

Can's Ass

Fock 2: Memories of Mizzou

The eastering leg of The Great 1990 North American Tour only reinforced the impression that Kansas was flat, light-hued, empty, and boring. We had angled for Dodge City that year, partly on my suggestion. I didn't want to risk being taken hostage by the irresistible lure of Prairie Dog Town again, and I didn't think a **third** visit to The Bear House was in order (Richie and I had stopped there again in '84, though we had simply flipped off Dog Town as we drove right by it that time.

I had always pictured Dodge City as being the type of place where history was preserved everywhere you looked: long rows of wooden-faced buildings, hitchin' posts, plaques and placards commemorating famous gunfights between legendary outlaws and lawmen.

[It's funny that "in-law" is not the opposite of "outlaw," iddinit?]

What a disappointment! Dodge is still a crossroads amid wide open prairie, but now it has Arby's and Best Western instead of saloons and livery stables. There was one token block that was a weak attempt at imitating the Wild West days, but it was too damn small. Besides, since you could drive right next to it, the flavor was pretty much gone before it even got started.

We did encounter a unique character in Dodge, though: Reggie, at Reggie's Liquors. He might've been the owner, but he was working behind the counter at the booze store when we met him. He gave us a healthy ration of shit because we were Bay Staters. We gave some back, of course, touting the merits of our Commonwealth. Then he chimed in with, "Ever hear o' Maine??" which pretty much just left us shakin' our heads.

That was one of the most impressive travel legs of all the roadtrips, though. Kelzo was the catalyst. Hell-bent for home after his too-long stint in Reno, and recognizing that the best scenery was already behind us, he was not shy about taking the wheel to drive, drive, drive.

With not much to see or do in Kansas, and not the most comfy sleeping arrangements with three of us in Max, he spearheaded an unplanned and unanticipated through-the-night drive that moved us from Pagosa Springs, an hour east of Durango in southwest Colorado, all the way to Boonville, in central Missouri, a very respectable 934 miles. Bobby and I dozed here and there, and took short shifts at the wheel, but when we would lag, Kelzo stepped right to the fore and roared old Max eastward.



We had been assuming that the Missouri border was the goal, but we sailed right through that and hurtled on into the sunrise. Kelzo was indeed a man on a mission. His resolve faded about halfway across the Show Me State, and we paused for a roadside snooze. Once the van got heated up by the climbing sun (only about two hours later), I picked myself off the floor and drove on.

We arrived in St. Louis just at lunchtime. We parked Max in the shade under the elevated highway right near the Gateway Arch. The Arch is an impressive structure, measuring 630 feet in both height and base-width. There are entrances to the subterranean Museum of Westward Expansion at each of its feet, and there is a clever little tram system that climbs up and down the legs to an observation deck. It's a good take. The windows are tiny, but the view of downtown as you look directly west is cool, and the view straight down at the brown Mississippi River is thought-provoking too.

The *LA Olympic Trials Tour* entourage made the climb in '84, and, of course, found a way to make it an adventure.

The cars of the tram are puny, worse than Geo Metros. You cram five people in each pod and slide the door shut. If the five people are tall, their knees all knock in the middle. Richie, Cliff, and I happened to get podded with these two guys from Oklahoma. As the tram shut and began its slow climb -- which was

kinda like walking up a flight of stairs inside a big basketball – somebody commented on the intimacy of the small pod. One of the Okies laughed, “Too bad we ain’t got some weed to smoke.”

Well, Richie and I must’ve taken that as a challenge, and before we could thoroughly scout out proper ventilation, a small device was circulating around the pod. It was an amazingly stupid thing to do, but in the mid-80’s, such things were not necessarily reviled as evil, disgusting, and perverse.

They *were* still illegal, however, and it was obvious that there was no place to run up here in this small room, sixty-stories up. We held our hit as long as possible to minimize the exhale, blew whatever was left out the cracks of the door, and congratulated ourselves on being so slick.

But we made a plan anyway. It was rudimentary and crappy, but give us credit: at least we made one. When the doors slid open, we just about sprinted out and up the stairs and immediately scattered and blended in with the crowd that was already there. Our pod was near the back of the train, but by the time I had finished my swift ascent to the door of the Observation Deck, I could hear a voice way down behind me: “Whoa! *Somebody* had a good time on the ride up!” So much for self-congratulation.

I saw the Okies scamper straight through the Observation Deck and directly into the downbound train, too paranoid to risk the enclosed and patrolled space. Good, I thought, if anybody smells it on us, we can blame the Okies.

But nobody bothered us. They *knew* it was us, though, you could tell that. A couple of times, one of the security guys leaned over right next to me as I peered out the window, clearly trying to get an incriminating whiff.

We stayed up there a long time, partly hoping that security would forget all about us. It happened to be the last Friday in June, and there was either a late solstice celebration or an early Independence Day festival taking shape on the huge lawn that sprawls beneath the Arch. As the sun hit the western horizon, a pyrotechnic display began below. It was still daylight, of course, but what was really quite cool was that the fireworks were exploding *beneath* us! I had never seen fireworks from above. The highest ones climbed almost to our level, and exploded big and wide for our enjoyment. It was great.



On the ‘90 visit, though, the line to tram it up the Arch was just too damn long, and we were just too damn hungry to wait. Plus, we didn’t have any hooch.

On the ride into the city, we had waved off the plethora of fast-food establishments in favor a real downtown restaurant. We decided it was time to treat our stomachs right. Someone outside City Hall suggested Charlie Gitto’s Pasta House, which was right close by.

I liked the place as soon as I saw it. A decades-old, two-story brick building, it stood between a large parking lot and a tall new parking garage. Clearly, the property had been coveted, but Charlie must have stood firm and made them build their lots around his long-established business.

The three of us had had a swim and shower earlier the day before, but we had done plenty of sweating and boozing since, and were looking typically roadrude when we entered

CG's.

It was prime lunchtime in the heart of downtown St. Louis. The restaurant was a nice, respectable place. There were hundreds of framed photos everywhere of famous and influential people who had eaten there. It was clearly a popular choice.

Every table but one was occupied, and all of them by people in professional business attire. Crisp-looking white shirts and ties, smart dresses, and dignified suits abounded. Our dirty shorts and tanktops seemed to buck the trend.

Any decent hostess would have given us the old no-room-at-the-inn line, and suggested that we come back in a fortnight or so. But I think this one must've been new, and she eagerly showed us to the one remaining table.

As luck would have it, we were not ushered into some dark back corner where our social indiscretions could be carried out in near-secret. No, no, our hostess paraded us right through the middle of the dining room and laid our menus on the round table in the very center.

We were, whether we craved it or not, on center stage. Nobody could have missed us. Eyes that should have just brushed across us instead locked onto us. People who did not want to stare stared anyway. Dingy attire, scruffy faces, rank running shoes, audacious smiles, and an overall unwashed demeanor met their surprised gazes. I felt like Jake Blues in Chez Luis.

We greeted our waitress – her name tag said “Jen” -- by name, and with boisterous good cheer. We ordered a round of cold beer forthwith. Jen found us amusing, fortunately – maybe even refreshing – and seemed happy to have the pleasure of our out-of-the-ordinary business.

The other patrons seemed to relax when Jen took a shine to us, and they settled back to their comparatively staid lunches. The clinking of our glasses as we hoisted a toast to the road home even drew smiles and approving chuckles. We drank heartily and summoned Jen to prepare Round Two. Some people from neighboring tables even inquired about our where-from's and our where-to's, and we gave them some mildly exaggerated highlights.

By the time they were ready to return to their offices, I dare say most of them envied us bigtime. We tipped Jen well, and headed off to the Anheuser-Busch Brewery.

The Brewery – or as Richie referred to it back in the day, “Mecca” (Richie was a die-hard Budweiser imbiber) – was an enormous letdown. Bobby and Kelzo had been looking forward to it because of the yarns that Richie and Cliff and I had spun for them.

On the Topeka trek in '82, Richie and I had made Mecca a feature attraction on our tour. It was reason number one for

visiting St. Louis. The tour was interesting, FREE, and culminated in a sojourn to The Hospitality Room. This was indeed attractive.

Our tour guide led us to the door, and informed the group of us (about 20 or so), that we were going to be stopping here to sit and sample the various Anheuser-Busch products that were on tap. He said that we should relax and enjoy, and that we should feel welcome to go back up to the bar as many times as we wanted. Richie and I were almost drooling by that point. Free beer ... on tap ... as many times as we wanted ... it was better than Disneyland ever could be.

Then our guide casually said, “So we'll be staying here for about ten minutes before we...” I have no idea what followed that. Richie and I had looked at each other and said “Ten minutes!!” and charged into the room. We could



hear the group chuckling behind us.

We strode right to the bar and accosted Jim The Barkeep most affably. He poured Free Beer, which made him almost a demi-god in our eyes.

The professional that he was, Jim recognized the motivation in us. We took our first round and moved toward a table. By the time we got to it, our cups were empty. We returned to the bar posthaste.

Jim, though in the midst of attending to some lameass bimbo's questions about the differences between Michelob Light and Bud Light, caught us in his peripheral vision and poured two cups. The bimbo looked puzzled, as if Jim had jumped the gun on her, but before she could say anything, and before we could even reach the bar, he set the cups to the side with a nod and a smirk in our direction.

Fully appreciative of the gesture, I dropped a five-dollar bill in his tip jar, and Richie and I set up shop standing at the corner of the bar.

The ten minutes passed quickly (even though it was more like twenty), and, six beers (each) to the good, we thanked Jim and moved on to the gift shop with the rest of our group. Our tour leader had made certain that we were with the group and had not "gotten lost" in the Hospitality Room. We "appreciated" his concern.

When we got outside, Richie – always thinkin' – suggested that we take the tour again. There really was no pressing engagement elsewhere, and the tour was, after all, free, so we went back in. Fortuitously, we caught a shift change, and none of the people who had greeted us an hour before were still there. We patiently listened to the tour spiel of our second guide of the day, excused ourselves for nose-powderings a few times along the way (no, not that kind of powder!), and were soon back at the Hospitality Room.

Ol' Jim did a double-take when we walked in, and shook his head in a blend of admiration and trepidation. He seemed a bit cautious as he poured our first, wary that we may just start a chugfest that might get him in trouble. We behaved this time around, though, and even took our beers to the table each time. Four or five freebies later, we were back in the gift shop, very nicely buzzed, and all too willing to purchase some Anheuser-Busch trinkets.

Two years later, on the return route of the 1984 *L.A. Olympic Trials Tour*, Richie, Cliff and I descended on the Brewery for more fun and games.

It actually was an interesting place, and in the course of a few tours, you do pick up some fun facts and such about Budweiser, Prohibition, and brewing in general. The brewery had a quaint but classy lobby, with dark wood everywhere, and display cases containing various awards or things of interest. One case had Clydesdale shoes. They were huge. Something like 26 inches across. Huge. I think I have a picture of them somewhere. If I find it, I'll show it to you later.

Tour groups were just informally pulled together, and when there were enough, a guide or two was assigned to the group, and off you went to view the various steps of the brewing process. We had a little buzz on, so we especially liked the bottling area. Thousands of brown bottles just seemed to be shuffling and waddling along these shiny aluminum tables with three-inch high retaining walls. There were some splinters and jags of glass here and there on the floor, left there, no doubt, to remind others of the futility of escape attempts. The bottle parade jiggled along into thinner and thinner corridors until they were single file, and they disappeared from view. When they came back into sight, they were neatly boxed and ready to be closed in and sent out into the world so John Q. Public and his ilk could get hammered.

The three of us were a bit impatient, but we tried to be nice as our guides rambled on about the brewing process and such. Richie and I had heard it all a couple of times before, and Cliff just plain didn't give a hoot, so we bided our time in the back of the group, being a frequent but unintentional distraction to our guide. If she had been smart, she would have just said, "you three: H-Room right now!"

That actually did happen, in effect, when Doug T. and I did that *Florida in February* roadtrip in 1983. We went to Busch Gardens, did some rides and stuff, saw some animals, and decided to take the brewery tour and get some sauce au gratis. We headed down the sidewalk and were brought to a halt by a big sign that said, "BREWERY CLOSED." We were stunned. Then I started laughing, and pointed out the other sign to Doug: "Please feel free to visit our Hospitality Room" with an arrow pointing the way.

We were entitled to two each, so we devised a rotation involving alternate trips to alternate bartenders and got away with four each. We were damn proud of ourselves. Then the shift changed, and a whole new crew of barkeeps came on duty. So, we did it all again. Well, almost all. We got a little sloppy, made too much noise, became too much of a noticeable pair, and got our drunk asses shut off. Oh well, seven freesbies ain't too bad.

But in '84, in St. Louis, we tolerated the half-hour tour and were parched by the time we reached Hospitality. To our disappointment, our favorite barkeep Jim was nowhere to be found, but we made do with the ones who were there. We did a rotation, with each of us going up to get a round in turn. For example, Cliff would chug his while Richie and I paced ours. We would hold our cups casually below table level while Jim went back for three more. When he got back, I would pound mine and go up for more, while they acted discreet and nice. It worked well. Nobody stopped us, but we were "noticed" and we knew it was no coincidence that a security dude just happened to stroll out behind us when our group departed.

We got outside and walked directly back into the lobby to take the tour again. A Code Rude, or something like that, must have been issued to the staff, because numerous eyes seemed to keep looking our way as we waited for the next group to form.

When it did, there was an extra guide, an affable young bespectacled guy named Mike, who apparently had been assigned solely to keep us in line. We tagged along with him several strides behind the rest of the tour group and played Stump Mike. We peppered him with questions about A-B, the brewery, the brewing process, etc. He came up with answers again and again. He was amazing. Far, far better than the tour itself was.

He was the A-B "stopper," the guy who came out of the pen in a jam and shut down the momentum of the opposition (i.e., us). We asked him if he had been instructed to babysit us, and he tactfully replied, "Your reputation preceded you." We didn't care, as long as we could still get into the HR. Cliff finally stumped Mike by asking what Anheuser-Busch's before-tax earnings were for 1983. Leave it to the accountant to come up with that one.

We did get to tour the taps again, and made the most of it again. In all, we got 27 beers in two fifteen-minute visits. Pretty good work, if I do say so myself.

That type of experience was what we thought we'd go for after having our Charlie Gitto's lunch in '90. Man, were we wrong!

Bud had re-tooled the tour process. (I'd like to think that the Rudes had some influence on the policy change.) Tours were now formally scheduled, took **seventy-five** minutes, and you were given one – yes, *one* – ticket, which was good for one – yes, *one* – free beer in the Hospitality Room. Miffed, and caught off our guard, we signed up nonetheless. But after only about two minutes of waiting in a stupidly long line, we recognized that it just wasn't worth it. Shit, I don't even *like* Budweiser! We gave our three tickets to somebody who looked like he would invest them wisely, and returned to the road.

That was our final stop, other than for gas or brief roadside relief. We pulled another all-nighter, and galloped home from St. Louis to Boston – 1241 miles – in twenty-one hours. We did the final 2320 miles in just over two days. You might say that we were *driven* (though I wouldn't blame you if you didn't).