, truckers have to drive miles out of their way to find a place to turn left or turn around. And since truckers are paid by the mile, not by the hour, city driving pays far worse than freeway driving. A good route is one that doesn’t involve stoplights.

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Pappa's best period. A little after noon, I returned to Pappa, leaving a clean, bright travel center where trucks filled the diesel bays and customers stood in line to order fast food. But Pappa showed no sign of a lunch rush. The parking lot held one other car — the cashier's? — and the deli stood empty. The cashier still didn't smile.

It was, quite possibly, the loneliest place in the world — lonely in a way unlike deBotton's service station, lonely in a way that seemed purely pathetic. And there wasn't a trucker in the place.

In its early days, trucking was a respectable job. Truckers earned roughly twice as much as factory workers, and like railroad workers, they presented themselves as pillars of the community. In the 1940s, some even wore military-style uniforms with marks on the sleeves that indicated years on the job.

By the 1960s trucking still paid well for a blue-collar job, but truckers' reputation had changed. They filled the same slot in the popular imagination as cowboys. They were romantic; they lived outside the law; they were loners. Their laments played on country radio.

In the 1970s truckers expanded their pop-culture dominance to pop music, movies, and TV. Millions of "four-wheelers" installed CB radios in their cars and called each other "good buddy." In 1975, C.W. McCall hit the top of Billboard's pop chart with "Convoy," the CB-inflected tale of a rolling not in which truckers defied not only "bears" but the Illinois national guard. In the movies, Kris Kristofferson, Burt Reynolds, and Clint Eastwood played truckers who were the macho equivalent of stewardesses: icons of travel, freedom, and one-night stands. Truckers were the kind of outsiders that everyone wanted to be.

But still: You didn't want your son to grow up to be a trucker. And you didn't want your daughter to eat lunch at a truck stop.

By 1970, roughly 700 truck stops dotted America's interstates. Oil companies such as Amoco built some of those truck stops, and in most cases leased them to independent operators. Each truck stop constituted its own little kingdom, with its own rules and business practices.

The chain truck stop was born in 1975. Jack Cardwell had worked for almost a decade at truck stops in El Paso, Texas, and he thought that he could do better. "The most important thing I learned was that no one was giving truck drivers the respect they deserved," he told Real Answers, Bridgestone's truck-tire magazine. "No one understood their needs... What they wanted was good food. They wanted clean showers. They wanted ample parking. They needed a place to stop where they felt that they were appreciated."

Cardwell opened his first Petro truck stop in El Paso, and as he expanded his company into a chain he exercised a chain's tight control of each location's day-to-day operations. The strategy succeeded, and Pilot and Truckstops of America quickly followed suit.

The new chains were poised to take advantage of trucking's defining moment: the 1980 Motor Carrier Act that deregulated the industry. After the Motor Carrier Act, federal "rate bureaus" no longer controlled a carrier's minimum fees. Instead, trucking companies were free to negotiate with shippers. As rates dropped dramatically, operating expenses and truckers' pay — once routinely passed to shippers — felt the squeeze.

For truck stops, the good news was that trucking boomed: More trucks carried more goods than ever before. (The American Trucking Associations estimates that professional drivers drove 200 billion miles in 2001 — a 146 percent increase in 25 years.) The bad news was that fierce competition slashed the profit margin on diesel. Truck stops became high-volume, low-profit-margin businesses — a dynamic that favored chains, which could buy in volume and negotiate diesel-fuel contracts with trucking companies. NATSO estimates that of the roughly 4,000 truck stops and travel plazas in the U.S., only half are, like Pappa and the Baytown Citgo, still independently owned.

At the back door of the sparkling new Baytown Pilot, at I-10 and Thompson Road, Larry Lauziere seems happy to talk. He lives in Westlake, Louisiana, and has driven a tanker truck for ten years. Today he was driving from Baytown back to Westlake — a short run. Most truckers hate short runs because they involve more unpaid waiting at loading docks, but Lauziere liked this run. He hates being away from home for weeks on end. His wife used to ride with him sometimes, but then she got diabetes.

When he's on the road, he tries to drive the ten hours daily allowed by federal law. He leaves the truck stop after breakfast, stops for lunch and fuel, then starts looking for another truck stop around 6 p.m. If he waits too long, he risks not finding a place to park for the night.

He prefers the big chains: Petro, Pilot, and TA. He feels safer at those than at rest areas or small truck stops, and at most chains, buying 50 gallons of diesel gets him a free shower and a place to park for the night. Sometimes Lauziere hangs out at a truck stop for days, waiting for a load. Sometimes it's just for the night. For lunch, he keeps Hot Pockets in the DC-current refrigerator in his truck and microwaves.
them inside a truck stop. For dinner, he usually eats at a truck stop buffet. He gets sick of chicken — every buffet has chicken — and he thinks the prices are way too high. If he doesn’t watch out, he can spend $40 or $50 a day on the road.

In the evening, he might watch a movie in a truck stop’s video room, but he usually stays in his truck. He calls home on his cell phone. He watches his DIY-powered TV. He used to subscribe to a deal that let him watch cable in his rig at some truck stops, but the company that offered the service went bankrupt. He beds down in a sleeping bag over his cab.

A few years back he couldn’t get a full night’s sleep at a truck stop. Girls would be banging on the truck door all night. Lots lizards. You still hear them on the CB, trolling for truckers — “commercial company,” they call themselves — but like hitchhikers, truck-stop hookers are a dying breed. They can’t survive in the bright-lit, security-guarded travel plazas. Lauriere likes that.

Lauriere obviously had no use for de Botton’s kind of lonely place. The difference, I decided, was that de Botton appreciated “Nighthawks” places full of lonely people during those relatively rare times when he was lonely. For him, loneliness was a novelty, with a romance and glamour of its own. He could afford to wallow in the emotion. But for truckers there’s no novelty or glamour in loneliness. Like high prices and lot lizards, it’s an occupational hazard, something you avoid when you can.

As deregulation changed trucking, it also changed truckers. Just when demand for truckers soared, many old-timers chose to retire rather than tolerate lower wages. To meet demand, big companies such as J.B. Hunt and Schneider looked outside the traditional white, male labor pool and recruited women and minorities.

Decisions shifted from a truck’s cab to a trucking company’s headquarters. Now, just-in-time inventory practices dictated precise delivery times — not sometime “late next week” but “3:48 p.m. Thursday.” Large trucking companies negotiate fuel prices for their fleet as a whole, and sometimes use complicated computer algorithms to calculate the cheapest places to buy fuel on any given route. A trucker for one of these companies doesn’t stop any place he wants. He stops where the company tells him to stop.

Many companies now equip their trucks with Qualcomm or other satellite communications systems. The systems connect a company trucker tightly to his home base, allowing for far tighter control. Not only can the trucker phone his dispatcher from the truck to ask for better directions, but a GPS beacon might tell the dispatcher where, precisely, the truck is. I expected truckers to resent such spying, but in fact most love the systems. Some satellite systems include cable radio stations that don’t fade in and out of range; most systems allow a trucker to send and receive e-mail. Almost all offer cell phones.

In their cabs, truckers are less alone than ever before. Besides the cell phone and satellite systems, they often have actual human companionship. Many of the new women truckers team-drive with their husbands; sometimes gay couples drive together; and everyone talks about the new trend of truckers bringing their kids along for the ride during summer vacation. Trucking is still a lonely business, but it is less lonely than it used to be.

At the shiny new Baytown Pilot you get a clearer picture of the new generation of truck stops. The convenience store sells Christian books — Experiencing God’s Love, Living Water for Those Who Thirst, The Prayer of Jabez, and The Power of a Praying Wife. Greyhound-brand blankets and pillows offer themselves to bus riders. You can rent an unabridged Danielle Steele audiobook and return it at any truck stop participating in the same program. I looked for shiny rebel-flag stickers but found none. Corporate-owned travel centers don’t carry that kind of stuff.

The McDonald’s next to the convenience store was similarly bright and cheery. Martha Stewart was on the TV, showing the world how to decorate with skulls for Halloween. Two McDonald’s workers were launching their own holiday project, taping to the wall the kind of big-eyed cardboard pilgrims that decorate elementary-school bulletin boards.

Through the front window I watched a white-haired man and two bountiful women exit an RV. Inside, they ordered three cups of coffee and two apple pies. They did not order the advertised special, a “triple-meat Big ‘N’ Tasty with cheese and bacon,” which a sign declared to be available only at Pilot McDonald’s. But then, the senior citizens were clearly not that burger’s target demographic.

Truckers like meat, and they seemed to like this McDonald’s. A pudgy, thirtyish black man with a baggy pants wool cap pulled down on his head entered through the trucker’s door and ordered a couple of burgers to go. One trucker, a fortyish white guy, plugged his laptop into a data port in the booth. A pair of men, apparently truckers, spoke Spanish to each other and ate their burgers in front of the TV. One got up and went to
the bathroom. The other turned, smiled at me, and raised an eyebrow. I held up my left hand and pointed to the wedding ring. He shrugged, still smiling, and turned back to the TV.

We weren't in the "Nighthawks" world; these truckers weren't cowboys on the range. They didn't glare at the four-wheelers surrounding them. They looked glad to be out of their trucks, happy to order their fries at a McDonald's much like any other McDonald's—clean, placeless, and entirely forgettable. What the restaurant lacked in soul, it made up for in hygiene. It was everything Pappa was not. And the truckers liked it.

The TravelCenters of America, at I-10 and Thompson Road, used to be the swankiest place in Baytown where a trucker could buy diesel, but then, about a year ago, Pilot opened that brand-new travel center on the north side of I-10. Since then, TravelCenters of America has "re-imaged" its Baytown location as part of the chain's national spiffing-up campaign. The front building, with the restaurant and convenience store, got a zippy new facade with the corporation's trademark giant red arc under the letters "TA." On the outside, at least, the place looks new.

But Mark Priddy, the manager, is quick to point out that TAs big, brand-new stops put this one to shame. In the mid-'90s, TA faced the problem plaguing its industry: As diesel profit margins slipped, and as more efficient truck engines used less diesel, truck stops could no longer rely solely on fuel sales. TA resolved to change its customer mix—"to hold on to its trucking customers, but at the same time attract an equal number of people in cars."

Michael O'Connor, TA's communications director, says that to divest its future the company engaged in aggressive marketing research, and its executives studied corporate "best in class" models: Nordstrom for customer service; Target for store interiors; the then-new airport in Pittsburgh for its mall-like feel; and the Ritz Carlton for bathrooms. TA hired Paul Westlake, AIA, a Harvard-trained principal at the Cleveland firm Van Dijk Pace Westlake, to design the company's new prototype.

Westlake has said that he sought "the wow factor" when he designed a zany place that looks something like a mall with gas pumps out front. A high, high arch forms the convenience store's roof, and the building's front wall is made of glass. The showers are marble. Name-brand fast-food restaurants stand arrayed in a food court. A snack bar sells cappicino.

When the first of TAs prototypes debuted in Denver in 1999, it made the front page of the New York Times—and, more important, it succeeded wildly with both truckers and motorists. The company has since opened 11 full-sized versions of the prototype. More are planned.

Behind the Baytown TAs spiffy new facade you find truck-stop people of the old school. Mark Priddy has managed the TA at I-10 and Thompson Road for six years. He's a talker.

The TA attracts all kinds, he says. Sometimes hell get one of those extreme examples of the new-generation trucking, a Ph.D., maybe, or a woman driving alone. But mainly, younger truckers prefer the Pilot across the street. They're grab'n'go types who like McDonald's more than the TAs sit-down restaurant, Country Pride. It's the older drivers who like a buffet.

In the evenings, those older drivers sit at the Country Pride's horseshoe-shaped bar and trade stories about the road. They're not travel-plaza material. They're not fond of four-wheelers. They don't want to watch their language because it might offend some blue-haired old lady from an RV. And they don't want some guy in Dockers and a snifft shirt joining the conversation. The old rode-hard-put-up-wet, chiseled, smoking, drinking, cowboy type, says Priddy—that's a dying breed.

And they're dying fast. Trucking isn't the healthiest lifestyle, he notes. When he first got to the truck stop, he saw jeans with a 45-inch waist on a merchandising table. What, he asked, were those things doing there? The guy training him said, Look around. For the first time, Priddy noticed a roomful of walking heart attacks, buffet busters, 400-pound men whose only exercise was waddling from the cab to the restaurant.

Trucking is hard in other ways, too. It's hard being away from your family. Once, when a trucker got word that his wife had died, Priddy arranged for the man to fly home. Three or four weeks later, Priddy picked him up and the airport and drove him back to the TA. The guy got back in his truck, got on with his life.

Priddy has seen a trucker terrified because his granddaughter didn't come home one night. On Christmas, while Priddy is home with his family, he knows truckers are parked in the TAs lot. He knows that they buy knickknacks—shift covers, cab curtains, nut covers—because they're trying to cheer themselves up, to redecorate, to make their trucks into homes.

But the saddest thing, says Priddy, is when a truck driver dies in his truck. It happens all the time. You gotta die somewhere. And where else, he asks, is a trucker going to die?