

Massachotts

Fock 1: Turnpikes and Bullshit

As a native Bostonian – or Masshole, as my Rochester cronies would say – it would be my duty to proclaim that entering western Massachusetts brings a significant improvement in aesthetics over the mundane New York scenery that precedes it. Well, duty or not, it's true.

The Berkshires, and whatever other steep and tree-covered hills that neighbor them, have much more character than the bland wooded hills south of Albany.

The NY Thruway jumps ship somewhere around Albany, eschewing the horizontal I-90 for the plumb line vertical I-87 down to NYC. Hence, at the state line, I-90 takes up its new moniker: The Massachusetts Turnpike, or, simply, "The Pike."



Turnpike is an odd word, given that a pike was a medieval weapon, like a pickax, or maybe a pole with a big spike on it. But I suppose, that was what the original tollbooth was all about. Some big dude stood guard, fondling his pike (hey, none o' that!), and proclaimed, "None shall pass!" (see photo, left). If you paid the loot he demanded, he turned his pike aside and let you pass. And if you didn't pay, you most likely were urged to seek an alternate route.

The Pike is, of course, a toll road. Such roads are typical of the northeast. It seems that just about every northeastern state has some major highway that you need to fork over money to drive on. This doesn't happen much in other parts of the country. New Jersey and Delaware are probably the worst, though they all suck.

The whole concept of the toll road irks me. Am I basting in peanut oil, or aren't our tax dollars supposed to cover road maintenance? Am I sitting on a butterknife, or are all those tolls mostly just paying for the booths, the booth operators, the vehicles and road crew, and the bullshit office personnel of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority? And if it's an Interstate highway, as it seems many toll roads are, then why does the state get to collect the tolls and not the feds? Are we being double charged in that way too?

A Boston TV station once did an exposé on the Authority (what a bogus, self-important name that is, huh?), pointing out nepotisms and bloated salaries, just as you'd expect to find in most state-run organizations. Well, not long after that, in a move that ostensibly had been pre-planned, but could only be taken as a "shit, you caught us" response, The Pike proclaimed Western Mass a toll-free zone, and stopped collecting tolls once you were west of Springfield or so. Very suspicious indeed, wouldn't you say?

Roadrage2000 would be sidestepping the two most notorious toll highways: The New Jersey Turnpike, and the Garden State Parkway. The former is an exercise in industrial driving, having its northern origins in the dingy shadows of New York City, its central stretches covering the charm and wonder that is Newark, and its southern extremes cut through gawdawful boring woods and fields. The NJT is strangely divided, in many northern parts having three lanes of traffic for cars, busses, and trucks, and three completely different lanes for just cars. They are separated by a median strip, and extra access ramps loop across one or the other at each exit or dedicated service area. Quite often, the "Cars Only" lanes are closed – gated off at the access point – and just lie there empty, laughing at you as you trundle along behind three-abreast trucks.

Then there are the Service Areas, all named after someone famous, ostensibly a significant New Jersian. Can you think of a better tribute to a human being than to name a New Jersey Turnpike Service Area after him or her? Vince Lombardi. Walt Whitman. Clara Barton. I know whenever I cozy my buns

onto one of their commemorative toilet seats, I cast a glance skyward, and say "This one's for you, Vince."

And just the name Walt Whitman Service Area puts funny images in my head. What kind of service would Walt Whitman give? Or is the area devoted to servicing your Walt Whitman? I've heard it called a John Thomas before, but never a Walt Whitman. Well, whichever, I give my Walt Whitman an extra shake in honor of Mr. Leaves Of Grass, and, a-wheels and light-hearted, I re-take to the open road.

Though they still bite badger balls, the NJT, the NYT, and the Masspike all are sensible enough to use the card system. The Garden State Parkway, on the other hand -- the northern metropolitan part anyway -- plops a succession of booths right across the damn road. Toll plaza after toll plaza after toll plaza.

It's a pastoral sounding thoroughfare, isn't it? The words "Garden" and "Parkway" almost want to make you sigh in contentment. The name evokes images of extraordinary floral layouts, expansive and well-manicured greenery, and a serene road for soothing both mind and vehicle.

Well, it's none o' that. There's a flower or two, and a couple of lawnish spots, but nothing about the GSP sticks in your mind as much as those damn booths. Every ten minutes, another thirty-five fucking cents! What moron came up with this system? *Let's bring all those thousands of cars to a grinding and infuriating standstill every ten miles or so, just to squeeze another seven nickels out of them.* Screw that!

As much as I hated shelling out \$6.75 in one shot whenever I reached Rochester, at least I could use cruise control all along the NY Thruway. On the GSP, you get goaded into revving up your competitive juices over and over, building that rage as you see the red Toyota to your left -- the one you cut off because he cut you off first, and you just had to chase him down to repay the favor -- and he's *getting ahead of you* again because the lane he chose is edging ahead faster than yours is! Your lane is paying with twenties, his is flinging change. DAMN!! **Move it up there**, you dolts! Cease your interminable twaddle! Can't you all see that this Toyota dickhead is getting ahead of me!?!?! So you throw a buck at Tollbooth Tammy, and fly off without your change, just to swerve back into the lead.

And, of course, it all happens all over again in ten more minutes.

Mile for mile, though, no state is more expensive than Delaware. By the time you pony up your fare to leave New Jersey, cough up another buck or so to cross the I-95 bridge that connects the two, and then go on to pay your Delaware toll in order to move along into Maryland, you've wasted some damn good beer money. All for a dinky 14-mile neck of road. RR2K would *not* be needing the services of Delaware, thank you very much.

Oh, ahhh, anyway, back to Massachotts.

One of the first bridges you encounter on the MassPike is not a road, but a footbridge where the Appalachian Trail passes over the highway. I had noticed it many times, but it never really had any pertinence to me.

When my relocation from Boston to Rochester occurred, my good friend Patrick did the follow-up thang, driving Blue Man in smooth, air-conditioned comfort, while I jockeyed the shitty U-Haul boxtruck ahead of him for the 400-mile jaunt.

When you see one of those U-Haul trucks on the road -- you know, with the scenic mural depicting some location, and a state name on it -- and you read the slogan "An Adventure In Moving", believe it!! This little ten-foot box truck was an adventure indeed. Indiana Jones should have such an adventure.

First of all, the storage compartment overhung the tiny cab by a foot on all sides, right in prime head-whacking territory. It got me really good twice, though I never lost consciousness.

Secondly, but of prime importance to me, the "stereo" was woefully inadequate. It looked like it had been stapled into the dashboard, and only one speaker worked, if you can call hissing and crackling on even the most local stations "working". Once I was beyond the I-95 belt -- basically only ten miles or so from downtown Boston, all contact with music was lost. And, of course, my Walkman -- which had saved my sanity so well on Road Trip '96 (Max's Last Hurrah), when CD's, cassettes, and radio *all* crapped out -- was packed deep in the bowels of the truck, and would not be found for weeks afterwards.

The A/C did work, fortunately; it was a hot and very humid late-July day. Lea and I could have irrigated a small Somalian farm with the flood that we perspired out the day before, when we packed that damn truck to its ultimate capacity. We probably could have fit in another toothpick, but we would have had to break it in half to do so.

So, cool air was about the only thing this little turtle had going for it. Even that was mitigated by the fact that the driver's door didn't fit snugly in its doorway, and streams of wind mocked me with harsh and loud whistles through there all day.

Then, of course, there was the way the truck "rode". To say it vibrated would be akin to calling a tornado "breezy". Once over 50 mph, this little piece of shit shook like a Sherwin-Williams paint mixer.

So, the hell with you-haul, I reasoned, and floored the little fucker all the way to Rochester. There was a sticker claiming that the speed was governed at 60, but I kept that damn sucktruck at 72 or better, even up the hills. I had even concocted a theme song for the ride, based on the Ramones' old hit *Beat on the Brat*: "*Beat on the truck / Beat on the truck / Beat on the truck / Who gives a fuck / Oh ya, oh ya, ohohohoh*"

It was an unpleasant ride, and I was only reminded of it all the more, when I would look in my shaking rearview mirror and see Patrick just gliding along behind me in Blue Man, tunes flowing, AC circulating, and cruise control cruising. The unloading and unpacking was a sweaty ordeal also, but we handled it like champions, then got down to some serious boozin'.

But on the way home the next day, Patrick came up with an excellent idea. Dugg's former roommate, Charley -- twice-former, actually, once at WVU and once in Boston -- was finishing up his final couple of weeks of hiking the Appalachian Trail. Two thousand miles of walking! He started in April, and was to finish up in Maine in late August.

Well, Patrick and I both knew Charley from the Boston days, and Patrick knew that he'd be coming through Massachusetts fairly soon, so he came up with the idea of leaving him a note -- kind of a "hey, nice job, how's it goin', keep it up" kind of thing.

So, as we re-entered Mass., we composed a note on light cardboard, put it in one of those plastic photo-page-protectors and secured it to the railing with wraps of athletic tape, with Charley's name showing prominently.

I was back on my way west again within a few days, and I looked up at the railing as I drove by, and noticed that the note was gone! I didn't know if somebody else had taken it or not, but I came to find out that Charley did indeed get it, and did indeed find it uplifting that a couple of acquaintances would take the time to cheer him along on his marathon route.

There was only one reason to do a Mass-pass on the way to Sacramento, though, and that was golf. Yes, golf.

Now, don't roll your goddamn eyes and *sheesh* me. I'm not going to write about gawwwlf. This is about attitudes, not about whacking a dimpled sphere across groomed pastureland. The plan was to meet Dash and Ban and a player to be named later at Crumpin Fox in Bernardston, up near the Vermont border. Any round of golf with Dash and Ban -- most any activity at all with Dash and Ban, in fact -- was worth the easterly detour on the westerly trek.

Well, that was the hook, anyways. Turns out that the Crump had other plans: they had a tournament that day, and our presence would not be necessary, encouraged, or condoned.

No hard feelings though. Crumpin Fox is not one of those fascist, elitist, ultra-conservative courses where they go out of their way to make you feel that you and your \$75 greens fee are an intrusion upon them. There are places that essentially scold you before you even reach the starter, pushing restrictions down your throat as they sneeringly count your cash or swipe your card. *Keeps carts on the cart paths only! No alcoholic beverages are allowed on the course! Soft spikes ONLY! No slow play will be tolerated! Stay out of the wetlands -- don't even look for your ball in there! Make NO noise whatsoever! DON'T run with scissors!! And DON'T chew with your mouth full!!!*



There was even one course in central Mass. -- Shaker Hills or Sterling, or one of those stuffy places where they believe that you must be scum if you don't have a collared shirt -- where the bag boy actually rifled through my golf bag looking for beers while we were inside paying! We came out, and he had them on the ground next to the bag. I thought the snotty little piece of shit was going to tell me to dump them out. I also thought I was going to wring his scrawny little fucking neck.

But not Crumpin Fox. The Crump, as we referred to it with respect and affection, was beautiful, challenging, and a delight. The clubhouse seems as if it was recently hewn from large fresh pines, the views off most of the tees are spectacular (especially #5 and #8, which is pictured at left), the beverage cart tours frequently, your cart is allowed to roam at will, and, very importantly to us, superfluous play (i.e., extra holes) is almost never a problem.

You pay your fee, get your wagon, and booze, chill, sightsee, and golf – in that order of priority – until the goddamn proverbial cows come home, assuming, that is, that the bovine beasties return to their roosts at darkness.

I don't know about that though. I mean, I've seen cows out all night. That's what makes cow-tipping possible: the fact that the stupid cows are standing out in the wide-open field in the middle of the damn night. If they went home, they wouldn't get tipped!

So maybe that phrase is ironic, and meant to imply staying out forever. Or maybe it means they come home at sunrise to get their fat titties squeezed. It has to be the high point of the day for them, after all. What else do they do all day long? They don't work. When was the last time you saw a cow doing any labor? All they do is eat grass, stand around, shit, and maybe sit down to take a nap. Tough life! So, they wouldn't want to miss the teat-squeeze, and that only takes place at home, and early in the morning. I don't know. Ask a goddamn farmer.

So, OK, we didn't golf till the cows came home. Harumph! Screw you, cows!

And here's something that bugs me (uh-ohhh): why is the term "bullshit" so widespread, while "cowshit" is rarely heard? Is it a fertilizer thing? Cow shit is good, legitimate fertilizer, but for some biochemical reason, bull shit is not? Hence the term bullshit comes to mean bad or incorrect information – "Aw, that's a lotta bullshit, Sven, and you know it! – just as the turd of a bull is bad or ineffective fertilizer? Maybe. Seems like it could be.

But how, then, did "bullshit" come to mean "angry?" *I'm bullshit about that ruling, Judge! That's a lot of bullshit, officer!* Hmmm.....

Here's an example of what I mean. Pardon me while I digress for a second or two. :-]

I was starting to feel like a damn groupie. Wherever Kenny Wayne Shepherd and his band went, I was sure to follow. But the man is SO damn good on his guitar! Well, late summer of '98 brought me three more KWS shows.

Actually, none of them were billed as such: they were all Van Halen concerts. Now, before you go raising your eyebrows, I have not become a VH fan, nor was I ever a closet VH enthusiast. I didn't even know that they did "Jump", for Crissake, until I heard them open with it.

Lea had gotten me the ticket to the Great Woods show as a birthday present, knowing full well that it would be KWS that I'd be digging, while she couldn't wait to see her all-time favorite band, led by "one of the sexiest men alive", Eddie Van Halen. Personally, I thought he looked like a pudgy ugly flea-bitten dog. With all due respect.

So, everything was going great. Warm and clear August evening, easy van ride to Great Woods, a few cold brewskies in the parking lot, and Doug, Lea and myself were on a roll! Just like a cheeseburger.

We settled in on the lawn/beach, so it was by far the greatest distance I'd ever been from Kenny at one of his shows, but he still put on a great show, even without the so-close-you-could-pluck-the-strings vantage point. Lea and I danced a bit, and had an overpriced beer or two.

KWS wrapped up well with "Voodoo Child", and I was sated. I had seen what I had come to see. It crossed my mind to adjourn to Blue Man and watch telly, but Lea was grinning like the Cheshire Cat all night, so I hung around to pick up on the happy-happy vibes.

VH came out to a surprisingly tame response from the less-than-sellout crowd, and played "Jump", to get the audience jumping. It didn't really work. I know I was unimpressed.

Then they played two songs pretty much featuring their prima donna lead singer Gary something, who was even less impressive. After that third song, there was an odd delay. All the power was still on, but, strangely, the band had left the stage.

Great Woods was soon getting quite antsy. So when, after ten minutes, Eddie came back out and apologetically announced that Gary couldn't sing anymore, so would we please all come back tomorrow night, he was loudly booed and jeered.

The crowd can only properly be described as "bullshit." Everywhere you turned, that was the only word you heard. Men and women alike were bellowing, "This is bullshit!" and "I'm bullshit!", and "What a bunch of bullshit!" The rest rooms were hilarious. Nobody was even serious: everybody was pounding

the walls and shouting "Bullshit!" I joined in, of course, and I wasn't bullshit at all. I was actually psyched: now I could come back the next night and see Kenny Wayne Shepherd again! Top ho!! When I left the bathroom, a squadron of security personnel was descending on it, intent on quelling the cacaphony of bullshish ka-ka.

Lea, naturally, was torridly bullshit. She expelled a string of loud and lurid expletives that lasted from the lawn to the van. Very impressive. She raised comment on many aspects of Gary's being, including the arrangement of his anatomy, and the marital status -- and, indeed, species status -- of his parents.