

ARIZONA'S HOT!

Fock 1: Zeds, Morons, and Tectonics

The pass through Arizona on RR2K would be brief, but there is nothing insignificant about the Grand Canyon State to this road freak. Even before I ever saw it, I loved Arizona. Maybe it's because there is a Z in the name, and Z is the coolest letter of them all.

Z catches your eye. It adds zzzzzip to a word. It makes people hesitate for a second when you spell the word, or, in my case, the name – *did he just say Z?* I like having a Z in my name. It sets me apart, makes me special. People see it and say to themselves, “Ooooooh, he has a Z in his name.” I suspect some envy me. I've often thought of capitalizing my Z; the K in my name is upper case, so why not the Z? MacKenZie. But, then, I think, there's no need to get snotty about it. I have my Z, and I should not flaunt it in the face of those less fortunate. I'm already showing off my special K.

There is a certain secret camaraderie among people with Z's in their names. We wink subtly at one another, or nod knowingly when nobody is noticing. You probably don't see that, mainly because we don't want you to.

Z has two names: Zee and Zed. Zed is one of those weird British things though, like “nil” and “naught.” Nobody normal uses those. You gotta use Zee. Nobody in his right mind ever says Zed. If you're spelling a word to somebody and you say Zed, people are gonna look at you and say, what the fuck is a Zed?? I don't have a Zed in my name, I have a Zee. Like Butch says, *Zed's dead, baby. Zed's dead.*

Scrabble players have a special place in their hearts for Z, and for X and Q, the other 10-pointers. We are alert for words that utilize those letters so we can use them to ambush our opponents.

I used to like the word “quiz” because of its Z. It was short, even a tad cute, and half the word was made up of awkward, little-used letters. And it's worth 22 points in Scrabble, even without any doubling or tripling of letters or words. Great word for playing hangman, too.

Games sometimes give you moments that stay with you forever. Just as cribbage provided that amazing hand with Moyny in the motel room, Scrabble stuck a lasting memory in my head, but in this one I came out the loser.

Den and I used to play Scrabble a lot. It was a mismatch – I was an English major become 23-year-old English teacher, a creative writer, and a vocabulary zealot, and he was a “C-sometimes-B” student as a high school senior – but he enjoyed playing, and I enjoyed his enjoyment of the game. Sometimes, I would offer him head starts or handicaps where double and triple words did not count for me but did for him. He almost always turned them down, and simply took satisfaction in keeping my margin of victory from being too gaping. Kind of like being content he wasn't getting skunked in cribbage.

Well, one day, the game was almost done, I was up by a comfortable 78 points, and Den was looking at another defeat. He was shaking his blond head, and his spacey eyes just looked in total befuddlement at the five tiles that remained in his rack. My rack had just one tile left – an “s” – and there were multiple places to put it when my turn arose, so the fat lady was clearing her corpulent throat.

Den asked if he could use the dictionary. I magnanimously agreed. I thought little of it when he opened to the back page. He looked for only a few seconds, then his eyes jumped to his rack. He began to smile. Dictionary again. Then rack. His smile became laughter. Then an outright belly laugh. He even had me starting to laugh.

“You will NOT fucking believe this!” he choked out between guffaws, tears forming in his eyes from laughter. It was pure out-of-control laughter too, the kind that leaves you hyperventilating. It took him three tries to even put the first tile on the board.

Working back from an existing “e”, he slowly laid his tiles in place, his contagious laughter rising



each time he laid one down. I was starting to crack up too, and I didn't even know why.

First, a "t". On a Double Word Score square.

Then, an "o". Hmmm.

"g". And I'm thinking, does he not know how to spell "goat"??

"y". And I paused, sensing something was *definitely* going to slap me hard.

"z". On a Triple Letter Square!

"Zygote!" Fucking "zygote"! 30 points for the damn "z" alone made it 39 for the whole word. And that got doubled!

It was 78 freaking points!! When we tallied it up, he doubled over again. He had pulled out a tie! Den was nearly apoplectic with laughter.

But, as you Scrabble aficionados know – and it took me a moment to realize after the zygote-induced shock began to wear off -- that it was not over yet. My sole remaining tile, my single-point "s" still had to be deducted from my total and added to his, which gave good ol' Den a scintillating, hilarious, and very memorable two-point victory. I remember instinctively starting to be pretty pissed about losing, but I got over it immediately. It was just too damn funny.

But, anyway, like I said, I used to like the word "quiz." But it sometimes only takes one person to change a lifelong perception. For instance, to this day, thanks to the singing of a redneck named Conrad on Hilton Head Island, the chorus of Van Halen's "Panama" will always be "*Padded bra! Padded bra-ha!*"

Well, in this case it was a twirpy ninth-grade kid who ruined it. After about two months of his freshman English class, this squishy-voiced front-seater began to meet my entrance into the room with this nerve-grating whine: "Are we having a kwwizzz?" Every goddamn day. Just the way he wormed the word "kwwizzz" out of his pussyboy lips just made me want to strangle the little bastard.

I don't remember his name, which is just as well, because I'd rake him over the proverbial coals in front of all you billions of readers. I can picture him, and I can hear that spine-scraping pronunciation, but can't recall his name, the weasel-nosed little twit.

Arizona's flag always struck me as being a good flag. It's content summed up the state pretty well: SUN, and lots of it. And its colors were crayon-friendly. Its 13 stripes represented the original 13 United States, which is pretty generous considering this territory was a long way away from being part of that group. The star is copper colored since Arizona is the largest copper producing state in the country: more than half of the nation's copper comes from AZ. So there.



I was also fascinated by the extreme temperatures that always seemed to show up over Arizona on the national weather map. Even as a wee tyke, watching Don Kent's hand-marked map on WBZ, I would "wow" at the 115's and 118's that would be scrawled across Arizona. I think it was one of the first states I ever learned, just because of that.

Wow, Dad, look! 115°!! Where's that?!

Why, that's called "Arizona," son.

Gee, Dad, that's hot as a Mexican whore's pussy, huh? Fuckin' A!!

Depends on the whore, son.

Wow. And it has a Zed!

That's a Zee, you retard.

Speaking of TV meteorologists, what is up with that profession? Why the hell do they **always** stand right in front of the east coast when they are showing the national map?? The point of having a full-screen map is to see the **full map** on the screen. If it's so damn important that they get their pretty faces on camera too, why don't they create a little margin where they can stand without getting in the way?

I mean, here I was, a day before embarking on this long, convoluted journey to Sacramento (!), and some frigging Weather Channel moronologist is blocking out New England through Florida: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, DC, and Miami – combined population of 10.5 million people – are all

hidden by suitboy, so the plains folk, mountain men, and quiche coasters can see their map. It's like they're saying, "here's a map; don't you wish you could see it?"

And sometimes, with the merging weather patterns along the coast, that area has more color swaths and swirls than my old paisley ties. Yet those Barometer Barons still stand there, cluelessly smiling at themselves in the monitor while millions of us scream, "Get the hell out of the way, you putz!"

There was one Weather Channel guy that I especially liked. I don't remember his name, but I used to know his schedule, and I would try to catch him whenever I could. His forecasts were great because he had a lot of trouble keeping a straight face. I used to get such a boot out of him. Somebody off-camera must have been giving him the finger, or making dopey faces at him, because he just couldn't keep from smirking. I liked watching him because I hoped to see him just totally lose it one day.

He got bumped from mid-afternoon to late-night at one point, probably due to excessive snickering in prime time. But the nocturnal influences must have been even worse, because one night, he did come pretty close to bursting out. He didn't guffaw or gasp or slobber, but he couldn't keep talking as he tried to stifle his laughter. I sure was laughing watching him. That must have been the last straw, though, because I never saw him again.

Ahh, the ignominy: to rise to the pinnacle of one's profession – to the exalted mountaintop that is prime time Weather Channel – only to be deposed by a propensity for risibility.

Dicky Albert, the head weatherman at Boston's WCVB, was my favorite all-time, though. He had an anagram thing going that gave him the nod in my book (see?). TTTC meant Too Tough To Call. GBAGL was for storm systems that were headed out to sea: Good Bye And Good Luck. Uncertain forecasts were NEIS, or Not Etched In Stone. You'd see these big letters behind him on the map while he talked, and all the while you'd be trying to figure out what the hell GBAGL meant, then he'd just slide right into it in mid-sentence. It was a good hook.

Then there was Bruce Schwoegler, one of the weather darlings of Boston's local Channel 4, and Dicky's crosstown rival. Bruce was OK, but I hated the way he said "clouds." I don't know why, it just sounded different, like it had two w's in it: Clowwds. It bugged me. *And they'll be some clowwds in the afternoon.* Dicky would've been saying MSTC: More Sun Than Clouds.

But Jack Williams, WBZ's evening anchorman zung Brucie about as well as I've seen a man get zung on family TV. Jack was not my favorite either: he had this way of seeming way too concerned about something that his co-anchor Liz Walker had just read, and then immediately launching into a smile for the next, more upbeat, item. They were all a good team, though, especially when sports guy Bob Lobel was in a jaunty mood. Bob always gave Liz, a formidable black woman, a hard time, so precedents for jocularly and derision were set.

This particular night, Bruce's hand-held remote, which he used to change screens and maps on his display board, must have run low on battery power because the weather maps changed erratically and late. He muddled through, eyeing and twisting his remote in frustration. The device was not a discreet accessory, either, being about the size of an interviewer's microphone, with a round, bright-colored foam tip, so he couldn't hide what he was doing.

When he finished his forecast, and the camera zoomed out to include Jack and Liz, Bruce lamented with a shrug, "My wand doesn't work."

Jack, without a heartbeat's hesitation, responded, "Yes, I've heard rumors."

Bruce was stunned. Liz, consummate professional that she was, shook off a second of shock and quickly tried to bury the zing with a rapid misdirection ploy, "Soooo, Bob, what's up in the world of sports??"

The camera cut to Bob, who had his head down on his desk, face buried in his arms, and was laughing his ass off. He raised a hand to wave off the camera, and the station cut to a commercial. It was classic.

Anyway, Arizona. I liked heat, so the simmering southwest captured my imagination. Summer has always been my favorite season, and that far off land called Arizona was Extreme Summer: I eagerly awaited my chance to go there.

It had a city called Phoenix, named after the mythical bird that consumed itself in flames and was born again from the ashes. That seemed appropriate for the scorching desert. Plus, the name had an X in it, with raised its Cool Quotient even higher.

Arizona sang to me of open spaces, Wild West legends, unexplored wilderness, strange rock formations, and, on top of all that, The Grand Canyon.

There really is no place on Earth like The Big Hole. Pictures do not do it justice. As much as you think you can appreciate the vastness of the area, and the depth of the cut, and the majesty of the landscape, it is 1000 times more intense in person. The more you look around, the more you just think, "Wow."



When Alf and I came to GCNP's Moran Point Overlook on Max's 1987 maiden voyage, the early morning rain had recently given way to hazy sunshine. We dismounted and sat peacefully on the wall, digging the view. Evaporation, in squirming, amorphous blobs of fog, rose from the crannies of the Canyon and vanished into the hot thin desert air just above rim level. It was a great sight to behold, and we watched in respectful and appreciative silence. Soon, a fairly elderly couple strolled up behind us to admire the same view. There was a

whole wide viewpoint to take in, but they came right up and stood only a couple of feet behind us. Alf and I exchanged bemused looks.

The man spoke up: "Is this spot the prettiest?"

I replied, "Looks nice to me," and Alf nodded in assent.

"But is it the prettiest spot?" he persisted.

Not giving him the satisfaction of a definitive answer, I stayed my non-committal course. "I guess that's a matter of opinion."

"Do you think it's the prettiest?"

Mildly flummoxed – if one can actually be only mildly flummoxed – I brought Alf into the dialogue. "What do you think, Dave?" (Dave was Alf's real name. We called him Alf because of former Kansas governor Alf Landon, to whom he bore no resemblance or relation whatsoever.)

"Hmm," he pondered aloud, "It's beautiful, but I don't know about pretty. It is pretty nice, though."

The old man persisted. "We want to see the prettiest spot."

Now, I don't know if they only had one picture left on a roll of film, or if they just needed the consolation of knowing that they had not accidentally missed the most scenic spot of all. And I suppose a simple "yes" to his initial question would have done wonders for all concerned. Instead, we carried on in the vaguest possible way about relativity and moods and shadows and preferences of smooth-versus-jagged and desert-versus-trees and whatever other balderdash we could think of.

They finally wandered away, but only a few steps from us, as if wary of losing the prettiest view. Soon we departed, leaving the Morons of Moran Point to their pretty pursuit.

"Pretty" is a very odd word. Its roles are so diverse. Rooted in Olde English as a word meaning "trick," it carries such varied Merriam-Webster adjectival definitions as:

1 a : artful, clever **b** : pat, apt

2 a : pleasing by delicacy or grace **b** : having conventionally accepted elements of beauty

c : appearing or sounding pleasant or nice but lacking strength, force, manliness, purpose, or intensity <pretty words that make no sense -- Elizabeth B. Browning>

3 a : miserable, terrible <a pretty mess you've gotten us into> **b chiefly Scottish** : stout

4 : moderately large : considerable <a very pretty profit> <cost a pretty penny>

synonym see "beautiful"

It so serves as an adverb, of course, in some of its most common usage:

1 : in some degree : moderately <pretty cold weather>

2 : in a pretty manner : prettily <pop vocalists who can sing pretty>

I've never heard "pretty" used as artful, clever, pat, or apt, so let's assume that one is a crock. Adjective definition #2 seems to be the most common meaning. But who knows what the heck Mr. and Mrs. Moron were after. In seeking a "pretty" spot, did they want one that was miserable or terrible? One that lacked manliness and purpose? One that was moderately large? One that had delicacy or grace? One that was pat? Or – dare I say it? -- apt??

I really wish I had been armed with those definitions back in '87. I would've loved to confront Mr. Moron with them. I doubt they would have lingered very long after that.

So, with all those possibilities, my favorite oxymoron (no relation to Mr. Moron) of all time – “pretty ugly” – seems a bit less silly.

I'm still kinda miffed by the word, though. Just the phrase “pretty good” is enough to discombobulate me.

How are you?

Pretty good.

Oh, what's the matter?

Why do people respond to “pretty good” as a negative thing, as if being moderately good were bad? But you never hear this:

How are you?

Pretty bad.

Hey, great!

If “pretty good” is taken as a negative, then shouldn't “pretty bad” be taken as a positive, like I'm not actually *bad*, just kinda bad? But it's not; it's taken to mean badder than bad. I'm not just bad, I'm pretty bad.

Inflection means a lot too, though. “Pretty good” can mean anything from OK to terrific.

How are you feeling?

Ohhh ... pretty good... I guess.

Or:

How are you feeling?

Pretty good!!

And if you're moderately pretty, you're pretty pretty, right? And why is it pronounced “pretty”??? Maybe we should move on.

Alf and I hung out at another viewpoint on South Rim (which seemed just as pretty) for the rest of the morning, and watched for another hour or so as the climbing sun lured the remaining fluffs of moisture skyward from their hiding places among the deepest crevices. When we saw the last of them wither and vanish into the open desert air, we began to get thinkin' about rollin' on.

We gazed across the gaping chasm, taking in the amazing medley of reds and browns and grays in their downward and upward zags of vertical-diagonal-vertical-diagonal. We felt totally puny, and looked to the far side with awe. After a while, Alf asked, “How far ya think that is?”

“This here map says about 15 miles,” I replied rather dryly.

“How long would it take to get there?”

“Walking as the crow flies, or driving as the van drives?”

“Van, shit-for-brains. Could we catch the sunset from that side? That'd be damn cool.”

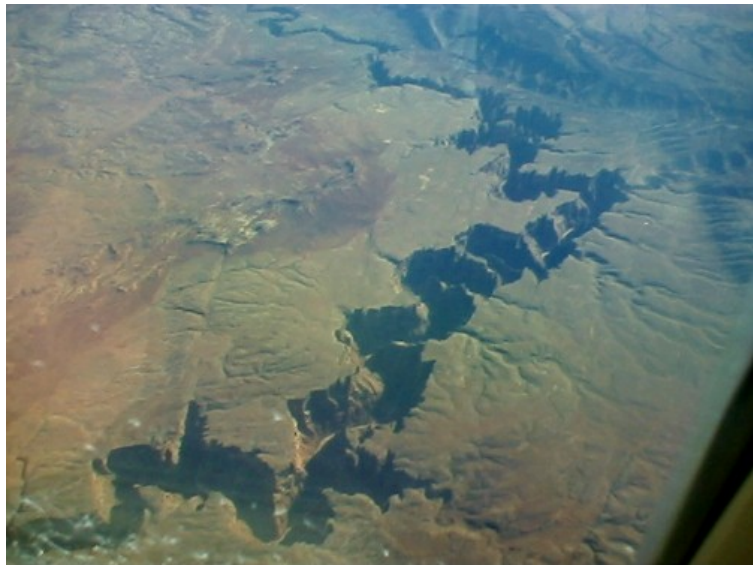
“I reckon we could, but remember: you are taking the opinion of a man with fecal matter for gray matter.”

He smirked his Alf smirk. “I do that every time I vote.”

There is no direct route across the Big Hole, probably because it's such a big hole. Grand Canyon National Park dominates the northwestern corner of Arizona: it is (a) huge, and (b) high. You don't just nip on over to the Hole, look in, and zip back to town. There are no towns between Flagstaff and South Rim, but it's about a 100-mile ride that is gradually uphill all the way. And nice greenery scenery abounds. North Rim is the same way.

And that, like so many other things, got me thinking. The story we're all taught is that the GC was carved by the Colorado River, but methinks that only carries so much truth. The fact is – and keep in mind that this is RAMfact here, which is substantiated mostly by what seems logical to me – that Grand Canyon National Park dominates a high plateau in northern Arizona. In order to reach South Rim from Flagstaff, you have to climb a few hundred feet. To reach North Rim from the Utah border, the climb is even higher. The point is: GCNP is the *highest* ground around, meaning that water couldn't rush down to it from the nearby mountains, and dig the chasm with its gush. At least, not originally.

When you fly over The Big Hole, the view is excellent, and very revealing. The high plateau where GCNP lies, rises smoothly up from the Arizona desert, and from the Escalante (Grand Staircase) area of southern Utah. At its top, it splits apart, just like a loaf of bread that rose and broke in the oven. Some primeval upheaval, resulting from the slow collision of subterranean plates, nudged the earth's surface a few thousand feet skyward until the top just ripped open, leaving a 200-mile-long gash across the region. As the Ice Age waned, glacial runoff sent torrents of water cascading down from the Rockies, creating wide and shallow seas in the plains of Utah below. The many bizarre rock formations of the area make it clear that they were being eroded and shaped by wild underwater currents for a long, long time.



Between the drainage of these seas and the melt from its own upper edges, the Grand Canyon became a funnel for all water in the southwest. When water is pushed into a narrow space, its flow speed increases dramatically, so with the weight of the inland seas pressing into it from the northeast, augmented by the rush of water from its own 200 miles of high grounds after each snowbound winter, the Colorado River must have blasted with ferocious force through the huge and vulnerable gash that we know as the Grand Canyon.

Even viewed from the Rim, it's easy to picture it all happening. The progressive slopes and precipices hint at the ripping apart and subsequent grinding away of the Canyon.

But, so much for The World As RAM Sees It. Geologists may see it otherwise, but they can just go polish my stones.

I decided that, sometime, I really need to hike this Canyon. It's beautiful to simply gaze at from the various overlooks along either rim, but to clamber deep down within its vastness must be overwhelming.

It obviously wasn't going to be part of RR2K, since I wasn't even going to visit GCNP on this trip. Having been there more than once already, it was not high priority on this trek. Next time, I guess.

I've always kept a "next time" file in the back of my mind, referring to things on roadtrips that I didn't have (or didn't take) the time to do this time around, but would've liked to. "Next time," I tell myself. But, given age and economics, there just might not be a next time. It'd be nice, but gotta face facts.