

THAT'S A PEACH, HUN!

Fock 3: Banners and Small Town Entertainment

There was another agenda for this trip, too, though: banner-heisting, a clandestine Olympic Trials event that had become a major part of OT '92.

We had been scouting the banners since we arrived. These were made of ordinary vinyl, hung about four feet long and three feet wide, and had a red-and-white Olympic logo on the top half with a black-on-white advertisement below it. Unlike the prized New Orleans banners, which were nearly double that length, were of far sturdier stock, and hung well out of reach on tall streetlight poles on major city streets, these Atlanta banners were easily accessible. They were much smaller and more cheaply made than the New Orleans banners, but they were hung everywhere around the Stadium area. Still, you couldn't just walk up and pluck one, since they were in plain sight, and apple-conscious security was constantly on the prowl. It was only a matter of time before the first blow would be struck, and I wanted it to be mine.

The three banners we purloined in The Big Easy required teamwork and a tool. We had been coveting them for most of the week, and laying an elaborate plan. But one night on the way back to the van, as we walked along a deserted sidewalk outside the French Quarter, Paul and I had the same idea at the same time. We had lagged behind the other eight, and one banner and pole particularly caught my attention. My hand was just slipping into my pocket, when Paul said slyly, "Got your Swiss Army knife?"

Without any further verbal communication, I handed him the knife, gave him the standard foot-hoist, from which he climbed onto my shoulders. I steadied his legs with my hands, as he cut the four thin plastic ties that locked the banner on its support arms. I heard him say, "done." In one motion he dropped the banner to me, and dropped himself lightly to the ground. I rolled the banner up like a scroll and tucked it under my arm. Paul assumed a position just in front of me to block anyone's sight of our trophy, and we casually caught up with our sauntering party. Not one of them had a clue that we had pulled off the heist. When we got back to the van, I tossed the banner in to them with a "Ta-Daaaaa!" and the banner lust blossomed.

That lust had simmered for four long years, but anticipation had been high in the last weeks before the trip. We had hoped that Atlanta's banners would surpass NOLA's in size and quality, so we were a tad deflated when we saw them, but we still craved them.

This Monday afternoon was an off day for Track & Field, which is why the golfers went to whack a few. It also meant that the Stadium area, which had been full of fans and displays and patrols all weekend, was now virtually deserted.

As I wandered back from The Underground, I reconnoitered the area carefully. Away from the Stadium, at the far end of the parking lot, was a fenced zone where companies had promotional booths and displays for the T&F zealots. Since no zealots were around today, the zone was empty and locked. One uniformed man sat in a chair under an umbrella, cooled from the mid-afternoon sun by a light breeze, doing his best Washington Irving imitation.

The chain link fence gave good cover from the road and from the lot, but I was in plain sight of the snoozing guard, who sat less than ten yards away. Skulking draws attention in times like this, so, once I resolved to strike, I walked with a calm sense of purpose right over the banner, as if I had been assigned to adjust it. It was installed on two parallel, horizontal bars, stretched tightly between them. There was no plastic tie-down to secure it, and no knobs on the end of each arm. It seemed like easy pickins. But when I gave it a gentle tug, to smooth it noiselessly off, it wouldn't budge. I tugged a little harder, and even gave it a sharp jerk, but that only made the fence rattle. It sounded loud to me, but Sam Sentry just kept zzz'ing away, earning his pay the easy way.

With the initial strategy foiled, I paused to reassess the task at hand. It occurred to me that the arms that held the banner taut were nothing more than ½" aluminum tubing, which wasn't exactly steel. An upwards push on the bottom arm easily raised the tubing, slackening the coveted banner, and it slid off like a prom dress into my waiting hands. I hastily rolled it up as tight as I could, nodded appreciatively in Sleeping Ugly's direction, and dashed off with the prize.

When the golfers returned to their hotel room, they were met with a red-and-white banner hung across their bathroom doorway. Victory cries abounded, and the harvest was launched. I'm not sure

how many we ended up with, but we actually got tired of taking them. Later in the week, I got another one when we came out of the Braves' night game.

Olympic Stadium, which also was the venue for the Opening and Closing ceremonies, and had that hideous erector set that the Torch was perched upon, was directly across the parking lot from Fulton County Stadium, where Ted Turner's Atlanta Braves played. Amid the thousands of fans exiting down the sidewalk of the shared lot, I pushed-and-pulled another banner right off its frame and into my shirt. There was some vague female voice behind me protesting my theft, but my accelerated walking pace soon left her behind in the throng. One evening, Bryan simply walked up to a banner that struck his fancy, and just plain took it in full view of everyone. Given the contrast with in-stadium security, banner-heisting was becoming almost a bore.

Almost. ;-)

Continuing west from Hotlanta here in 2000, I thought ahead to potential suppers stops and such. Myriad small towns lay ahead, and they often provide a nice breather. They are a quicker in-and-out than big cities are, and they tend to show some character that the urban centers can stifle with their corporate genericism.

On one of the Florida-Boston jaunts, in 1993, for instance, I pulled in for a supper stop in Tifton, which, with a population of 14215, was either a large town or a small city. I had a hankerin' for some good, hot pizza, and some good, cold beer. Gionelli's Pizza looked like a happenin' place. The primary sign proclaimed that it was "The Best Pizza Place In Tifton", and another, bolder sign, shouted the word KARAOKE for all to see. I'm not a karaoke enthusiast, by any means – I'd rather listen to the real songs, by the real artists, than suffer through some jamoke straining his larynx trying to be Bruce Springsteen – but if that's what Gionelli's was serving up as the side dish to pizza 'n' beer, then I guess I'd choke down my helping of it.

The place was packed. Half of Tifton must have been there. Karaoke, apparently, was all the rage in this burg. There was one very small table near the back of the room that was left. People seemed to be giving me distrusting looks as I walked through the room, as if they could sniff my Yankee musk as soon as I entered.

With a polite, dry, closed-mouthed smile, I told them all to kiss my booty, and I took my seat. Service was slow, due to the crowd I suppose, so there was nothing much to do except wait. The music was already playing, but nobody was signing up. The karaoke host guy sang the first couple of songs. He was an OK singer, but nothing great. You don't want the opening act to be really good. If the show opens with some killer good crooner, or some babe with righteous pipes, or some golden-throated tenor, then nobody else is going to want to go up there; it's just too tough an act to follow, and you are going to look all the worse by comparison.

So, the host did two blah-yawn numbers, then let the machine play the next one as an instrumental. The ice was getting thicker by the minute; it needed to be broken, and, I figured, I was just the guy to break it. Nobody there knew me, or would ever see me again. There was no reputation to lose, and, hence, no real embarrassment to suffer. It was that on-the-road freedom thing coming back. Summoning up a southern drifter persona, I chugged own my beer, and went up to sign up. The host was relieved, and he put me on stage forthwith. I did my best Bob Dylan voice for a crowd-awakening version of "Like a Rolling Stone". It seemed long. Really long. But I got into it, sang it with volume, if not tone, and took the onus off whoever would sing next; this was not an especially tough act to follow. When I left the stage, to modest applause, there was already another performer waiting, and I could see others signing up. I had done my duty. I returned to my table, and my pizza was just arriving. I ordered up another beer, began the chowing process, and faded back into comfortable obscurity. The singer who followed me wasn't very good...

Speaking of barroom entertainment, southern Georgia provided another memorable incident. On another GA just-passin'-thru thing, I stopped to visit Dad and Marilyn at the condo they were renting on St. Simon's Island, which is just off the coast near Brunswick. It's a nice place. Not as large or as developed as Hilton Head is, but with some really nice residences, and a good beach. The condo was decent, but they go to bed pretty early, and this doggy was up for a little nightlife. Unfortunately, SSI doesn't have a whole lot of that.

What I did find, though, was a small bar near a marina on the south side of the island. The bar was like a shanty. It was small, and darker than most bars I've seen. There was entertainment there, but

it wasn't music. It was Comedy Night, which struck me as a bit strange. Generally, you need a good-sized audience to make live comedy work. Laughter is very contagious in a large crowd, and a few "good laughers" can get the whole room going. You know the "good laughers": the people whose laugh is just so mirthful, or so silly, that you can't help getting the urge to laugh yourself.

But, in an underbelly lounge, with maybe a dozen people there, most of whom are there more for the booze than for the entertainment, the comedian really has his work cut out for him. With just a few others around, people feel more self-conscious about bursting out. They may smile, or let an audible chuckle escape, but there is a strange aura about the silence of an almost-empty room. Even ordinary conversations tend to be hushed in such spaces. There is no reason not to cut loose, but your own voice or guffaw sounds so damn loud and conspicuous that you hold back.

Well, I went into the old shanty and took a seat at the bar. There were maybe nine people clumped here and there at the half-dozen tables between the bar and the stage. A very average looking guy was on stage with a microphone. He was clearly not Vegas quality. Still, I sympathized with his plight, and was willing to give him a fair shake.

There seemed to be a tension in the air already, though, and after only two quick jokes, some drunk, rough-edged, squirmy-looking guy at one of the tables shouted out some disparaging comment. The comedian took the heckle in stride, and parried the man's thrust with a cutting witticism. Clearly dim-witted, the heckler could not muster an immediate come-back, and the comedian galloped onward into his next jokes.

Not surprisingly, Squirmy did not stay quiet long. After another joke or two, he had to bellow out some other remark. Unfortunately, his tablemates found his remark funny and laughed at it. Thus encouraged, the heckler began to feel the spotlight shifting to him. He now felt empowered to compete with the comedian.

Even more unfortunately, though, Squirmy's comments were not funny at all: they were simply crude blurt-outs like, "You're not funny," and "Get a new job, loser," and such classless things. The entertainer tried valiantly to just ignore the outbursts, but eventually he had to respond.

As all stand-ups have to be, he was well-versed in the art of the rip, though, and kept digging into his Back At Ya file for more and more biting repartee. Predictably, Squirmy soon had exhausted any attempts at humor, and resorted to blunt obscenities. The comedian's retorts did not cross the line, but he definitely went from funny-nasty to nasty-funny.

The rest of us wearied of this base dialogue quickly. I had gotten very aggravating. Even Squirmy's two women companions seemed to be shushing him. There was an uncomfortable moment as both sides reloaded their guns, and, before I really thought much about it, I stood up – apparently feeling that taller equals more intimidating – and spoke clearly, firmly, and decisively, with the practiced tone of an angry teacher addressing an unruly student: "Why don't you just clam up and let the man work."

Almost immediately, a few supportive voices could be heard. "Yeah, shut up, man," and "We came to hear him, not you. Be quiet."

Squirmy initially gathered his ire for a response, but when the others admonished him too, he deflated like a bad tire. He sat down and stewed until the comedian regrouped, cleared his throat, and returned to his material. Once the act resumed, Squirmy and his two friends quietly departed. I gave him a cold, penetrating look as he walked near, but he didn't look at me. Loud-mouthed wuss.

The atmosphere in the room immediately lightened. I asked the barkeep what the Jokeman drinks, and ordered him up one. I carried his Jack-and-Coke up to the stage and handed it to him. He gratefully took a long pull, and launched into a string of jokes and insults at the expense of the departed Squirmy. He was hilarious. The handful of us who remained had a great time.

The next day, as I was leaving St. Simon's Island, and heading south to Florida, I saw a very odd thing. Each state's highway department tries to assist motorists with roadside signs that tell how far various destinations are from your current position. Personally, I love these signs. They help me chart my progress, and remind me where the hell I'm going when my mind wanders a little too much.

The first such sign that I saw on this southbound road heading towards Florida read: "Jacksonville 73". The next sign, a mile further south, said "Jacksonville 74". WTF? I went a mile towards Jacksonville, but was a mile further from it? There's something verrrrry suspicious about that road...

The Interstate across Georgia is not scenic, but that is because Georgia itself isn't. Probably the most scenic spot that I ever saw in Georgia -- and, come to find out, Georgia's "#1 Family Destination!" -- was Stone Mountain. If you're not familiar with it (I wasn't), it is to the Confederacy what Mount Rushmore is the USA: national heroes carved into the face of a mountain. In this case, the "nation" in question is the short-lived Confederate State of America.

Stone Mountain, of course, had that name before all the carving was done, and it is aptly named, since it's enormous, almost-vertical face is uninterrupted stone. It's called a mountain partly because mountains are hard to come by 'round these parts. Actually, a geologist would tell you that it's an exfoliated dome, which is fairly rare thing. It's a gigantic hunk of exposed granite that stands 1683 feet above sea level, higher than the highest point all but 41 states. Carved on its somewhat convex face are the three major figures of the Confederacy: Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson. The carving was begun by Gutzon Borglum, the same artist who did Rushmore.

In the large, flat, plain area below, Stone Mountain State Park is full of nifty stuff to do: boating, fishing, golf, camping, and tennis are just a few. SMSP, as we found out to our surprise in 1996, was the tennis venue during the Summer Olympic Games. There's also a waterslide, an antebellum plantation, and a Car And Treasure Museum. After sunset, the three Confederate heroes get laserized in a dazzling light show.

We didn't see any of that shit, though; we just climbed the hill and snapped a couple of photos for posterity. When we couldn't find posterity anywhere, I just kept them for myself. Part of our OT96 entourage did make another trip out for a day of golf, but, in an unusual turn of events, I declined the chance to flog, and, in a not-so-unusual turn of events, I opted to spend the day bar-hopping around Atlanta instead. The dark, woody bar called The Groundhog Tavern, in the underground shopping area that is cleverly called The Underground, further entrenched itself in my heart as a favorite. I had quaffed delicious Bass Ale there before, and did so eagerly again, while penning a bling or two. The background music was a subtly-bouncy blend of jazz and rock and techno. Very good for the digestion.

But on RR2K, Georgia passed without incident, and though Atlanta provided I nice mid-state break to the mundane rural surroundings, it was only a pass-through this time. The city provided a nice wash of memories, but I was not in city mode this day. I had the call of Bourbon Street in my ears and a long way to go to get there.

The Alabama border would soon be breached. The route would go from "Not Scenic" to "Even Less Scenic". As Roadrage2000 continued on towards the Olympic Track & Field Trials in Sacramento, I wondered what grand OT banners would be in store for us in that distant California city...