

# ARIZONA'S HOT!

## Fock 2: Bad Food, Bad Hat

For all its depth and breadth and overall holeness, it's easy to picture The Big Hole as a desperately low point in the earth. What most people fail to realize – and I used to be one of “most people”; now I sit smugly among the esoteric – is that you have to climb significantly to reach the Canyon rim. You know, being so deep and all, you picture a low spot in the earth, like the deepest valley there is. But GCNP sits more than 7000 feet above sea level. It is closed for almost half the year due to snow.

For perspective, Mount Washington in New Hampshire, proud holder of the title “Highest Peak in the Northeastern United States,” stands at a majestic 6288 feet.

Taking the North Rim elevation of Cape Royal (7865') as “x,” and the round number of “a mile deep” (5280') as “y,” and doing some rudimentary cipherin', we deduce that  $x - y = 2585'$  – or we could just look at the map and see that the actual elevation of Phantom Ranch, at the Canyon bottom is 2546' – meaning that the deepest point of the Grand Canyon sits nearly a half-mile above sea level. That's no **low** point!! That's higher than the highest point in **15** of the 50 United States! Fuggin' A, huh? :-]

Florida has the lowest high point, at only 345 feet above the nearby sea. To Florida's credit, they did not name this towering peak. Louisiana, though, took time to name their highest point – at a nosebleeding 535' – Driskill *Mountain!*

Illinois' top spot (1235') is quaintly named Charles Mound.

Georgia scrapes the sky (4784') at a place called Brasstown Bald.

How do I know this? I had plenty of time to poke around in the Rand McNally as Alf wheeled Max east from Kaibab National Forest, and north through the Painted Desert. It is a long ride from South Rim to North Rim – 222 miles is what it took us – so there was ample time to kick back and thoroughly enjoy the open and arid southwest.

Max had swivel seats, a luxury that, I'm told, has since been outlawed as a safety hazard. As Alf drove, and classic Rolling Stones tunes pulsed from all corners of the brand new van, I sat in the seat behind him, facing backwards, reclined, feet on the bed, sun on my body, and watched through the big picture window as the desert just coasted on by. It was one of the most relaxed afternoons of my life.



We made North Rim in time for sunset, and though the view from the south-facing high point at Cape Royal was excellent, it wasn't the blazing-orb-sinking-into-the-rift that we had idealized. Fussy sumbitches, weren't we?

We carried a couple of frosties out onto Angel's Walk, and watched the day turn into night. Somewhere down near Flagstaff, a thunderstorm was raging, and another began flashing angrily in the west. Hundreds of flashes of brilliant lightning decorated the edges of our calm starlit sky, and we lay on the rocks in long periods of contented silence.

After a time, we moved on. We had no lodging here – that would cost money! – so we had to roll on north, towards the promised land of Utah. We stopped just short of The Beehive State. Our Notbook entry:

*11:30 MDT, Fredonia AZ. Parked next to a gas station that advertizez “Ice-Beer-Gas” – which seems to sum up our needs. Drive no more. We await its opening with ‘bated breath.*

Alf and I came into Arizona from the east, through New Mexico. It was the only time I had ever been to the Land of Enchantment. They don't call themselves “The [Something] State,” which is good enough for 47 of the others. They go all-out and turn the nickname into a Disney Theme Park thing: The Land of Enchantment. They should get together with the good folks over at The Land Between The Lakes, and they might really concoct something Middle-Earthish. [Illinois is “The Land of Lincoln” and Alaska is “The Last Frontier”, in case you were wondering... and I know you were.]

I'm sure New Mexico has its beautiful spots. Maybe I'll find some Next Time. But, in '87 we sure didn't see any. The mountains in the center of the state seemed pretty desolate. Not pretty, mind you: pretty desolate. We took I-40 straight across, passing near, but not through, Albuquerque, which Alf had to repeatedly pronounce in a loud, hollow and shivering voice, as if invoking some southwestern ghost.

But the best thing we experienced in our NM crossing was the shower in the Ghorn Motel in Moriarty, where we stopped for the night. It was my first shower in 90 hours, so it rated a big thumbs-up from me (and Alf – he was no rose garden either.) The motel's odd name, which we saw in lights as we approached around midnight, turned out, by day, to actually be the Longhorn Motel. The "Lon" part was the victim of bad circuitry.

Ghorn sounded good to us. Like in that Monty Python skit about tinny words and woody words. Ghorrnnnn. A good woody sounding word.

New Mexico didn't sell beer on Sunday. That didn't sit well with us. "Arizona does!" the store clerk said with way too much zeal, as if encouraging us to get out of his damn Enchanted Land, pronto.

There weren't many people to be seen anywhere. Lots of empty ground in New Mexico. With only 12.54 people per square mile, it ranks 43<sup>rd</sup> in density – comfortably behind Nebraska and Utah, and barely ahead of Idaho. And it's a big fukka! It ranks fifth in land area! Fifth! Whodathunkit? Arizona is sixth. But NM is almost a Massachusetts bigger than Arizona.

Arizona cracks the top half in population, though (24<sup>th</sup>, with about 3.7 million), while New Mexico plays home to just 1.5 million, ranking it 37<sup>th</sup>, just ahead of Maine.

Fifth! Damn, that surprises me. I would've thought that Minnesota, for instance, was way bigger than New Mexico, but the North Star State is only 14<sup>th</sup>, not even as big as Oregon. The perspective really changes once you get on the left hand page of the map, I reckon.

Well, anyway, Alf and I came into Arizona from New Mexico, and immediately felt crowded. AZ is 37<sup>th</sup> in density, with 32.36 ppsm – more than 2½ times as jammed as NM -- and you could feel the difference right away. It was stifling.

Less than an hour after the state line, we came upon an unplanned diversion: Petrified Forest National Park. Looking at trees that had turned to stone seemed like a worthwhile way to take a break from driving, so we pulled on in.

They really don't do much, those trees, but I guess that it's the fact that they haven't done much for millions of years that makes them noteworthy in the first place. On first glance, we pretty much shrugged and so-whatted them; they looked interesting, being stonish tree parts, but there was nothing that that made us go "ooooohh."

But when we took the time to read some of the plaques and signs that abounded, we began to



get damn impressed. These three-foot thick trunks were just small pieces of branches from 200-million-year-old trees that stood over 200 feet tall. They were broken off by storms or whatever breaks trees apart, and some pieces got buried in sediment. The ones that didn't just decomposed, but the sediment, which was rich in volcanic ash, provided silica that pervaded the logs and crystallized as mineral quartz, which created a permanent replacement for the cells of the wood. Pretty interesting stuff, we thought. So, if nothing else, the place got us thinking, which was nice.

And the views of the Painted Desert and its badlands were quite good, too.

There were signs all around, sternly warning visitors to not take any pieces. Threats of penalties and fines cast a shadow over the area, as if Big Brother were watching every little chip and sliver. So, of course, I took one. It was just a little piece, barely bigger than a quarter, but it made us paranoid as we

exited the park and the ranger in the booth asked us ominously if we took anything. Alf was driving at the time, and he smilingly lied, "Just pictures!"

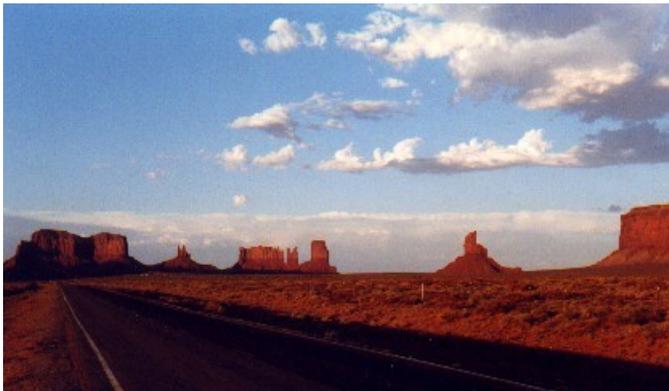
I still have that little tree-rock, too. And it still makes me think.



In '84, on our way home from the L.A. Trials in 1984 (none of us made the team that year), Richie, Cliff and I took the Moose to Four Corners: the marker where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet at one common spot. In the photo above, my two companions are pictured at left, straddling state lines, with the Moose waiting dutifully in the background.

There was almost *nothing* there: just a small parking lot, a couple of shanty-style outhouses, a concrete slab that held the seals of each of the four states, and a gold metal disk, about the size of a baseball, that served as the marker for the only spot in the country where four states met. And, of course, like a dork, I just had to stand on it and do the "Hey, look at me – I'm in four states at once!" thing. Wow, huh? Dork.

At least, that's what it was like in 1984. There are probably freaking motels and Burger Kings there by now.



I had another chance to skim through that Four Corners again in 1990, when Kelzo and Bobby and I were rolling home from Seattle and Reno, but when I looked at the map and saw "Monument Valley" as the other option, I had to think, "hmmm, why the holy heck didn't I go this way last time??"

Of course, it was truly awesome, as you've been told.

That '84 trip also was the first visit for any of us to the Grand Canyon. On our eastward ride from L.A., we had had a

strange encounter with a culinary creation that I hope does not still exist: Culpepper's Gourmet Watermelon Popcorn. Yeah, you read that right: watermelon-flavored popcorn. We had stopped at a small cluster of shops somewhere, and I let Cliff and Richie go inside while I gave the Moose a much-needed tidy-up.

When they came out, they had two fairly large bags of "gourmet popcorn" that was apparently one of the specialties of the shop. I don't remember for sure what the first flavor was – mighta been strawberry – but it was the watermelon flavor that really sticks in my mind. It was ghastly. I swear they just poured light green paint all over plain popcorn. It was all shiny and kinda sticky too, like Cracker Jack, but with this awful sickly tint to it. The strawberry stuff looked like it might have been dipped in blood. Oh, yum. It had no crunch because of the coating, and it stuck to your teeth badly.

Strangely enough, we actually tried to eat it. We toughed our way through the strawberry crap first, which was bad, but barely tolerable. There were a couple of principles at work: first, we couldn't admit that we had bought something so bad that we couldn't choke it down – the Country Club XXX Malt Liquor episode in Kansas still stung at our pride -- and, second, if you spent money on it, you can't just throw it out. I know, again, we violated that with CC XXX ML, too. And that had alcohol in it! Demonstrates once again just what a gagger that beverage was.

We really did try with the watermelon popcorn. We ate at least half the bag. We even tried mixing the two flavors together. But it was an errand of doom that we were attempting. The damn stuff was sickening. And it was even making the beer taste bad!

So, being (a) the owner of the vehicle, and, hence, the Captain Of The Ship, so to speak, (b) the senior member of our party, and, hence, the most capable of mature decisions, and (c) seated in the passenger seat, with easy access to the outdoor world, I took action. I grasped the proffered bag from Cliff, looked at it with disdain, and with a sudden, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say," I dumped the remaining contents into the hot, dry desert. My touring companions raised no objections.

Hopefully some rattlesnakes choked to death on that vile snack food. Gourmet, my anus.

GCNP surprised us as we closed in on the Big Hole. We expected desert, and, yes, we expected a deep valley. Yet, here we were, driving continuously uphill, closing in on 8000' of elevation, amid thick, tall forests – much of them aspens – wide open, lush pastures with happily grazing cows, and the occasional deer (not to be confused with The Occasional Ed) nibbling away by the roadside.

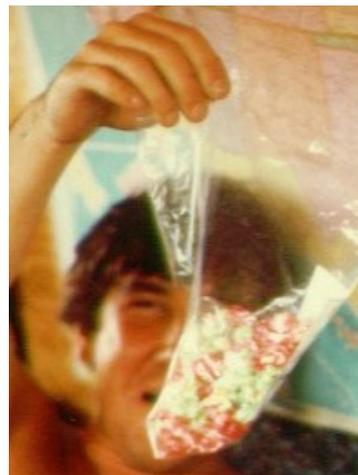


We arrived at North Rim, parked, and walked to the nearest viewpoint. It was astounding. Since we were a tad tipsy, we made for somewhat boisterous tourists, but we were respectful of others, or at least made a thin effort at it. The other people seemed amused by our antics and commentary, and enjoyed our enthusiasm about the sights before us.

Cliff was wearing The Ugliest Hat In The World (UHITW, photo left). Richie had purchased this distorted rag in Los Angeles, and we all took turns wearing it. It was kind of like a French Foreign Legion

hat in shape – the short, square-edged cylinder, with the straight visor, and the long flaps extending down from the back to protect the neck from sun or errant pigeon shit – but the colors were extreme, even for us. It looked like it had been stained with radioactive vomit.

We encountered that lady that I told you about earlier – that one-time Norwood resident who like Lewisburgers – and chatted with her for a while. She admired the UHITW, and twice commented on it. Magnanimously, Cliff insisted that she put it on. Possibly feeling unworthy of such extraordinary cranial adornment, she politely declined. We insisted, however, assuring her that she would **not** look good in it. At that point, she consented and we took her photo. Funny how she relented when we promised her that



she would look hideous. Maybe it was that same type of psychology that was at work with that cold can of Country Club XXX Malt Liquor: this really sucks, try it!

It was still my 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, and we were still very much in a celebratory mood. We found a little path that strung away from one of the major overlooks, toted a bagful o' brews on ice out to a narrow ledge, and settled in to watch nightfall descend.

Only a few minutes after we arrived, two other adventurous tourists came out along the same footpath. They were a young couple, who appeared to be recently married. Her name was Karen, and she was from Westwood, Massachusetts. How bizarre was that? We run into two women from very familiar neighboring Bay State towns – Cliff lived in Norwood, I worked in Westwood, both he and I had gone to high school in Westwood, and Richie very often joined us to sauce at Lewis', in Norwood – and we were 2500 miles from there.

Anyhoo, Karen was beautiful. I mean, really mouth-gaping gorgeous. She surely had to get tired of people like me staring at her as we talked. Making eye contact was sheer pleasure. It was sad to watch her beauty – along with the Canyon's – fade into darkness. Her hubby Dave was a good egg too. He probably was glad that night came and kept us from gawking at his wife. They both got a boot out of our van-sleep plans and our roadtrip tales, and did the right thing by offering to let us use the shower in their cabin in the morning. We did the right thing and thanked them, knowing full well it was one of those all-talk, do-the-right-thing things. I mean, why would this young couple let three, smelly, hungover strangers use their shower, especially since we wouldn't know which cabin was theirs anyway.



We all stayed out on the ledge till after midnight, joking and chatting and boozing, and sometimes just lapsing into silent, appreciative lulls. Dave finally announced that he and Karen were going to go fuck, and they wished us a good night. It was quite sincere, but the contrast of what he was heading to, and what we had ahead of us made his wish seem a tad ironic.

Whereas our bed-down in Vegas had been haphazard – think Three Stooges -- we faced this night with a Plan, carefully configuring cushions, space, and exit routes. The closing notbook entry for 6/26/84 read: *1:00am – We are organized tonight! It's cool. We're bombed. We should sleep well.*

We "slept in" the next morning. Except for a few sneaks outside to water the lilies, we all slept like dead men. The dearth of z's the night before, and the smoky and liquid excesses of my birthday, had put us out like lights. An overcast, drizzly morning made for great sleeping temperatures, and none of us would have been labeled a "morning person" anyway – especially not Cliff, who had once slept straight through from a Saturday night to a Monday morning. Yeah, if you're sick that's not a big deal, but he was just snoozin' and snorin' for thirty contented hours. He says he stirred a few times, saw it was a cold, gray New England winter day, knew there was nothing exceptional to be had on TV, and just burrowed back under the covers till it was time to get up for work.

What finally woke us up at the Big Hole was a knock on the van window. Damn, I thought, some Park Ranger is rousting us. I opened the side door groggily, and, to my astonishment, Dave was standing there. "Hey," he said, cheerfully, "we gotta check out at noon. You guys want to use the shower before we go?"

After a moment of silent stun, I replied, "Hey, yeah, sure! How did you find us??"

"Not many big, brown, Massachusetts vans here," he grinned.

We rallied quickly at the prospect of a real, hot, shower, and another chance to see Karen, but she had gone off to ransack the gift shops, and was not to be found. Awwwww. Still, the shower was damn nice. And it was tremendous of Dave to actually seek us out. Kinda restores your faith in your fellow human, or at least some of them – quite a few of them (like politicians and Yankee fans) still suck toads.