

Palmetto Ponderings

Fock 3: Brian, Frank, and Pedro

When I did my own relocation to Hilton Head, I definitely forgot to pack a clue. I arrived with a van full of belongings, a wallet full of cash, and not the slightest hint of what HHI would be like. I knew there was golf there, but that was about the extent of my knowledge of the place.

Call it confidence, or call it ignorance. Call it conignorance, if you want, I don't care. I just believed I'd be able to get a job or two without much effort. I figured apartments would be a piece o' cake too. Getting employed is largely a matter of giving the impression of capability and integrity. It is largely up to you to audition convincingly. Getting a place to live, though, depends on there being one available. I was right about the jobs, but I did have to sweat out the apartment, because the pickings were damn slim.

I was down to my last chance, and, fortunately, it clicked. It was a condo overlooking the sound on the southwestern edge of the island. The west-facing view was real nice, and my semi-furnished room was just fine.



My roommate, Brian Leff – or I suppose I was his roommate – was a good egg. He was typical of the non-service-industry working class, I guess. He introduced himself to me as “kind of an inventor,” but his day-to-day job was to climb on the roofs of houses and install these heavy, cumbersome caps and windscreens on the top of the chimneys. Since HHI was still riding a housing development boom, Brian always had plenty of work.

Trouble was, he got paid crap for it. He would toil in the summer swelter, lugging these metal windscreens across the steaming hot, sloping rooftops. He would be gone by sunrise, and would crumple limply through the door after six at night. “I am shot in the ass,” was his usual lament as he would fall exhausted into his big cushy sofa. Strangely, he only made about eight buck per hour for his labors, I believe, which was essentially the same as I was making for pouring drinks and shooting the breeze with the hotel guests in air-conditioned comfort. Even more strangely, he used to brag about that very fact, how he was out busting his ass while I just stood around to make my money. I used to just shrug. I still don't get his point.

As lean as times got in the summer, they got even leaner in the winter. With daytime temperatures commonly in the 40's and 50's, the lure of golf and beach just was not there. The Westin made no attempt to fight it, and simply closed up for six weeks, so all of us had a month-and-a-half of “unpaid vacation,” which is a euphemism for “unemployment.”

So, it was time to go. I left Hilton Head feeling that I had gotten out of it what I could. There were many fun places, like Remy's, where I often grooved to the zydeco vibes of The Chilly Willy Band and the unusual moodblends of the enigmatic Mundahs.

There was a strip bar – oops, I mean, a Gentleman's Club – called the Pink Cadillac, to which, ironically some of us were denied admission one night because we were wearing tank tops. Naked women within, but we couldn't show our shoulders. Fine. Even more ironically, when we changed out of our clean tank tops and returned wearing the sweaty and smelly T-shirts that we had golfed in that day, we were allowed to enter without paying the cover charge. Go figure.

The closest bar to my home was Frank's Oasis. Since there was only one road home, it was always on the way. And since it was beyond any trace of traffic patrol, with nothing but empty, end-of-the-island roads left to drive, Frank's was always good for “one more.”

The O bordered on underbelly. Left to its own devices, it kept its head above water, but it all depended on what crowd showed up on what night. There were several pool tables, a few dartboards, and a kickass jukebox. One night, I got there early, and none of my work buddies had arrived yet. The place was nearly deserted. None of the other HHI drunks had come out for the night yet, either. So, I ordered up a cold Molson, and entertained myself by having a solo darts tournament: Left Hand vs. Right Hand. The game was 301, and I compassionately waived the double-in rule for Team Left. My left has never been especially good at anything skillful, so I gave it a break. Then Left won Game One handily. (Hahaha, get it?) So much for waiving rules. I enforced full rules on Left. Still, Right needed huge comebacks to eke out games 2 and 3. It was strange, though: throwing left-handed, I definitely saw the board differently, and approached the game with a more conservative strategy. Game 4, however, was all Right, a total romp that proved that I am indeed right-handed after all.

Frank's also had The Ring. You've probably seen The Ring: a simple, small hook is attached to the wall at about eye level, and a even simpler metal ring, about 1½" in diameter, hangs from the ceiling on a six-foot long piece of string. You stand about ten feet from the hook, and release The Ring, attempting to swing it along an arc that will leave it dangling from the hook. I would seethe as I watched certain people hook it again and again, yet I arced it and arced it and arced it some more and the freaking little Ring from Hell would just come swingin' right back at me.

On my final night in Hilton Head, a late October full-moon evening, with the van packed and ready for more southern relocation, Frank's was the last stop. I chowed down a delicious cheeseburger, and washed it down with a couple of Molson Goldens. My planned departure was already delayed, but I was not leaving until I hooked that fucking Ring. After many tries, I paused for a beer break and bemoaned my lack of success to the assorted spectators who had begun to either cheer for me or deride me.

Then, over the sound system, came the floating lyrics of a Led Zeppelin tune, as if speaking directly to me: "Leaves are fallin' all around / It's time I was on my way / Thanks to you, I'm much obliged / For such a pleasant stay / But now it's time for me to go / The autumn moon lights my way / ... But now I know I've got one thing I've got to do / Ramble on."

Inspired, I knocked off the last of my Molson, stepped up to the line, and hooked the Ring on my very next try. I was all paid up, my notbook was already in hand, so before the Ring even stopped wiggling, I was out the door with a big goodbye wave.

The island also had some real beauty to it. Spanish Moss was new to me, and I loved it. Big old sprawling trees would be draped with the ethereal strands, swishing slowly in the heavy breeze. Tall, thin pines were also everywhere to be seen. And, even though Hilton Head is on the east coast, there was enough water between it and the mainland to give some beautiful sunsets.

And I have a special place in my heart for South Carolina, and Hilton Head, because it was there that The Blings were born. :-]



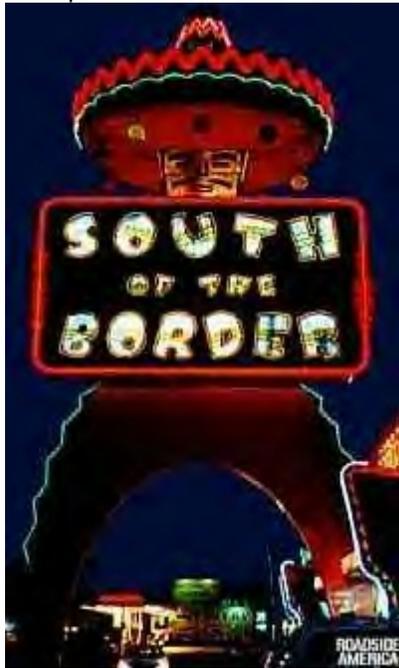
The Palmetto State is slightly smaller than Maine and ranks 40th in land area. It is dead-nuts in the middle for population, at 25th, just ahead of Colorado. It was the 8th state, and, hence, is represented by one on the 13 stripes on the American flag.

The name still bugs me, though, just as West Virginia does, and as North and South Dakota do. If there was a territory called Carolina, why did they bother to split it? Just leave it as one and call it Carolina! When you divide it, you are manifesting a desire for a separate and distinct territory, so it makes no sense to keep the damn name!

At least there is no poor-cousin implication in the Carolinas or Dakotas, as there is with Virginia and it's retarded cousin West. It's not like you have Carolina and South Carolina, or Dakota and South Dakota. There is North and South. Is it supposed to be like "Mr. and Mrs. Carolina"??

But, still, why?? There were so many names available. There were only seven other state names taken at the time! I hope there was at least a fervid plea put forth by some creative-minded soul who didn't want his state to go down in history as The Unimaginative State. And we waste three other states with foolish, uncreative, compass points. Throw in the four "New" states, and you have way too many dumb names. Dropping the "New" from their names, York, Hampshire, and Jersey all would've been fine (except for the link to the English towns), but Mexico just wouldn't have worked as a state name.

And the "South" aspect of South Carolina is drummed relentlessly into your psyche if you are traveling on I-95. Approached from either direction, the border between the Carolinas becomes a most anticipated landmark. From as far away as Florida to the south and Pennsylvania to the north, I-95



motorists face an onslaught of billboard advertising that is unrivaled anywhere on either coast. The signs start slowly and fairly well spaced, but as that boundary draws near, their frequency rises and rises. They lead to, of course, SOUTH OF THE BORDER, that we-have-everything tourist trap that sits just – you guessed it – south of the border of NC/SC.

Brightly colored billboards tout the wonders of the place, with elaborate 3D displays on many of them, and puns aplenty. One such sign supported an enormous reddish-brown 3D tube which extended for the length of the sign. It was slightly curved upward, and was rounded closed at each end, so that it resembled, from a distance, a big hot dog, without the bun. Underneath the tube, in dazzling font and vibrant colors, boasted the corny claim, "You Never SAUSAGE a Place! – You're Always a WEINER at Pedro's!"

Yeah. Groannnn.

And that is just one of, ohhh, a couple hundred? Pedro, the animated, sombrero-wearing Mexican mascot of SOTB, appears, is mentioned, or is quoted on most of them, beckoning everyone to stop in. Some signs blatantly aim directly at children: "Keep Yelling, Kids. They'll Stop!" instructs one.

Fireworks – they have the largest selection of pyrotechnics in the USA -- cotton candy, cold drinks, dinner, motel rooms, souvenirs, gas, ice cream, miniature golf, an amusement park, a wedding chapel, and God knows what else await in Pedro's paradise. All I know is that I got damn sick of the billboard barrage blocking out the landscape, and would flip Pedro and his posse an impolite gesture as I escaped into the next state. If I want commercials, I'll watch TV, thanks.

Stopping at SOTB would have been admitting defeat: that the power of advertising had won out over the power of reason. The place must spend millions every year on their billboards. Even just a \$1,000,000.00 annual expenditure breaks down to \$2739.73 per day, or over \$114.15 per hour. You gotta sell a lot of cheap souvenirs to cover that marketing bill. You would have to sell one \$5 item every 2 minutes and 37.7 seconds, all day, every day, just to cover your ad campaign. Employees, utilities, taxes and all that shit is not even included.

Now, \$1M on advertising might sound like a lot, but rental of a highway billboard would probably run at least \$500 a month, and Pedro must have a hundred or more in each direction, so that would be a-mil-a-month!

SOTB has had over 112 million visitors, they claim, so business must be good enough, and it is prime location on a prime route (100 million travelers a year use that road). It started in 1949 as a beer stand, though, so I really can't dislike the place totally; it may have sold out, but its pedigree is sound.

When you're heading south on I-95, it just makes you glad that you have arrived in South Carolina because you no longer have to deal with the signs. Heading north, it makes you glad to leave South Carolina. It's just one more reason why the inland I-81 to I-77 route is more appealing.

Or, in this Roadrage2000 case, a waaaaay inland route through the hickest corner of the State.

But Blue Man had finally angled more west than south. Yes, west to Sacramento!! (After New Orleans, of course.)

