

The Keystone State: Doing the Scranton Dodge

Fock 3: Scranton Dodge Redux

On the northerly ride home, Max got hit by the same pebble twice. Kicked up in a high arc by the car in front of us, the stone struck Max's windshield at a steep downward angle and bounced straight ahead. When it lost its momentum, Max butted right into it again, this time propelling it up over the roof. [Not very exciting, I know, but you gotta admit that's kind of a cool thing to have happen. Has it ever happened to you?? Anyway, it was an unusual enough event to give me a reason to have a beer.]

But that ride north was delightful. Under brilliant sunshine, the grassy, gently rolling terrain of North Carolina became the scenic wall of mountains that is Virginia – always one of the most uplifting parts of the drive. Daylight gently waned and the sunset across the fertile valleys was a great sight. The night was chilling rapidly, the heater was oozing toasty warmth, and we rolled quite peacefully into The Keystone State. It was a wonderful ride ... **UNTIL** Max got within sniffing distance of, yes, *Scranton*. **ARRRRRRGGGGHHHH!!!**

Midnight approached, and a mere three hundred miles remained in the roadtrip, when Max began wheezing and struggling on the big Pennsylvania hills. Each upslope got a bit slower. By the time that dreaded city was at hand, eighteen-wheelers were roaring past us near the tops of two-mile-long hills.

Oh well, I sighed, at least I know the way to a repair shop. Max limped and coasted off the highway and into the bowels of Scranton at about 1:30 a.m. Finding Scranton Dodge was easy; by now, I knew that city far better than I had ever hoped I would. The back corner of the back parking lot became home for the night, and I snuggled under a couple of sleeping bags to ride out the cold, welcome-back-to-winter night.

Man, were those folks surprised when *my* sorry ass came shuffling through their back door the next morning. Betty was psyched: she thought her White Knight had returned to save her from her purgatory. Wrong, Betzo.

Another dismal, time-passing run through Scranton took place. There really is no "good side" to that place. The spark plug wires were the problem this time. They were the original set, but I guess 170,000 miles is too much for a set of wires. Live 'n' learn. Chris replaced 'em, and I skedaddled outa there pronto. I have been wary of that city ever since.

So, four years later, looking to avoid any such shenanigans as Roadrage2000 wended its way out of Jersey and into Pennsylvania, I earnestly sought an alternate route. Dad had mentioned a good one to me once – some former truckers' route that he used to sometimes use in the height of his traveling days - - so I consulted Rand McNally. The maps showed a nice looking option: Highway 209, on the west bank of the Delaware Water Gap N.R.A., through the foothills of the Poconos.

What a fine ride it was! And it even got better. Getting off the Interstate system just got me hungry for smaller and smaller roads. So I dedicated a few hours to an exploratory foray into the forested hill country via routes 447, 191, 390, and 940. Somewhere in those curving two-lane roads, a sign for "Wilderness Camp, Spruce Lake Retreat" stopped me. Behind it was a rickety wooden fence, with the gate standing open. Behind that, a narrow dirt road snaked up and out of sight into the thickly wooded hillside. The word "Wilderness" grinned at me. Blue Man and I sat there for a few seconds, waiting to see if an answer to the question "Why not?" would present itself. It didn't, so we turned hard right, drove through the gate, and up into the wild.

The rutted and rocky drive path was long and twisted (kinda like this story). The forest was deep, thick, and largely unchecked. The shadows were dark and steamy on this hot sunny, July 1st afternoon, but it was not a beckoning kind of shade. There was no tidy planting pattern to these thick woods; the trees grew strong and tough out of rugged underbrush. No daylight shone through from beyond. A look through this forest led your eyes to nothing but blackness behind the trunks and tangled branches.

The jouncy climb led to a large summer day camp. Strangely – this being a summer day – it was deserted. A brief moment to chill in solitude was sufficient here. There was a weak urge to strip down

and do a bath in the pond, but the pond was lookin' a bit scummy and the bottom held promise of grossness.

Though it wasn't nearly as bad, it did put me in mind of the swimmin' hole that Patrick and I shelled out \$3 apiece for somewhere near Gettysburg on RAMtour '84. Actually, he paid for both of us since he was the one who had the serious jones for swimming.

That "pond" was more of a puddle. It was a man-made, roadside, amazingly feeble attempt at a water park. One side had the featured "Water Slide" that was boasted on a billboard somewhere up the road, and the other side was the fifty-foot-by-fifty-foot square pond.

Separate admissions were charged for each side. We had suspicions that the slide price may have even been per trip, and it was a pathetic, dinky slide. This was smack dab in the middle of nowhere: just a dirt pulloff, a chain link fence, and the two "attractions."

The water was turgid. I'm not even sure what "turgid" means, but it sounds gross, and this water was every bit o' that.

The pond sported a coffee-with-cream hue, and the surface was only marginally reflective. I balked inwardly at the sight of it, but Patrick was hell-bent on havin' a swim, and marched right in as if it were a sparkling Colorado stream. Goaded by my younger travel companion, I reluctantly followed.

It was hot. Had to be at least 90. And that's the water I'm talking about. The bottom was that yeuchy, squishy kind of mud that feels like monkeyshit mixed with motor oil as it oozes between your toes – or, at least, what I imagine monkeyshit mixed with motor oil would feel like (I have never actually had the displeasure of that experience, nor do I expect I ever shall).

To escape that repugnant sensation, I went buoyant, but was careful not to submerge my precious head. Looking downward at myself, it struck me that I lost sight of my body about two inches below the surface, as anything deeper was obscured by the swarthy water. A decision to re-test the depth of the pond only gunked my foot into several inches of bottom slime, and I hastened to extricate myself from it, lest it suck me in.

"AH!" Patrick ejaculated (no, not like that, dumbass – verbally). "Something just bit me!"

Well, the thought of anything actually being alive in this crudpuddle – not just alive, but hungry too – was enough for me. Daunted by imagined mutations and feeling far less clean than when we arrived, we exited this watery wonderland (for it did indeed make us wonder) and proceeded to Gettysburg.

If you went to school anywhere in southeast Pennsylvania, then this critical Civil War battle site must be a mandatory field trip. And I do mean "field" because that is essentially what you see. It's good, though: you get pulled into the mood of the place. There are enough markers, signs, and monuments to enable you to understand and to try to envision what went on there nearly a century and a half ago: the strategies, the direction of the attacks, the duration of the struggle, and the appalling numbers of dead and wounded that littered the now clean and quiet landscape.

Fifty thousand men died there. Fifty thousand dead bodies contorted on red-stained ground and stinking in the summer heat. Fifty thousand!! Many not even twenty years old. Lives stupidly wasted because some rich and powerful assholes couldn't make a few compromises.

Gettysburg is a sobering experience. Which is why we didn't stay long. Sobriety was not exactly what we were after on the roadtrip. ;-)

So, yeah, anyway, this Poconos campground pond didn't look *that* bad, but it wasn't quite inviting enough to draw me in either. The trip was still quite young, and though a cleansing would've been nice, it wasn't crucial enough yet to warrant pondscum in my hair.

As I sat there, taking in the scene, I noticed another dirt "road" that seemed to sneak out of the back of the day camp's grounds. Looking rougher than the entry road, it snaked off into the woods, and was barely a Blue Man wide. There was the very real risk of a dead end, or impassable narrowness, and that could lead to a very difficult serpentine ride in reverse, which is no bargain in a big van. But Blue Man sometimes thinks he's a Jeep, so we saddled up and ventured down that road anyway.

For a while it looked like it would indeed be a one-way trail to nowhere. It never widened – in fact, it narrowed considerably – but there were occasional wooden signposts with nothing atop them, which seemed to hold promise that the road had at least been used as an occasional route to or from *somewhere*.

It was about a 3 MPH ride, which reminded me of the winter afternoon several years before when Duggy and I got buzzed and took his Subaru wagon for a stonecruise on the dirt backroads of Medfield, Mass.

Noon Hill Road and Causeway Street were thin, unpaved cuts through woodlands of Boston's yet-to-be-filled outer suburbs. Their pure darkness and convoluting terrain made for excellent late nights of pipe-smoking, slow-driving, and tune-digging. Turnouts here and there led to mysterious foot trails, and, if you knew your way around a bit, a lively stream could be found for some wee hours skinnydippin'.

But Duggy and I were here in broad daylight, trying for a new land speed record of sorts. His brown Subaru had a digital speedometer with big amber numerals, and we wanted to get it to display "1". This did not seem unreasonable; it would certainly be less stressful on the poor old car than making it show "101". Besides, being buzzed bigtime, our average speed was only about 10 MPH anyway.

See, that's the difference between driving stoned and driving drunk. Drunk drivers tend to be aggressive and sloppy, they fly through red lights, and try to pass where they shouldn't. You read about their horrific results when they fail. Stoned drivers roll meekly along, with a contentedly vacant expression, sit stupidly through green lights and then laugh about it when the yellow catches their attention, and if their driving abilities lead to a collision, it's usually just an "oops, sorry, dude" bumper bump.

So, am I condoning widespread weed puffing? Hell, no. Not a damn thing would get done – at least, not well, or quickly. I wouldn't want to mail things if I thought all postal workers were baked. I'd let my teeth rot before I'd let a stoned dentist play with a drill in my mouth. And I certainly wouldn't want the brewers of my favorite beers forgetting if they added the yeast already or not.

One night, on a late night fogride after work, I remember my fellow bar employee Tom "Moonhead" Mahoney cautioning me that maybe I should slow down. We were way deep into the Noon Hill backroads, Pink Floyd's *Meddle* was wailing, and when I looked to see just how speedy I had gotten, my speedometer needle was pointing to "8".

But, this winter day, try as we might – and we tried for what seemed like about an hour -- Duggy and I could not get a "1" reading. It would show "2", and we would try to cut our speed in half, but it just went to "0". Finally, we either gave up or forgot what it was we were trying to do, but we never did get our elusive record.

And, damn, 1 MPH is freaking *SLOW*. It would take you a full minute to cover only 88 feet! That's home plate to first base in 1:01.

Blue Man's speed gauge only goes down to 5 MPH, so I guess if you're going slower than that, you just shouldn't be caring what your dashboard tells you.

Well, my needle pretty much hovered just below the 5 for most of this Poconos campground road. It got very uneven. [The road, not my needle.] In spots, the left wheels were easily a foot higher than the right, only to be reversed a few van lengths later.

After several minutes of rockin' and rollin' through this wilderness, and being tossed about like the S.S. Minnow, sparkles of light began to appear through the thick foliage ahead. Sunshine was glinting off windshields -- many windshields. The forest spit us out into a filled-to-capacity campground. Hundreds of tree-covered tents and pop-up trailers ringed a central family fun area. This place was huge. And apparently, it was some sort of Festival Day.

Big, balloony things were puffed up and jiggling here and there around the perimeter of a grassy front field where three-legged races were being run. Grills were alight, and mirth abounded. Large wooden buildings stood among the curved rows of campsites that spread out wide in three directions. I tied Blue Man to the hitchin' post and set out to stroll around among the merriment.

Keen, as always, to the opportunity for a legit shower, I toted a towel, and pocketed razor and 'poo (sham, that is).

If you can't blend in at a crowded campground, then you should just give up on the blending concept. Nobody is there long-term, so new faces are not only accepted, but expected. Besides, nobody really wants to get to know all that many people in such a place. They came here to get away from their crowded neighborhoods, and ironically, they have ended up in an even more crowded place. And here, your neighbors' nocturnal noises are not silenced by wooden walls and A/C hum. They are barely muffled by thin layers of nylon, just spitting distance away.

So, why do they come? Why gather here among the bugs and humidity?

It's the trees. People love trees. Negative ions, baby, I'm tellin' ya. And this wilderness area was awash with them.

Spruce Lake, which the campground was named for, may have been part of the lure too, but I never saw a lake, and I walked and drove a pretty good bit around there.

Skeeters must have loved this place. In mid-afternoon, they were off doing whatever skeeters do for leisure, but I'll bet they swarmed from miles and miles around to feast on this orgy of uncovered flesh. Male skeeters live only a week to ten days (females up to a month), but what a week it must be with all these hundreds of people coming right into their big dining room and just plopping their plump selves right on the dinner table.

Anyway, away from all the frolic and fiesta, off behind the main buildings, four high school kids were loitering on the swingset. Clearly too old for three-legged frivolity – and for playing on swings – these kids were obviously here on the sly. They went silent as I came around the corner into their playground, and eyed me with cautious indifference – kind of a *who gives a shit about this guy, but maybe he knows my parents* look. My black cowboy hat gave me a less-than-model-citizen appearance, and my green-mirrored shades kept them from knowing if I was eying them back or not.

The expected and familiar aroma of toasted herb wafted to my olfactories as I strolled past the swings. I inhaled audibly and gave them a smirk. They smirked back, a bit more relaxed. I gave them a “which way?” Gesture with my hands and asked “showers?”

Two of them pointed straight ahead, one pointed to the left, the other made no effort to point at all. I nodded, smirked again, played the odds and proceeded straight ahead, leaving them to their swings and things.

The shower room was private and unoccupied, and the hot water lasted just long enough. Showers on the road are always a bonus, especially free ones. It's that beat-the-system thing again, I guess.

Shortly after departing the Spruce Lake Retreat, I noticed a sign which gave me pause: it was four brown planks nailed to parallel upright posts, with a little gap between them, and it stood at the outer edge of the dirt parking lot for a small general store. The four planks, sloppily hand painted in dripped white, read:

**HELP
WANTED
WORMS
BERRIES**

Cheap labor, for sure, but I was moved to speculate exactly what tasks a berry could perform.

Music makes connections in your mind. Certain songs always serve as a reminder of a person, or a place, or an event. Maybe it's the person who introduced you the song, or the artist. Maybe it's somebody you were with when you first heard it. Maybe it's something you were doing that you get brought back to when a special tune hits your ear.

Well, I will always think of this Poconos route when I hear The Propellerheads' "History Repeating" (featuring Shirley Bassey, of *Goldfinger* fame, on vocals). And that was Ban's doing. Ban had made me a Misc. tape and gave it to me just before we parted company way back at Wachusett CC, two chapters ago. This was not unusual. My cronies and I often swapped Miscs., and Ban was always great at coming up with some tunes that I was not familiar with yet.

It was his tape's turn in the deck when Route 209 was chosen, and his tunes carried us down that pleasant road. The thing was, "History Repeating" clicked with me like an open bar. I kept going back to it again and again and again. I must have played the damn song fifteen times in two hours. It just mingled with my mood, got my mind bouncin' and swingin'. It would finish, and the tape would try to continue on, and I would decide, "ehhh, one more time," and rewind it. Over and over.

So, it's kinda cool that every time I hear that song, I get transported back to that place and that mood, and give Ban a little tip of the hat. It happened a few more times on RR2K too, as you'll probably find out.

Once back on I-81, and content that Scranton had been dodged, the trip regained its elusive momentum. Sacramento was squarely in the crosshairs now, but the crosshairs were still a bit out of focus. And my focus is never all that sharp on roadtrips anyhow.

Like I said before, signs catch my eye, but it's usually because of what they say on them. There is a sign on I-81 near Harrisburg that made me just shake my head. It's one of those huge, green, across-the-whole-damn-highway signs that tell you what direction you're headed. In this case, you're

headed for Harrisburg. The word is very prominent on the sign. The word "Harrisburg" is critical to this sign's purpose. Indeed, it's pretty much a "Hey, Harrisburg is THIS way!" kinda sign.

Now, these signs are not cheap. I've never paced one off or anything, but when you have a sign that spans most of three highway lanes, you have a LOT of sign. You could probably park two or three school busses on this sign.

(Well, if you put the sign on the *ground*, you could park busses on it. Up on those supports and crossbeams, bus parking is a tad impractical. Even if you could get the damn bus up there, and get it to stay, you'd probably get a ticket for blocking the sign itself.)

ANYWAY, this was a pretty new sign. The green was vivid, the lettering crisp. The font was Tahoma-ish. The "H" was upper case, but the "arrisburg" was lower case. There was nothing controversial about the "arrisbur". The problem was the "g". And, no, this has nothing to do with my previous anti-G tirade. I've risen above that.

The "Harrisbur" was lined up perfectly. But the "g" obviously had posed a problem to the sign makers. G, as you know, has a tail when it is in lower case. Only five letters are tailed – g, j, p, q, and y – and even though they are not the most popular letters – ranked 17, 23, 19, 25, and 18, respectively -- they are common enough that you would expect that signmakers would have strategies in place to handle them. I mean, how hard is it?

Well, apparently very hard. On this sign, tails were apparently not allowed. The bottom of the g's tail was even with the bottom of the other nine letters, and the top of it was level with the top of the upper case H.

It looked stupid. Damn stupid! You spend thousands and thousands of dollars making and installing a sign that large, that literally millions of people will see, and you *choose* to screw it up! Somebody, some high-falootin' Public Works Department honcho in some crapass office somewhere in Pennsylvania, approved it.

Didn't *somebody* anywhere in this process, take a look at this sign as it was being made, and say, "Nooooo, that's not right." Didn't anybody notice how goddamn STUPID it looks??

I'm sorry, but whoever gave the go-ahead to this sign, you should just QUIT, because you are an IDIOT! And you make your state look BAD. Every driver with half a brain in her/his head looks at that sign and thinks, "Man, they must have some real morons in Pennsylvania."

On the way out of Pennsylvania, we went through York. People don't always make connections about some names and things, and then when the connection makes itself obvious, we just go "Duh" with a forehead slap. York did that to me. At the time of Roadrage2000, my income was coming partly from Personal Fitness Training. Between that and getting my runners into the weight room, I had plenty of exposure to barbells and 45-pound weight plates and such, and I had seen the prominent brands of that kind of equipment. But, somehow, I was still surprised to see the Weightlifting Hall of Fame as I drove through York. "Hey, check it out," I said, apparently to my van, and then noticed the building next to it: the York Barbell Company. "Duhhhh," I thought I heard Blue Man say, "and just where did you think YORK weight equipment was made??"

Nobody likes a wiseass van.

Well ... I do. ☺