

Coolo California

Fock 3: Screw Bakersfield!

The RR2K visit to the city of Bakersfield was just one big frustration. Screw Bakersfield. Everybody say it: *Skah-roooooo Bakersfield!*

And I should have known it too, because it sucked when Richie and I had passed through in '84 too. It was an off day in the meet schedule, and we decided to do a bit of exploring. Though we knew nothing about it save the name on the map, we chose Sequoia National Forest as our goal for the day. We envisioned stately, towering trees in gigantic groves. Seemed like a good way to take a break from the crowded city.

It took more than four hours to get as far as Bakerfield. Once again, that map-scale perspective had played its trick on us. Not Book said:

[1:00] Gas in Bakersfield. Lunch at Carl's. It sucked. Burgers, fries, service, personality all bit the big one. Now we're headed to SNF to look at trees.

[2:23] FUCK BAKERSFIELD! First, shitty food, now a closed road. Route 178 was shut because of a rock slide five weeks ago. I say, trot those rocks the fuck out of there and let us see big fucking Sequoias!

No alternate routes seemed close enough to be practical, so we cut our losses and headed back towards LA.

[3:23] Misfortune continues. We pull off to grab a swim at Pyramid Lake only to find it closed due to contaminated water. California is looking better on the map than it does in person today.

That string of bad luck had faded out of memory, though, as I pulled into The Golden State's twelfth largest city in 2000. Though it was only 400 miles from Las Vegas to here, it been one of the longest driving days since New Orleans, and I arrived with grand expectations of splendid watering holes, rife with never-had-it-wanna-try-it California brews.

As luck would have it, the exit I took off the highway took me right to a bar! However, it was an On The Border (OTB)– the very same chain that had moved into Uno's neighborhood in Woburn and crushed our bar business, and I still kinda bore a grudge.

The only positive of OTB in those mid-90's full-time barkeeping days was the Sunday night rush. Those nights were Rick's Blues Bar Nights (or Jazz, or Alternative, or whatever I felt like throwing onto the 5-CD player), and they were my only really good night of the week – both for money and for fun.

Lea and Patrick and Cliff and Dugg and even Danno or Richie, or the occasional Ed – I wonder if he's ever been called "The Occasional Ed" before? – would stop in for a casual bite to eat and some very under-priced beer. And I do mean "casual bite to eat" because if I got busy with other customers, my buddies always had to wait.

I loved having friends come in while I was barkeeping. They were fun to talk with, I could slip them beers on the sly, and no matter how good or bad service I gave them, they always felt compelled to tip well.

Though there was one night when I nearly had to shut them all off because they were obnoxiously singing *At The Copa* or some other song that I hated, and one of them ended up lying flat on the floor by the front door where somebody else had dropped him. I kinda forget who was who in that exchange though, because I was pretty lit when I went into work that night too. It was the day of the Corrib Pub Road Race, and I had availed myself of a little too much of the free Harpoon IPA during the post-race revelry.

But Patrick and Lea were my Sunday night regulars. We'd sit there and watch the Simpsons on the big TV, and pass the early Sunday evening hours with booze and comedy and good tunes. The time went fast, the company was delightful, and the tips (©) were great.

The last two hours, though, was when I *really* made my money. That's where OTB came in. We closed at 11:30. They closed at 10:00. They were busy, so they all made money, and came in *en masse* with pockets bulging with cash tips, and a thirst earned by a night of serving the cantankerous public. So, I would go from empty and idle, to full and scrambling in a blink. But I knew that, as F&B brethren and sistren, that they would (a) be patient, and (b) tip well, so I hustled to serve them well. There were a

couple of run-ins with a couple of ignorami in the first few invasions. One guy stole a beer from my bin while I going to get food, so I tossed his ass out and made him pay for more than he drank. Another guy got irate when I wouldn't give him a drink about twenty minutes after last call. I booted his crabby ass out too, and denied them entry on subsequent nights. You know, it just doesn't make sense to rile the guy who pours your booze. And he was a bartender himself! He shoulda knowed betta.

The first night, I was dumb: I rang it all on one check, thinking only of saving my own effort. Well, they didn't all leave at the same time, and most of them didn't leave enough to cover what they drank, let alone a good tip, and the final few guys got stuck with an oversized bill, and I got an undersized gratuity. I made some adjustments, comped a few drinks, and let them off easy, but the next Sunday, I played it smart.

When the OTB swarm began to roll in, I began to set up a whole row of individual checks. I got names with orders and kept them all separate. They actually loved the individual attention, and being called by name – “Hey, Gertrude, you ready for another Sex on the Beach? And Sven, how about another tall IPA?” – and when I presented each bill, I always got a 20-40% tip.

It got so I was making almost \$200 for a Sunday night, while I would toil on Friday and Saturday nights for about \$70 on average. Some nights – like when OTB would run a special – I might make as little as \$35 on a Saturday night. And that happened often enough to sour me on OTB for life.

So I laid aside my initial impulse to pounce on the first available bar, gave OTB a sneering “perhaps some other time” nod, and set out to find a more local-flavored place. (In a word: underbelly.) With a population of 174,820, Bakersfield certainly seemed ripe for some good saucing.

It was about 9:00, and the west yet glimmered with some streaks of day. [I know I've used that line before, but I just *like it*.] My instincts pointed me north – or maybe it was a little east, actually I don't remember which direction it was, damn it – but for several minutes I only found myself heading away from activity. A change of heading only made things worse. I looped back, checking hither and yon on the way, but hither was closed and yon had gone out of business. I needed petrol, and there was an ambulance gassing up when I got to the Chevron station. Well, I reasoned, EMT's have to know where everything is, so I approached them. They were pretty bemused that this whacko in a tank top and a cowboy hat, carrying a Rand McNally, would just stroll up and ask where all the good boozin' spots in town were. The guy was ready to ignore me, but the woman took a shine to me, and directed me to a certain street, where “things will be hopping.”

I heartily thanked her, and filled with new confidence and resolve, I resumed my quest. It took only a few minutes to find that fabled street, and it took only a handful more to realize that I had been had. There were plenty of shops and such along this long tree-island-divided street, but the only bar I saw anywhere had been closed for a couple of hours already.

Persistence, persistence, I reproached myself, and gave the full length of the street a chance. Nada. Egg. No go on the bar-o. Not a party site in sight. Stupid EMT.

More exploration yielded nothing. I sought out downtown, shopping areas, softball fields – I sniffed all over that damn city. Keeeee-rist!! Don't people *drink* in that city? Why the hell do so many people *live* there???? Well, just fry my eggs, Bakersfield!

So, having just added an extra hour of driving for *nothing*, I said “Fukkit” and rolled back to OTB. Frustrated by that wasted time, but content that the Borderboys and Bordergirls would once again come through for me, I grabbed my Notbook, locked up Blue Man, and strode purposefully across the lot.

It was a beautiful mid-July night, with a totally clear sky that allowed much of the day's heat to flee up towards outer space and leave a cool touch to the breeze as it brushed across my tanned and re-tanned skin.

I was digging it, and calming down nicely – after all, beer and cool, casual California company were imminent. The soft voices and light clatter of people chatting and doing the social-drink thing on the patio captured my fancy: great night for a patio sit.

So I reached out for the tall, vertical, slightly ornate door handle, and gave it a friendly pull.

Then a not-so-friendly pull. Then a disbelieving tug. Then a pissed-off yank. Then a bullshit heave. It wouldn't budge.

Locked!?! I searched the doorway and saw a sign. It said: *Closed, asshole, it's after 10:00. Piss off*. At least that's what it seemed to say to me.

Enraged, I stormed to the van, angrily threw my notbook and hat on the passenger seat, started Blue Man with a roar, and threw him into reverse. I wheeled him around and faced the doorway. With a loud, pent-up, feral growl, I slammed the accelerator and careened towards the door.

