

Mississippi

Fock 1: The NTP and the Fall of Mr. Hobson

I bid my new Illinois friends farewell, and made myself welcome in Mississippi. It was easy to do. There was nothing around but trees for quite a while. This is a pretty rural state. It ranks 31st in population, 31st in area, and -- whaddyknow? -- 31st in population density, though I suppose that might depend on which definition of “dense” you are using. It’s bigger than Pennsylvania and has more folks than Kansas. On the other hand, it’s smaller than NY and has fewer people than Iowa. Its highest point, brazenly named *Woodall Mountain*, looms 806’ above sea level. So, there ya have it.

It’s also The Magnolia State. I found that kinda strange because I had just recently learned that Louisiana’s State Flower is the magnolia. Nothing wrong with sharing a State Flower, I guess. Just because your neighbor likes it, that doesn’t mean that you can’t like it too.

Mississippi’s State Bird is the Mockingbird. At first, that seemed to make sense, because of the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, but then I realized the setting for that book was Maycomb, Alabama, not Mississippi. Still, the mockingbird is a cool choice; they sound so great. We had one in the tree in front of our suburban home in Needham, Massachusetts for a few nights one summer. At least, I assume it was a mockingbird. If it wasn’t, it sure did a good job of mocking a mockingbird.

This little avine creature, whatever it was, had a seemingly inexhaustible repertoire of songs and sounds. It was incredible to lie there in the dead silence of night, and then hear this bird begin its performance. It would croon one tune for maybe a minute, switch to a different timbre and rhythm for another minute, then toss out something else that had no resemblance at all to the first two. It would keep changing and changing and changing. It was a terrific show.

UNLESS you had to get up early for work, like Dad did. I was working nights, so it sang shortly after I got home, but with 6:00 a.m. wake-ups imminent for the Dad, this wee hours serenade was as unwelcome as if I had cued up my *Aqualung* LP. Dad grabbed the basket of old tennis balls that was sitting in the garage, and gave the tree a salvo. He bombarded the branches with fuzballs and the mockingbird flew off. It came back the next night, and got another barrage. That was the last I heard of it. I wanted to record his song, but Dad saw to it that I never had the chance.

When I arrived in Mississippi, I couldn’t help but notice that the State Flag still has the CSA Stars-and-Bars in it. I dunno, y’all, I think it’s time to move on with life. That Confederacy stuff didn’t work out too well. Let it go.

Highway 61 is a scenic route in its own right, so Mississippi was a pleasant experience from the start. Forty miles north of the LA/MS border is the small city of Natchez, a Mississippi River port that is the starting point of the Natchez Trace Parkway, which was, at one time, a prominent mule trail for lugging goods to Nashville. It passes through Jackson and Tupelo along the way, and I’m sure it was a boon to those land-locked cities as well, but Nashville was the Big Enchilada. (Still, taking the River to Memphis, then zooming along I-40E would have been much faster. Wonder why they didn’t do that instead?)

There is no road anywhere like the Natchez Trace Parkway (NTP). It is designated as a National Park for its historic significance. It is only about 452 yards wide, but a full 452 miles long. The northern end is just south of Nashville, and it rolls across the southern half of Tennessee, cuts through the northwest corner of Alabama, and runs diagonally all the way across Mississippi. In the whole stretch, there is not one traffic light -- nor any electric light of any kind -- no trucks allowed, no stores, no houses, no advertisements, no interruptions whatsoever to your pleasure cruising. It’s a nine-hour escape from the real world of contentious highways and clogged side roads. It is like driving in Motorists’ Heaven.

NTP doesn’t give you Grand Canyon-like postcard scenic moments. It gives you a constant view of nice and relaxing scenery. The road seems to move in long, easy ripples, and it bends as if it were just swaying slowly in the summer breeze. You’d almost swear that the next time you travel it the bends would be in different places. It’s smooth, and it flows like a stream, and it says, “Helloooo, are you a pleasurrre vehicle? No hurrrrry? No attituuuuude? Then come oooonnnnnnnnnn downwwwn...”

NTP is a shelter from everything. It’s a National Park, so it is cleaned and manicured religiously. It is not the real world. It is safe, comfortable, and devoid of commercial harassment. Aside from the pavement, and the occasional guardrail, it is all natural. For 452 miles!

I'm sure that part of what I like about it too, is that it strikes the chord of the golfer in me. With its green, well-maintained grass along the entire length, and its simple curbless pavement, and its close-by trees, it almost seems like a cart path at some expensive country club. It's like tooling down the paths at Crumpin Fox.

As darkness engulfs NTP, it engulfs it totally. No streetlights of any kind. I stopped once to, uh, stretch my legs, and I shut off Blue Man. The stars, shrouded by the South's humidity, were less than spectacular, but the NOISE was astounding!! The trees were SO DAMN LOUD!! I've never heard such loud trees in my life! There must have been a billion insects screaming, "Get him! Kill the human! Devour his flesh!" I got scared, so I skedaddled.

The Road Gods rewarded my efforts at getting to their Valhalla, by granting me the Motorist's Prime Wish: an empty road. Not only had I reached the perfect driving environment, the Powers That Be decreed that I would have it all to myself. I entered NTP at roughly -- you guessed it, Dash -- 5:15, and did not have a car behind or in front of me until 6:45. Ninety minutes (*and eighty miles!*) of My Very Own Road. And that trend continued throughout the ride.

And even when I came up on somebody, or somebody came up on me, zooom, right on by because there was nobody coming the other way! Unbelievable!

As dusk drew nigh, a turnout called Fall Hollow caught my attention. Upon stopping to move around in the humid murk, and hearing the trickling of a small waterfall down in the gully, I was made aware of a certain familiar need rising in my bladder. So, I wandered down the trail a little but got intrigued: the path was narrow, dirt, and closed in by brush and trees. It wound steeply and slickly down the side of the gully. I found myself at the base of a small but "big enough" waterfall. A splash of water on my face was refreshing, but not nearly enough. This isolated spot was screaming "Shower time, Rick!" My gallon jug rinses had done good short-term duty, but a full body wash was indeed in order. The water was the degree of cold that I like to call "bracing" -- where you can stand it, but you gotta kinda be he-man about it to do so. And, for those few moments, I was absolutely no different than some schmuck native four hundred years before, splashing himself clean in Nature's shower.

Thoroughly refreshed, I pulled my shorts and tank top and sneaks back on, and headed back to my air-conditioned van for another cold beer and some good tunes! Nature's cool, but small doses are enough!

I mean, how shitty must it have been for the unfortunates who lived 200 years ago, and had to trek this winding ribbon of sweltering wilderness with saddlebags and small wagons full of goods, all the way from the Mississippi River to Nashville! That must have taken two damn weeks! And if it was hot and humid, you sweat and stunk and sweat some more and stunk worse. And your horse stunk like the shit he kept dropping along the way, just like everybody else's rotting shit all over the path. If it rained you got wet, your clothes got wet, everything you owned got wet, your horse got wet, and both you and your horse stunk afterwards. And when it got cold, you just froze your freaking ass off, and had no place to hide to get away from it, and your butt froze when you had to shit, but at least you probably didn't stink as much. And you slept on the hard ground, even in the rain, and bugs were crawling all over you, and the food you had to eat sucked unless you went and killed your own and feasted on fricasseed squirrel innards or something.

Nice. Wish you were there, I bet.

I like my van. It's comfy. And it doesn't stink (though I might, from time to time -- I am a Rude Brother, after all).

I would wonder about anybody who would describe Tupelo, Mississippi as a "wonderful and special" place. Maybe a few of the ignorant hicks who live near it might find it magical, but I've been there a few times now, and it just gets worse.

Doug and I visited it back in '85. Strangely, it ended up being the "destination" of that trip. We left Boston with no particular place to go, and no real reason to be going anywhere, other than the nonspecific desire to go *somewhere*. It was a classic roadtrip for roadtrip's sake: the quintessential ramack. We did the spine of Virginia, and the top half of the NTP, when our allotted time ran out. Dugg only had a week off from work, so we were on a limited time budget. Tupelo was where we were when we hit the turnaround time. So, if Tupelo was it, Tupelo was it, and we hung out a while to enjoy our vacation hot spot.

The first place we went was Papa Gino's. Or maybe it was Pizza Hut. One of those two; I always get them mixed up. Doug had recently turned eighteen, and though the laws in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts decreed that he was too young to drink, the strictures in Mississippi were more lenient. The Magnolia State said, "Drink up, son! If you're here, you probably need a good drink." So he confidently purchased a pitcher of beer, and I was there to witness it. I felt so proud of him. Lump in the throat, and all that. You know the feeling.

Anyway, as we left Papa Hut's we noticed a batting cage in the lot behind it. It was just a single cage, with a noisy pitching machine, and neither of us had ever been a baseball wizard, but, we figured we'd give the ol' horsehide a few whacks with the old aluminum wand.

The cage was manned by a boy. He was about fifteen, skinny as a rake, tanned, with dark hair. I guess his hair was tousled, whatever that means. My pocket Webster's says it means "mussed." Damn, I like that word. Mussed. I gotta use that more often.

So, anyhoo, Eb's dark shaggy hair was mussed. Oh, yeah, Dugg and I nicknamed the boy Eb, just because he seemed like an Eb. Eb's are usually mussed. Have you ever seen an Eb that wasn't mussed? I rest my case.

Eb had a younger buddy hanging out with him. The other kid was about nine or ten, kinda pudgy, and didn't say a word the whole time we were there. We paid him no attention at all.

Dugg and I took turns slugging away while Eb kept loading up baseballs for us. Our conversations, our Red Sox allusions, and our foreign accents eventually prompted Eb to ask us, somewhat warily, "Y'all fr'm Tupelo??" Sharp kid, despite the muss. We reassured him that we were not, and that, after today, he would never see us again.

It was still really hot and humid out, so we went topless to keep our precious shirts from getting all sopped. Between the sweat and the slugging, and the fact that I was in pretty good shape that summer, I had a decent buff goin' on.

We were starting to tire of the batting cage experience, when we saw Eb's face get all excited. Then he pointed to the road behind us, drawling, "Golly, looky thar!"

Now, I didn't think that real, live people ever actually said "Golly, looky thar!" I thought it was just in movies, and on the old *Andy Griffith Show* with Opie and Aunt Bea and that loser Barney Fife. But, there it was: I saw and heard it with my own eyes and ears, respectively. "Golly, looky thar!" I guess some stereotypes exist for a reason.

So, Dugg and I turned to looky thar, and we saw a thin, elderly black man, in dark pants and a long-sleeve shirt, standing very unsteadily by the curb about twenty-five yards away. He wavered back and forth, and side to side, as if the sidewalk were made of Jello. Then, he lost all sense of verticality and just plopped flat back on the ground. The four of us jogged over to check on him. It looked like he had whacked his head pretty good when he toppled.

We tried asking him if he was OK. His eyes were open, and he seemed to hear us fine, but he made no response. After a moment, a police car pulled right up to us. It didn't occur to me right away what I must have looked like: this sweaty, white athletic dude, holding a baseball bat on his shoulder, and standing above a fallen black man who could neither speak nor rise. I can't imagine what the cops might have thought. Certainly, if the colors had been reversed, they would have arrived with guns drawn.

Instead, they walked over calmly, pretty much ignored the four of us, and began speaking to the fall guy by name. Mr. Hobson, they called him, obviously familiar with him and his misguided drunken attempts at foot travel. They eventually hefted him up, deposited him safely in their back seat, and drove away.

We thanked Eb for the extra balls he let us hit, and he enthusiastically thanked us for coming. We were his only hitters all day, he lamented. Eb must've been about thirty when RR2K was happening. I wonder if he was still mussed?