

# THAT'S A PEACH, HUN!

## Fock 1: Savannah and Atlanta

Georgia is The Peach State. No other state pays such tribute to a fruit. Trees, sure: Palmetto (SC), Evergreen (WA), Magnolia (MS), and Pine (ME). And sundry flora: Bluegrass (KY), Sunflower (KS), and Buckeye (OH). But no other fruits. I guess that makes Georgia unique.

We won't get into their flag; too much controversy. The old one, adopted in 1956, had the old Stars-n-Bars of the Confederate States of America as it's prominent field. With nearly 30% of the state's population being black, and, thankfully, a growing percentage of clear-thinking whites, the tribute being paid to the pro-slavery CSA was deemed inappropriate and offensive. At the time of Roadrage2000, the protested flag was still flying over Georgian soil, but it would soon be replaced (in 2001, then further modified in 2003).



The Peach State is bigger than Michigan (ooh, but Michigan is so big!) but smaller than Washington (ahh, but Washington is kinda small, iddinit?). It's home to more people than Massachusetts is (man, that's a LOT of people), but not as many as North Carolina (but *nobody* lives in NC!). Go figure. I won't say "You do the math." I promise.

This RR2K route from the Smokies didn't go near it, but the coastal I-95 route of my early roadtrips passed within a swallow's flight of Savannah. That city, which is the third largest in the state, was also a common escape from Hilton Head Island. While many northerners flock to HHI, quite a few of the residents there seek occasional respite from its artificially-induced-paradise atmosphere, and scamper off to the real city life of Savannah. I-95 and I-16 bring you right into the downtown historic district, and to the calm comfort of Riverfront Plaza.

Savannah was the very first city founded in Georgia, which was the 13<sup>th</sup> of the original 13 colonies. General James Oglethorpe chartered the colony in the name of King George II. What a brown-noser. One of Savannah's oddest claims is that it was once given as a Christmas present to President Lincoln.

Strangely enough, Savannah hosts one of the largest St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the world, and Canada. Millions of people flock to the Bay Street area for a parade that claims to outdo New York City and South Boston in magnitude and revelry. That's a tall claim. The people also flock downhill into the many River Street bars that overlook the Savannah River.

My own introduction to this city happened a day too late. I didn't know about that massive St. Pat's party, and I ignorantly arrived the day after. It being a Sunday, there was still a good amount of revelry to be found along that Riverfront. The establishments there are lined up in close quarters, with their backs tucked up against the high, steep bank of the river. They are all part of a 1970's urban renewal project that reclaimed an old warehouse and converted it into a colorful array of galleries, restaurants, bars, and so on. They stand tall above the aptly named River Street, which stands raised up from the river itself. It's a short and easy walk from place to place. Good spot.

Some of the patrons that I encountered at Spanky's, at The Warehouse Bar & Grill, and at Kevin Barry's Irish Pub looked like they had been neither sober nor asleep for two days or more. There was also an interesting odor about the area: a combination of the river water and stale, spilled beer that was making the sidewalks sticky to walk on: not unusual for a city on the rebound from a St. Patty's Day swarm. The next rain would make it all right as rain again.

Without a doubt, though, the heartbeat of the state is its capital city of Atlanta, and it did lie along the RR2K route. With nearly 400,000 residents, Atlanta is indeed a thriving and fun metropolis, and is bigger than Georgia's second and third biggest cities – Augusta and Savannah – combined. The rest of the state is what I will choose to call "rural," since that sounds better than "redneck" or "hick" would.

There is plenty of empty highway in the Peach State, with blah and ordinary scenery. That's true of most of the south though, I think. There just aren't enough hills to create long-range vistas, and coastal views are relatively scarce. The vegetation is thick in undeveloped areas, and even the arable lands tend to be less sprawling than their Midwest counterparts.

But the traffic in Atlanta is astounding. As you approach the city, I-85 widens to six lanes of traffic -- in each direction! You begin to congratulate the city on having the foresight to provide more than enough roadway for even the heaviest traffic loads. But then you get closer to the city itself, and you realize how wrong you were. *Twelve lanes* are inadequate! WTF??

This lesson was learned in an early 1996 pass-through that was supposed to be a quick look at the city, to scout out hotels for our Olympic Trials week later that year. Zip, zoom, get outa town. The pass-through was not zippy. Traffic ground to a crawl, then a halt. And there it stayed, and stayed, and stayed. I felt like I had become a resident. All those lanes and nobody moving.

So, since I was going nowhere anyway, I decided to see what was up in town that night. A quick look at the newspaper indicated that there was a pro hoop game at the Omni. I splurged for a pretty good seat, and settled in for some up-close action.

This was one putrid display of "sport" that the NBA foisted upon the public, though. The Hawks and Cavs engaged in a horrible advertisement for the game of basketball -- this should have been called "bogusball" -- that reached halftime with a pitiful score of 38-37, and only got *worse*. No set plays at all. Terrible shooting. Dozens of turnovers. Cheap and stupid fouls. Ugly, ugly play all around. Small wonder that fewer than 5000 people spent their Friday evening watching the playoff-bound Hawks earn their coach, the estimable Lenny Wilkens, his 1000<sup>th</sup> career victory.

Before either team reached 50 points -- Cleveland did so two minutes into the *fourth* quarter -- I had determined that this game was too heinous to view this closely. I abandoned my fifth-row seat, and sought out The Remotest Seat. And it was remote indeed.

When I got up behind the top row of the upper level at midcourt, I spied a ladder. My eyes followed the ladder up the side wall of the arena, and into the rafters, where it led to an unoccupied and *unguarded* television camera platform. People were even less interested in the arena's upper reaches than they were in the court, so my ascent went undetected. I was soon seated just under the roof, quite proud of myself, quite far away, and even a bit chilly, if you catch my drift.

Of course, I had to mark my territory. So the next time a crew would clamber up to that lofty perch, they would find "RAM 3-1-96" scrawled in small but prominently-placed block letters on their custom canvas camera covers.

That wasn't the only time I sprung for a good seat at an Atlanta sporting event, only to end up going Remote. The Friday evening Braves game at Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta stands out. Usually, when I visit other cities' stadia, I just buy a medium-to-cheap seat to get myself through the turnstiles, then spend most of the game wandering about, catching as many angles and views as I can, watching the fans, and comparing the FQ (Friendliness Quotient) of the various beertap tenders. Getting a good seat is not high priority, because I know I'll be able to slink my way into the low boxes late in the game anyway.

Once in a great while, though, I do plop down top dollar to get the Hot Shit Seat.

For those of you who don't know, "hot shit" is a compliment. It is good to be referred to as a "hot shit." Believe me, I have no idea why. I've given this one some good thought too, and I just can't figure it out. Would a "cold shit" be a good thing too? Or is it the warmth of the feces that is so endearing? I get stuck on the fact that -- warm, cold, or tepid -- shit is shit.

It's likely just a naughty spin-off of the more socially acceptable "hot ticket," just as "shooting the shit" is a twisted version of "shooting the breeze," though both serve as idioms for confabulation. They're taken as being synonymous with "chewing the fat," which is a reference to the Inuit passing the time by masticating whale blubber.

"Hot ticket" itself is a bit of a puzzle, but I suppose it means "something in demand." Following that, a person who is a "hot ticket" would be someone popular, a life of the party kinda guy, and in demand for social activities. And "shit" replaces "ticket" because, well, why wouldn't it?

Anyway, having grown up in an area where "hot shit" was just always a favorable description, I assumed that the country -- the whole world even (*Il est un merde chaud, n'est-ce pas, Jacques?*) -- was all in agreement.

Then I used the phrase outside of New England. On an elevator at BYU in Provo, Utah, with six other track coaches from all corners of the US, while talking about a fellow coach at the week-long school, I happened to say, "Yeah, Jeff Johnson's a hot shit." There was an awkward silence for a second or two, until Skott said, "I don't know, I think he's a pretty good guy," and the others nodded in consent.

"I know," I replied, "that's a compliment."

"Why?"

Stumped.

We were on our way to a bar anyway – A. Buford Gifford's Libation Emporium, to be exact – so we came up with several possible etymologies of the phrase and its positive connotation. Some were hilarious, but thanks to Giff's libations, I have no recollection of them, and they are lost to the ages.

Anyhow, here in Atlanta in 1988, there were no second thoughts about the Hot Shit Seat. That year, the Braves sucked. They would go on to become the Team Of The Decade, beginning with their 1991 Worst-To-First transformation, but that was still three years of bad baseball away. They were a woeful 54-106 that year, for a .338 "winning" percentage.

It was a gorgeous Friday evening in late-June, and Max and I were trekking back northward from Florida. Atlanta had been the goal for the night, and taking in the ball game seemed like a great way to start it off. We pulled into a spot in the second row of the parking lot across the street from the ballpark at 7:25, and I hurried over to the ticket window. There was no line.

I announced to the elderly man behind the cage, "I'd like the best seat you have available."

He replied in a deep, unhurried, distinctly southern voice, "y'all wan firs' ba' sahhd, o' thi'd ba' sahhd?"

"Whichever is better."

He shrugged. "Don' matta."

"Third base side."

"Nahhhn dolla."

Ducat in hand, I entered the virgin territory of Fulton County Stadium. The first strains of the anthem began, and I focused on the signage that would steer me seatward.

Let's see... here...up this ramp...behind these standing people...down this aisle...up yours, usher, I don't need your help...down here...and down...and downwnn...

I rechecked the ticket, and looked at how many rows were left. "I'm in the damn front row," I muttered. Only then did I look around at the stadium. It was all but empty. The Friday night crowd, which would later be announced as about 5000, was more likely less than 3000. In a stadium built to seat 52,013, that looked damn lame. Small wonder that they ranked 12<sup>th</sup> out of 12 among NL teams in attendance.

I had barely settled into my seat when a waitress – a *waitress!* good luck seeing *that* at Fenway! – came over and took my order. Moments later, cold Moosehead in hand, feet up on the visitors' dugout, I turned my attentions to baseball.

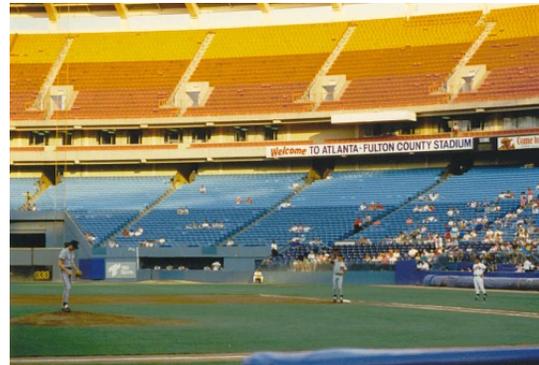
Four empty seats to my right, at the corner of the Giants' dugout, a fairly well-dressed couple sat. A few players had come out to shake their hands and exchange pleasantries. Later, I asked the man if he had an affiliation with the Giants, and he replied good-naturedly, "I'm their Vice President." The woman gave me a tolerant smile.

Dale Murphy, the closest thing the Braves had to an established star, but suffering through his first of six bad pre-retirement seasons, provided a spark early on with a two-run homer in the bottom of the first, but the Braves were already behind. The crowd gave a polite little golf clap as Murphy did his trot.

By the time Murphy was up again, the Giants had a touchdown and more on the board. Dale sent another horsehide rattling out among the vacant outfield seats, and a smattering of appreciative applause echoed through the stadium.

In the sixth, with Braves on second and third and two outs, and the home team trailing, 13-3, Murphy came up again. He blistered a fierce line drive that the shortstop barely had time to catch before losing his face. Third out. The "crowd" booed Murphy. I wanted to stand up and bellow at them, berate them for their ignorance. But I had a full beer and didn't want to spill it.

The game was not worth the cost of the front-row seat, but the between-inning entertainment sure was! Alternating between first and third base from inning to inning, a full squad of cheerleaders danced and pranced atop the dugout roofs as the teams changed roles. It was uplifting. If the remainder of the game had been cancelled in deference to this performance, I would not have protested.



Late in the game, I went walkabout, looking for that grand overview. Fulton County Stadium was one of those round multi-sport stadia that was so common in the 60's and 70's, so every top row seat was as remote as the others. Center field seemed like a long way to walk, so the seat directly behind home plate became the target.



It was clear that my (or anyone's) presence was not wanted up there. A ribbon of orange tape roped off the top section, and ushers slouched somnambulant in some of the tunnel openings. Slipping by two lazyass, sleeping-at-the-switch, usher boys was a piece o' cake, but emerging into full view would definitely draw somebody's attention. But, taking the brazen approach, I strode with confidence from the tunnel, and began to trot up the first aisle towards the top row.

Some overachiever in a red jacket, gave a shout from about five sections over, and began to walk my way. I heard him, but pretended not to. He yelled a couple more times, but I was already preparing my camera. He stood angrily at the bottom of my aisle as I snap-snapped a few photos of the yawning empty park.

With my coveted pictures procured, I deigned to notice the exasperated usher. Giving him my best, "Who? Me???" look, I jogged back down. I gave him a shit-eating smirk as I approached. I decided not to insult his intelligence with some knucklehead excuse, and he decided to spare me the insincere rebuke.

It was a mutual WTF: there was no real reason for him to keep me out of there, other than his boss telling him to; and there was no real reason for me to take the hi-ro-fo-to, other than I just wanted to.

It's astounding the stack of photos you can accumulate after a few roadtrips. In '84 on the RAMtour the Los Angeles Olympic Trials, my Pentax ate through 24 rolls of 36 exposures each. In '90 – the Trans-Canada trek – the trip photos cost over \$350 to develop and print. Just when you think your vacation expenses are finished, you're shelling out twenty cases worth of beer money to see glimpses of it again.

Then you get that pile o' pics and begin to flip through them. If I was smart, I'd pick out the few dozen cool ones and just toss the others away. But nooooooo, I have to keep them all, like they are irreplaceable links in some kind of magic chain or something.

There were maybe six early-trip pictures of the highlights of Ontario. That's really bad. The frigging province is bigger than Texas and Montana *combined* – 1380 miles of driving -- and I can't even get a dozen sights worth a snap. Oh, yeah, and one of the ones I did take was of a huge nickel poised atop a dead hill in a moon-like, over-mined region.

The plains of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta took up a couple of rolls. But when we reached the Canadian Rockies, and saw all those jagged peaks after days of flat-flat-flat, I went camera kooky. Snap – you get the picture. (Hahahaha, picture, hahahaha.)

The result: the photos come back and I flip through them like I'm counting Monopoly money. "Mountains, mountains, mountains, mountains, mountains, mountains, more mountains, still *more* mountains -- ooooooh, that one's nice -- mountains, mountains, more goddamn mountains..."