

West Goddamn Virginia

Fock 1: Wheeling through Wheeling

West Virginia is small – ranked 41st in land area (just ahead of Maryland – bigger than Croatia, but smaller than Latvia) – and the drive through its eastern nub would be quick. I had thought that once before, though, only to have it not be so, so I was leery about it.

There are a couple of things about this state that I'm uneasy with, and that starts with the name. And the name starts with W. And the problem with W starts with its name.

Are you as sick as I am of the letter W? I mean, think about the stupidity of it: we have a letter that takes three syllables to pronounce! How dumb is that!? Every other letter in our alphabet is a short and sweet syllable, but when we get to the 22nd one, it goes polysyllabic. I've always hated it too. Even when I first learned it in kindergarten, I remember I challenged Miss McGinty about it, claiming that it was really a double-V, not a double-U. She told my parents I was definitely college material.

And why does it need to be double-anything? Did we run out of shapes? Couldn't we have done a square with a dot in it, or a circle with a horizontal line slashing through it? Or an upside-down triangle: "don't forget to cross the V"??

Do we even need the letter? Do other alphabets have the V, the U, and the W? The Germanic languages have a W, but it's pronounced like a V would be. They also have V, and it's pronounced like a V would be.

When I was in Seattle for the first time back in 1990 with Ed and Bobby for the Goodwill Games (Track & Field and Team Handball), we were very puzzled by the references to "U-Dub" that we kept hearing. One of the women high jumpers was a crowd favorite, because she had gone to U-Dub. Then light dawned: University of Washington was UW! U-double-U sounds pretty idiotic. Triple-U is moronic. So, U-Dub it became. Cute, in a retarded sort of way.

What makes the letter so galling now is that we are constantly bombarded by it. It was bad enough when you had to use it for radio station call letters, or in abbreviating World War II, but the World Wide Web has just jammed this annoying letter down our collective throats. Every site begins with "www", a cumbersome and time-consuming plod through NINE syllables -- just to say THREE letters! In this save-time society, that's ridiculous!!

W ranks 15th in frequency of use, right between M and F. It gets a few free rides here and there, on words like *writhe*, *wrinkle*, *wry*, *wrestle*, *wriggle*, *wring*, *write* and *wrong*. W and R are like the hippo and those little birds that ride around on their backs eating all the buggies who think a hippo is a bus. R carries the word, and W just eats bugs.

Similarly, H often latches onto W to get a free ride of its own, in words like *when*, *where* (but not *wear*), *whether* (but not *weather*), *what*, and *why*. The tables turn, however, in *who*, where W hides behind H's sound. Weird. Wacky. Wild. Whatever.

But that's not what irks me about W; it's a pretty versatile letter, and that's a positive. Also, the redundancy concept in the shape is something that I've learned to live with; I accept it as one of life's necessary evils.

No, it's the name of the letter that irks me: the tri-syllabic tongue-turner. You can't even race through them very easily. Thanks to President Bush, "dubya" has seemed to become pretty standard, especially in certain disadvantaged segments of society, and the south.

So, my proposal is this: let's change the *name* from "Double-U" to "Wuh". That's what the letter sounds like! And that's how most of our other letters are named: they all somehow have the letter's sound built in to their names (except maybe "H", unless you're one of those wierdos who pronounce it "Haitch"). So I say, let's make all of our lives a whole lot easier, and change the pronunciation of the letter.

"Double-U–Double-U–Double-U" becomes "Wuh-Wuh-Wuh"; three quick and easy syllables, and get on with your day. Think of all the time you'll save.

In recent independent tests, it has been shown that the pronunciation of "double-u, double-u, double-u" takes an average of 1.42 seconds. Saying "wuh, wuh, wuh," took only 0.71 – exactly *half* the time! This means that if you have previously spent four hours of your day saying "double-u, double-u,

double-u,” and you change to “wuh, wuh, wuh,” you can free up two whole hours! Think of the boost to national productivity! This could be the trigger to the economic upturn that this country needs so badly!

[Those tests, by the way, were not done by some unscrupulous government agency with a self-serving agenda; they were done by me, using my stopwatch and voice. Very scientific, and only slightly fallible.]

It is no coincidence that the stock market woes have accompanied the arrival of the Bush administration. Precious hours of productivity are wasted by unnecessary syllabication: “George Double-U Bush” just takes much longer to say than “George Wuh Bush.” It may seem like a little thing, but, as any syphilis cell will tell you, little things add up.

I’ve already made this change myself, and have been doing it for a couple of years. Those of you who have spoken to me in person have heard me use the “wuh-wuh-wuh” prefix to website addresses. And you know what? Not once have I been misunderstood. Nobody has batted an eye. They write down “www” just the same as if I had used the triple-triple.

It’s time to stop the madness, and save the Miss McGinty’s of the world from having to try to explain a foolish concept to young and probing minds. I honestly think that I might have turned out somewhat normal if I hadn’t been tormented by this letter from a young age.

Of course, we’d have to change the tempo of that alphabet song a little.

But, aside from the irksome initial, the state name still has a fundamental flaw. It’s the “West” part. And I even have two problems with *that!*

Yes, Santa Claus, there is a Virginia. The next chapter will prove that. But there was a total lack of creativity in selecting the name West Virginia. Come on, there were plenty of names left. It’s like having two sons, and naming the first one Bob and the next one Little Bob. Poor Little Bob has to go through life lugging his brother’s name around, and always being compared unfavorably to his sibling. And, no, it would not be any better if he were named West Bob.

Why couldn’t those seventeenth century twits have called the territory Excelsior, or something like that? I mean, Virginia is not called East Virginia. It’s just itself.

I have the same problem with the Carolinas and the Dakotas. Don’t get me started on them.

Maryland and West Virginia are very awkward states too. Look at them on a map sometime. They look like spills. It’s like Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Pennsylvania were are just sittin’ there, and somebody poured some goop between them. The goop seeped into little gaps, squished up against the bigger states. Even the two goop blobs squeeze each other out: WV damn near circumcises MD’s western tip, at almost the same spot that VA nearly chokes off WV’s eastern extremity.

And the “West” thing is hogwash anyway. Take another look at that map. There are parts of Virginia that extend farther west than the westest part of West Virginia. There is kind of a yin-yang thing going on with these two states, and the bulk of WV really is W of the bulk of V, but *North* Virginia would probably be a little more accurate as a name; it’s more on top of Virginia than beside it.

Sigh. So there is plenty to beware of.

But, all that aside, it was past experience, not nomenclature or alphabetic issues, that gave me the worst worry.

In 1992, the Mountaineer State ravaged Max, laying him low three times in a single trip. (It was really only two, but I blame WV’s bad karma for the third.)

Patrick and Neal and I were en route to the New Orleans version of the US Olympic Track & Field Trials, where we would meet up with nine or so cronies for what would end up being ten life-changing days, especially for Patrick and Dugg. But more on that later.

Most of the entourage would be flying from Boston to the Big Easy, but the three of us opted for the extra time and scenery of the roadtrip. We had a leisurely 3½-day ride planned, including a stop at Graceland in Memphis (Neal was a big Elvis enthusiast), and we left in high spirits. Neal was not a fervid boozier, as Patrick and I have been known to be on occasion, so we knew we could count on him to take the wheel once we got some momentum going.

We rolled across Pennsylvania without a care, even sailing smoothly through Scranton (which, incidentally, had not yet tormented Max), but a few heartbeats after we crossed the West Virginia border, Max let out a shuddering groan and limped into the breakdown lane. Something smelled very bad, and, this time, it was not Patrick.

A quick look under Max revealed a flow of sizzling, reddish fluid emanating from the front end of the transmission. The three of us conferred briefly, officially declared the situation Not Good and – this being pre-cell-phone days – I set out on foot to call AAA.

We were towed to an AAMCO shop in Wheeling, a city in the northern thumb of the state that had become shabby around the edges long ago, and shabby to the core more recently.

The AAMCO shop itself was a microcosm of the city. The room seemed large, but really wasn't; a high ceiling gave the illusion of size, but it was mostly useless space. The dirt that put a gray filter on the late afternoon sunlight had been coating the windows for a long time. Cleaning them was obviously not a priority, since it would only illuminate a dingy room. The workers were soiled and tired from a long day, and empty shells of old transmissions hung and lay all around. The place cast a gloomy pall over what was already a grim situation.

The good folks at AAMCO pronounced our tranny "cooked," and said we needed a rebuilt one. It was almost quittin' time on a Tuesday, and they said it would take at least a day to do, so we cabbled to a nearby drab hotel, got us a drab room for the night, and prepared for the unexpected pleasures of spending a night in Wheeling.

Wheeling actually gets its own little box in the Rand McNally, making it appear that people often select it as a Place To Go. If there are noteworthy attractions there, though, we missed 'em. The map does indicate a spot named Good Zoo, just outside the city, but we didn't go there; we could zoo on one another well enough.

So, with vacation spirits dampened but not drowned, we shifted into Make The Most Of It mindset. Patrick wasted no time phoning up his old college teammate Declan, a tall and boisterous Irishman, who had fairly

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DAY 3 - Tuesday 6/16 - Happy Birthday, RGM!

11:44 (1489... still) Recollecting last night will take some work. We went out around 7 or so to get "something to eat." We ended up having a round at The Bridge Tavern (orange was the color of choice in the men's room); then strolling down to the Sportsmen's Club for an Iron City (and to sign their book); stepping next door to Amber's, where Trina the foxy barmaid worked, a guy in a green shirt talked about car parts, and a fat lady who was the food expert won Gator over with her charm. Then, we checked out Johnny Cool's, a very black bar that no one was in, and that we had to be buzzed into after being checked out in the 2-way mirror. Next came the Office Lounge and Karen. Then, finally, we went to Big Boy's (which everyone called Elby's for some reason) and got food. One common theme in all those bars: cheap beer! \$3.75 for 3 beers.

Then, phase two began. Oy. Declan and Brenda showed up, we knocked down a few cold ones here, then went back out for an encore tour. Oy... Cleverly, we left out Johnny Cool's this time. Instead, we ended up in the Cork and Bottle, hanging out with Mike (the owner) and Sandy the barmaid. Lemi did several shots - S. Comfort, Jack, Sambuca. Declan pushed me into the fountain, and Gator jumped in on his own.

recently opened up his own bar in Pittsburgh, a mere hour or so north of us. He sounded eager to help us delve into the underbelly of the Wheel City.

At this point, left to my own powers of recollection, I couldn't tell you much about what happened that night. But that's why I keep my notebooks (see sample page, right, above, or wherever).

Some of it leaks back into memory after reading that page. "Orange was the color of choice" referred to a poster over the urinals: four gorgeous and sexy women, each in a brightly colored bikini. We all agreed that the orange bikini was the best, so it must have been a fashion comment.

While we were at that bar, one of the patrons was heard to proclaim, "Oh, look! The bridge is all litted up." We made no joke about her grammar at the time, because, we figured, maybe they all talk like that 'round here, but, like good Christians, we laughed heartily at her expense many times afterwards.

The various bars are a blur – a cheap, smoky, uriny-smelling blur – which is probably for the best. The Sportsmen's Club, I believe, was a Men's Bar all the way. I don't think it was a gay bar, because I don't think Wheeling was quite that progressive in its "thinking." But it had no ladies room at all, just a men's room, and Brenda had only been let in because she was with us, and we had made a favorable impression (tipped well) our first time in.

Other than that, one underbelly just blends with the others.

Except for the fountain. I do remember that.

It was late enough to be calling it a night, and I believe that we had just left the last of those skanky bars – perhaps we had been asked to – with our hotel in mind. Something distracted the pack on the walk, and I found myself a bit ahead of them. I plopped down on the ledge of a large stone fountain in some lameass little plaza and waited for them to catch up.

They soon approached, with Declan in the lead. From about fifty feet away, he saw me sitting on the fountain, extended his arm, palm forward – kinda Heisman-like – in my direction, and began slowly walking towards me. I remember thinking, "I wonder if he'll do it?"

So I didn't move.

Sure enough, calling my bluff about calling his bluff, he walked slowly up to me, straight-armed me right in the sternum, and toppled me backwards into the two-foot-deep water. Still without moving, I settled quietly to the bottom and thought, "Hmmm, he actually did it."

Declan and I really did not know each other that well. You usually won't dunk a fully-clothed person in a fountain unless you know him very well. Or unless you're mad and trying to drown him.

He wasn't mad, at least not in the angry sense. Declan was just a crazy Irishman who had been boozin' heartily and wanted one more big laugh to top off the night.

I didn't get upset. What the heck, I could have easily gotten out of his way. Besides, it was a June night, I was loaded, it was late, vacation attitude was rampant, I needed a bath to clean off the awful stench from those crappy smoky bars anyway, and being sopping wet in Wheeling just kinda fit somehow. Max was back in action late the next afternoon, which I still marvel at. I put something like \$800 on my plastic, shrugged, and off we rolled, wheeling away from Wheeling.