

Coolo California

Fock 7: SACRAMENTO!!!!

It was no real surprise that as I headed northeast, the sky brightened. The fog was like a big gray sea monster that rose up and devoured the coast each morning, fed on as much good cheer as it could find, then retreated back under the waves. Does it do that every morning? Gad, that would be a morose way to start each and every workday.

Aside from anticipation, the ride to California's capitol went well. The city seemed timid by comparison to Frisco and LA. With 407,018 residents, Sacramento is only 1/9 the size of LA. Of course, that's no disgrace: LA is freaking huge. Sacramento is the 37th biggest city in the US of A, and had swelled by more than 10% in the previous decade. It's about on par with Atlanta, Oakland, and Tulsa, population-wise.

I took a quick stop by the state capitol building, just because I saw it on the map, and it looked convenient. It seemed pretty insignificant for a significant state like California. Topeka had a grander edifice than that.

It was misleading, though, since major construction was underway behind the modest building, with a structure in progress that would soon dwarf the smaller, outdated one.

The Golden State's capitol is just about the same latitude as our nation's capitol, both of them sitting between 38°-39° N, and it has a delightfully temperate climate that typically sees low 90's in summer and low 40's in winter. It's also about the same latitude as Lisbon, Portugal and Athens, Greece.

Yawwwwwwn.

Yeah, that's how I felt, too. After 13 days of build-up, Sacramento ("!") was just another city. The traffic crunch was smaller than SF, but it was still there, and the typical narrow parkways, some with floral medians, threaded off from the arterial interstates into typical urban-to-suburban neighborhoods.

If there were any feral wolves about, I didn't see them.

There was some time to while away before heading to the airport to gather Ed and Bryan (also known as BVD). Since I was the first to arrive in this city, I would assume the role of host. It would be incumbent on me to know where we were staying, how to get there from the airport, the best route between our hotel and the Track & Field stadium, and where the nearest bars were. It was my duty, as host, concierge, and chauffeur, to make sure that their visit would go as smoothly as possible.

So, I did the necessary scouting, found everything pretty easily, and contented myself that I would be a good host. I would sound like a goddamn Sacramentonian by the time my guests landed.

Satisfied, I headed to the airport. My Boston upbringing had conditioned me to allow plennnnnnnty of time to get there. Boston's Logan Airport was not easy to get to, being, basically, in the Harbor. Sorry, I mean *Hahhbah*. Southeast Expressway would definitely have jam-ups, Callahan Tunnel traffic was sure to suck, and the convoluted airport roadways would be twisted around yet another new construction mess. So, to do a 20-mile ride in from the burbs to meet a 2:30 flight, you'd probably leave at, ohhhh, noon-ish. If it was a 6:00 p.m. arrival, I'd leave at 2:00, just to beat rush hour. I'd far prefer to spend those surplus hours chillin' in an airport bar than grinding my teeth in bumper-to-bumper assholes.

Well, Sacramento Metropolitan Airport is a breeze to get to, and I was waaay early. Some Gordon Marten-Beirzen draught helped ease the pain as I cooled my heels in the small, brightly lit lounge. I broke out the laptop for a bit and DL'ed some of those ill-fated photos, and congratulated myself on having such dandy pics to look back on and to show off.

The first digital ramack was in 1997, a solo Boston-to-Louisiana run. The Ricoh camera that I had only held 25 photos in its memory, so the laptop had to come along for the ride too, so I could



download the pix and clear the memory for the next batch. This worked fine until the time I found myself in Kentucky, with a full camera, an empty laptop battery, and the anticipation of good **Land Between The Lakes** scenery ahead.

Rest areas are good for many things: sleeping, crapping, and doing pushups on picnic tables are my most common ways of utilizing them. But where there are vending machines there is electricity, and electricity was what I be needing.

This particular Rest Area had a whole row of machines: sodas, coffee, ice cream, candy, snacks, and sundries. It was late morning, and plenty of people were pulling in from I-24W to grab a pre-lunch sip or nibble, or to service Walt, or just to stretch the legs. It would have been pretty inconsiderate to go up and unplug the Coke Classic machine and tell thirsty kiddies that they'll "just have to wait." And I knew that whichever vending item I might have picked – even the mustard-flavored cruller machine – that would be the one that people would suddenly get a hankering for.

There was also a water bubbler – at least, that's what we called them in Boston, you might call it a fountain – at the far end of the building. The bubbler itself had one power cord for its pump and chiller, but that left the bottom half of the outlet empty. I sat on the ground, plugged in, and began to load down all my photos from Cleveland – Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame, USS Cape Cod, The Jake, Flannery's – and Ohio in general. The process took a few minutes. This was still early in my 'puter days, and neither my 336 MHz processor nor my lazy camera was able to move those megabytes very quickly. Digital cameras were still quite new on the broad consumer market too, and the affordable ones hadn't reached a very high level of sophistication yet. At least, this one hadn't.

This didn't attract a lot of attention, but it drew some. The funny part was that parents would pause on their way by and look at me very quizzically, and then their 11-year-old kids would start explaining to them what I was doing. It was pretty weird. Weird enough to convince me to buy an inverter, so I could do this stuff in private.

I didn't feel at all weird about doing the laptop thing in that Sacramento airport lounge, though; it was a common enough sight, and probably gave me more of an air of respectability than I deserved. I looked like a goddamn businessman!

But there *was* a strange feeling growing as my cronies' arrival time grew near. The solitary nature of the trip was about to be morphed into almost constant companionship. Blue Man would become a shuttle -- a combination team bus and clubhouse of sorts -- instead of just my intimate rolling bedroom.

The solitude had been easy in The Valley Of The Gods and in The Narrows, but even in a place like this lounge, I could maintain it despite the people around me. That doesn't mean I put up impregnable walls in a case like this; I usually leave an open door, and sometimes somebody cool like Ron, the wrestling coach I met at Timbers in Gunnison, would pop into my world to have a chitchat. Writing in the Not Book has proven to be a much better conversation starter than plipping on a laptop is. The book makes you look like you have a tale to tell; the laptop makes it look like you are behind in your work and need to be left alone.

Anyway, their plane arrived without incident, and we adjourned to The Heritage Hotel, where Bryan had reserved a room for the week-plus. The Heritage was not exactly a Hyatt or a Westin; it was more of a Motel 6, but not quite as good. It needed work. It also needed people. For a city that was staging an event that involved thousands of out-of-town athletes, coaches, and officials, and tens of thousands of spectators, this hotel seemed ridiculously empty.

The décor and layout of the hotel was decent, but in the course of the week, we would find ourselves subjected to odd things. The front desk dude was creepy: he wore all black, had an Alexi Lalas beard, and could be seen reading a book on Nazism. The inconsiderate maintenance staff took more than three days to make the pool and laundry ready for use. There was a cold-water hot tub. The Powerade vending machine clumped out a bottle of plain old water to you, no matter what flavor you pressed. The housekeeping staff went MIA in the final three days, leaving us with nothing but soggy, used, used, and reused towels. And we ended up neighboring with the Bill Glass Champions For Life entourage, a prison ministry evangelical group. Bill himself was a hoot. When Bryan greeted him innocuously on the elevator, "How are you?" Bill replied with a way-too-ready, "I'm blessed." That was a conversation stopper.

There were some up-sides to the Heritage, I suppose, but all of them were outside the building. The parking lot, for instance, met with my approval. After two nights of fitful sleeping on folded-over comforters on the floor of the hotel room, I thenceforth retired to Blue Man for my z's for the rest of our stay. The lot was pretty much empty, and a few small and leafy trees made for quiet nights, and shaded mornings.

The balcony outside our room, and the lawn underneath, made for excellent stretching spots. Those came in handy because the undeveloped lands adjacent to the hotel property contained a network of bike and horse trails that we used for our almost-daily runs. They had easy-on-the-legs soft dirt underfoot, and adequate shade overhead, which was important since we weren't exactly up at the crack o' dawn each morning. In fact, I usually just slept while Ed, Bryan, and Doon, who arrived a couple of days into the meet, suffered through a hung-over, late morning trot.

The Olympic Track & Field Trials themselves took ten days on the calendar: Friday, June 14th (Bastille Day) through Sunday, June 22nd. It involved eight days of competition, with Tuesday and Thursday built in as "rest days." I won't bore you with the details of the meet – it's old news now anyway, with names that have fallen out of familiarity, even among most T&F fans – but, to us, it was grand entertainment.

But there were many non-track highlights of the week that deserve mention, some connected with the meet, and some just out and about in Sacramento, which we affectionately nicknamed *Sacre Merde*...

SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF CALIFORNIA'S CAPITOL

The Baseball Game at Raley Field

The Sacramento River Cats defeated the Fresno Bears, 7-5, on a chilly (like mid-50's) and wind-swept night at brand new Raley Field, bringing joy to the almost sell-out crowd here on Kids Night. We procured our local microbrews (River Otter Ale), had the barkeep autograph our program (he was, after all, *our* hero of the night), then Bryan, Ed and I stretched out on the lawn in left field for some Triple-A baseball. This was the River Cats' inaugural season in California's capital, having emigrated from Vancouver, and the crowd was large and enthusiastic.

After a few innings, we wandered over to right field, contrarily grabbing a Left Field Lager and a Roaring River Red on the way (and a very large plastic bottle of MGD for BVD), and plopped down on the lawn in right field. Very casual. Nice way to watch a ball game. And when the game slowed (as baseball is wont to do), there were plenty of little kids running, jumping, and rolling around to keep us entertained.

Though I had to fight off the mental connections between the name of the field and that disagreeable old biddy at Indigo Run, I liked the ballpark and its atmosphere a lot. I resolved to buy a River Cats hat to commemorate our visit, but when I went to make the purchase, I found that they all really sucked and were way overpriced, so I said "screw this" and spent the money at O'Malley's instead (see below).

Best Bar: O'Malley's, Old Sacramento CA

After a couple of only semi-successful expeditions into *SacreMerde* to find *boire terre* in the first two nights, we found our way to Old Sacramento on the third night.

We had visited Stinger's, which we had presciently tabbed "Stinky's", on Friday night and were very disappointed. It was just across the parking lot from the stadium and would have made for a great place to have a sip or two while waiting for the crunch of exiting traffic to subside. Sadly, the food was lame, and the crowd was surly, so we gave up on that one.

On Saturday, we dined at Sudwerk, a nice (i.e., pricey) kinda-German-kinda-brewhouse kinda place, and then set out in search of local flavor, specifically beer flavor. The first bar we tried, which looked atmosphere-ish from the outside, turned out to be a gay bar. None of the guys looked good, so we left after about 30 seconds. (It was an odd parallel, actually, considering that when Ed and I had arrived in Vancouver after our trans-Canada ride in '90, the first bar we stumbled into was also a gay bar, that one in full drag motif. We lasted maybe eight seconds there.)

We shook it off and kept looking, soon finding a side-street-in-a-neighborhood place called The Depot that had a huge black bouncer who turned out to be from New York. He was from Queens, which has nothing in common with Rochester except the ", NY" after it, but being fellow New Yorkers in such a distant land gave us a bond, and he let us enter without paying the cover. Go figure. We went in and

started tilting a couple of frosties and watched as patron after patron arrived, until the place was pretty damn full, and we were clearly in the minority. No, this wasn't a racial thing: the place was teeming with tattooed lesbians! It was the butchest collection of painted ladies I've ever seen. But they were fun to drink among, and they seemed to get a kick out of our presence.

So, with that as our background, we followed up Sunday night's River Cats game with a visit to Old Sacramento, the city's historic district. It was pretty cool to stroll up the mostly-empty old-style wooden sidewalk amid the preserved turn-of-the-century architecture. At this hour, most places were closed, but we only needed one, and Bryan, having those Southie instincts, was quick to spot the sign for O'Malley's Irish Bar.

It's a narrow place, with a narrow bar, a narrow darts room, and a narrow poolroom, but that just made it a close and friendly place. It was odd that Bryan's order – a Bud bottle, hardly an exotic selection – caused the biggest stir, as the barkeep actually had to scamper down into the basement to retrieve one. We played pool (not well), we drank (well, as always), and made sure we spun the jukebox tune "Lodi", by Creedence Clearwater Revival, more than once. Lodi is a small city about 30 miles south of SacreMerde, and we figured the locals must be damn sick of tourons like us playing the song, so we did it to torment them.

We returned to Old Sac with Doon on the following Saturday, our final night in town. We were fired up from dinner, and took on these two guys in classic pool games. They were both NBC guys, one of whom worked on replays, and the other was sort of a generic "in the truck" guy who did whatever. They got to go to the NBA Playoffs, the MLB All-Star Game (which they had just come from), the Trials, and then it would be on to Sydney. Pretty decent summer, I'd say.

Doon got in a banner-swiping mood, but since the banner he wanted was strung across the main street of Old Sac, and a police cruiser was parked just down the block, we talked him out of it.

Most Puzzling Bar: Bleacher's Sports Bar and Grille

I will never figure this place out. It was always empty. We ate there three or four times and it was never busy at all. They had a big sign out front saying "Welcome Olympic Athletes," but were closed up tight by 10:30 on the two nights we tried for post-meet victuals there. One of the barkeeps later told us, "Oh, we close as soon as business dies down." We looked around at all the empty seats, and wondered why they were ever open at all.

The food was good, the beer choices were plentiful, the atmosphere was comfortable, TV's abounded, and it was prominently placed on a very major road. We really liked the place. All that was missing was business.

To be fair, though, they had one very busy night, which we missed by being at the meet. It was Male Dance Revue night, with this group of Chippendales-type, shirtless, tight-pantsed, buff guys strutting about for an (almost) all-female crowd. We were told that it was packed, and it was fun. Weird place.

Another puzzler was a place called the Rusty Duck. The name sang to us. It sounded fun and whacky, but outdoorsy and down-to-earth. So, we went there one night. It turned out to be a very nice place: quite large, with an all-wood hunting lodge look about it. It had a large balcony overlooking the American River, soft piano music, candles on the small, linen-covered tables, cloth napkins, expensive entrees (including roast duck), the works.

It was way too nice for us, in fact. We had gone there partly because we had found it in the listings for "Bars", not "Fancy Schmancy Restaurants." So, rather than look like idiots by walking in and then walking right back out again, we sat for a drink, then scooted and headed more downtown, where we might nestle into some underbelly.

Placid Recreation: Alister MacKenzie Golf Course

When golf was brought up as a Tuesday afternoon activity, we looked to the Yellow Pages for guidance. Ed and Bryan had golfed at Teal Bend – is that a classic California name or what? – earlier in the week, but I had missed it attending to Blue Man's muffler needs.

The murmur of Rochester, which had grown into a rumble by Little Rock, had become a full-fledged roar by Sacramento. Not a half-fledged, or quarter-fledged, or even twelve-seventeenth-fledged roar, but a FULL-fledged roar.

You know where that phrase comes from? Birds. Feathers, more specifically. A young bird who is just about to start flying is a fledgling, meaning that it has matured enough, and grown enough feathers

to lift itself off the ground. When it is fully feathered, it is a full-fledged flying animal. So, Blue Man had feathers roaring in his muffler. This, obviously, had to be attended to.

So, I dropped Ed and Bryan off at Teal Bend for an afternoon of frustration and futility, and returned to the city to seek professional help. Hopefully, I could find better specimens than those pipe-hammering rednecks in Arkansas.

Midas seemed like a logical place, and I pulled in and had them give it a look-over, with the admonition, *If a pipe doesn't really need to be replaced, leave it in, OK?*

Less than a minute after Blue Man went up on the lift, the mechanic, stifling a smirk, called me in to have a look-see. "The guy in New York said this 'wasn't bad?'" he asked, and pointed to the undercarriage. The muffler itself looked kinda tattered, but what made me laugh out loud was the pipe that extended back from it. There was maybe about 15% of it left. The top half was gone completely, and the bottom was disintegrating fast. It looked like a joint that was burning unevenly, and was canoeing along the bottom – or so I'm told.

"I don't think we can save that," he said dryly.

I gave him a raised eyebrow look. "Yeah, I guess that's even beyond duct tape."

What a difference when I floated Blue Man out of there. Not a sound. You could have heard a feather drop.

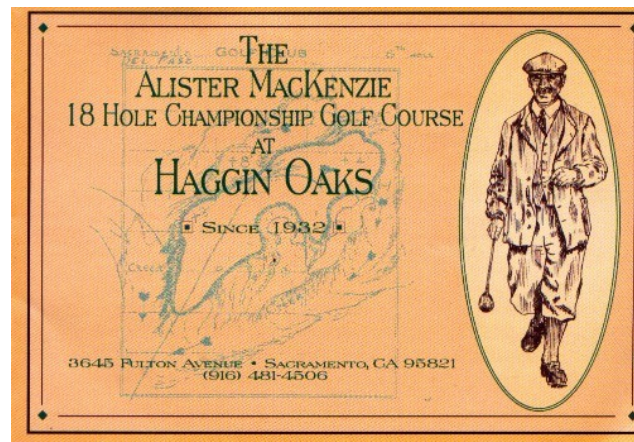
So, on Tuesday, I was eager to swing the sticks, especially when we found a place called the Alister **MacKenzie** Golf Course! The deal was uncanny: \$16.95 covered greens fees, the cart, *and* a free soda. It always cracks me up when the cost includes a "free" something. If it's included in the price, then it isn't FREE, is it?

There was "significant construction" underway on AMGC, with bulldozers, trucks, and torn up ground just about everywhere. Rather than being irked by this, I realized the potential benefit of that most generous of golf rules: Ground Under Repair (G.U.R.). Swing with abandon boys! If it goes astray, you get a free drop!

Quite honestly, it didn't come into play as much as I would have thought, as we all played well. I had a rough first few holes, mainly due to double chips and 3-putts, but I was hitting my irons on crisp straight lines. Those of you who have golfed with me know that it's the Big Dog off the tee, not the skinny-headed clubs that usually make my game. This day, though, it got so I wasn't even using the woods. If a hole was 380, I'd hit a 5-iron off the tee and a 6-iron to the green, get on in regulation, and calmly 2-putt for a par. It just kept happening! It was so weird.

I baffled Ed and Bryan when, sitting 280 from the green after a big drive on a par-5, I eschewed going for the green in two, and instead poked my second shot with a 9-iron and knocked it halfway to the green. In response to their perplexed looks, I explained: my chipping and wedge game is in the dumper, and I feel better with a full swing shot, so why hit to within 100 yards of the green if I'm just going to douche the short, half-swing shot? I had my iron mojo workin', so I rode that strategy as far as it would take me. I then hit another 140-yard niner pin high and almost got the bird.

And then came The Hole. I can openly boast that Tiger Woods would NOT have been able to beat me on this hole. The par five 18th was a teaser at 457 yards: just a half-a-tad too long for a common man's par four. The Big Dog came out and barked out a 300-yarder just right of center. I didn't see it land, but Bryan said its third bounce hit the golf cart of the guys in front of us, or it would have rolled another twenty or so. Then came the charmed shot. The Titleist 2 leaped off the face of the 7-iron, soared high into the Sacramento sky, and went plumb line straight at the pin. It zoomed down to earth, biting the soft grass eleven inches to the right the hole, and spun to the right another eleven inches before sitting tight. I calmly knocked in the easiest eagle putt of my golfing life. Tiger would have been hitting a



wedge, but, c'monnnn, what are the odds that he'd hole it out? Yeah, I know, he'd probably do it just to piss me off. And it would too.

The eagle finished off a 38 back nine for an 82, my best score since Indigo Run in '93. With the same strategy in place for the full round five days later, I shattered that with a PR-equalling 75 (38-37, five over par), despite a bogey 6 on that same 18th hole. We all scored great that day, I think I had about ten Coors Originals during the round, and, again, the G.U.R. was virtually a non-issue for any of us.

There was just good karma oozing from all over this course: the cheap greens fees, inexpensive beers, and ridiculously friendly and talkative rangers. Those guys actually slowed us down with their loquacity, spinning yarns for us instead of barking at us to keep our asses moving. MacKenzie G.C. was a-o-k. But what else would you expect from the finest name in golf?

The Tahoe Roadtrip

On Thursday's rest day, we took a roadtrip (within a roadtrip) east to the town of South Lake Tahoe. It was just over 100 miles from SacreMerde, so it wasn't even a two-hour drive; hardly worthy of the label "roadtrip," but it got us out into travel mode, and Blue Man got to dig being the open-road chariot for the team.

The ride took us up into the lush pine forests of the Sierras. The air was crisp and clean and light. The deep green of the forests was inviting. Then we crested the ridge, and looked down upon Lake Tahoe itself. Quite a sight.

We were able to gather some stats along the way. Lake Tahoe is the second deepest lake in the United States and the tenth deepest in the world, with a maximum depth measured at 1,645' – nearly a third of a mile. The amount of water contained in Lake Tahoe could cover a flat area the size of California 14" deep. There is enough in that lake to supply everyone in the United States with 50 gallons of water per day *for five years!* The amount of water that evaporates -- just what *evaporates* -- from the surface of Lake Tahoe every year could supply a city the size of Los Angeles for five years. Holy shit. We gazed at the lake with newfound respect and admiration. What a lake!

South Lake Tahoe straddles the CA/NV state line. In the California half, there is no gambling. In the Nevada half, there is plenty. It really creates a dichotomy: the family-oriented, boating and hiking enthusiasts can enjoy peace and serenity in California, while those more interested in shows and gambling and hookers can hang out in Nevada.

We parked in the Nevada section of SLT, and set out on foot. We agreed that we'd hang together, scout the town out, grab some eats, then release the hounds.

We stumbled upon a place called Roman Feast, in the Caesar's complex. It boasted endless food for a penny, or some ridiculously cheap deal like that. Feeling that quantity was a good thing, we took the hook. As it turned out, the place was tremendous! Real roast turkey, thick roast beef, lasagna, salads, hot bread, fricasseed ferret feet, fried fox fur fondue, and yummy desserts up the wazoo. We went back for more and back again for more of more. There is something about all-you-can-eat arrangements that just make you want to stuff every last morsel down your throat so you can claim maximum value for your dollar. If you pay ten bucks and eat 1000 calories, that's a penny a calorie. If you chow down 3000 calories, you're paying only a third of a cent per. That's just being a smart consumer, literally.

We hefted our bloated carcasses up from the table, and proclaimed that the Evening would now begin. Bryan was like a bloodhound, and immediately took up the scent of casino action. He found himself a seat at a blackjack table, and settled in for the long haul. I did some slot machine yanking, and hit a \$40 dollar jackpot almost immediately. A waitress brought me a free drink, and I began the leisurely process of gradually giving the casino back its money.

Enough soon became enough though. The machines gobbled up my quarter cache pretty quickly, but at least they were faceless gadgets. I prefer that to a live game where the dealer smugly takes your money right off the table in front of you. That's such a kick in the balls. If I were a dealer, I'd be laughing, and gloating, and taunting, and sticking out my tongue, and singing *Na-na-hey-hey-Goodbye*. Right up till they shot me.

Ed's not much of a casino zealot either, so we roamed off in search of more placid entertainment. We found a place right by the lake's edge called The Island Café. Of course, it wasn't on an island, but the nearby water made it seem like it could be, if you used your imagination. It had the Caribbean feel going, and a reggae kind of band playing. We settled in on the veranda, sipped a couple of fruit-topped Coronas, and mellowed out to the cool breeze off the Lake.

I'm surprised our bellies allowed as much beer in as they did. We had several, then went and secured a California motel room for the night. Once in, we sauntered back into Nevada to find Bryan and Doon. Bryan was still going strong. He was ahead by about \$125, and was on his umpteenth free Bud. Doon was ready to dock the boat, so we told Bryan where he could find us, and retired to our room. I, of course, quickly transmogrified Blue Man back into bedroom mode, and enjoyed an excellently cool night of vansleep at 6200' elevation.

Bryan, I guess, fumbled his way into the room around four, having "quit while I was ahead." He walked away with \$20 more than he sat down with, and drank on the house for more than five hours. Not a bad night's entertainment.

The three of them went for a run the next morning. I started with them, just so I could say I ran all the way to Nevada from California, but the thin mountain air had me gasping after about a half-mile, so I had no problem whatsoever with stopping and walking back. If anyone in a car looked at me funny, I gave them a big friendly wave. That way, they'd think I was crazy and not just lazy.

As we left SLT to return to Sacramento (!), Bryan just happened to mention that he had seen a sports betting room at Caesar's and that the odds of Tiger Woods breaking the British Open Record of 18-under-par at St. Andrew's were 500-to-1. Damn, I said, I would have plunked a \$20 down on that! Tiger was rolling like no golfer in history, and I had faith in him. We were already a half-hour out of town, though, so turning around was out of the question. Tiger went on to post a 20-under. Oh, well, ten grand would've been nice...

Best Meal: Fat City Bar & Cafe

Throughout the week, we had been rotating paying for eats, tossing out the plastic for one-a-day meals. On that final Saturday, while we were on the 17th tee at Alister MacKenzie Golf Course, I suggested that we go down to Old Sac and have a really good dinner, in a real good restaurant. I knew it was Ed's turn up, and without hesitating, he said, "I think it's a great idea."

We found Fat City on Front Street, in one of the oldest buildings in the old section of town. It was fancy but casual. Real nice place. We had pre-meal drinks, appetizers, salads, hang-the-expense entrees, a uncharacteristically genteel bottle of Merlot, and, yes, even desserts: Coconut Cake, Key Lime Pie, Peach Crust Pie, and a Peanut Brittle Bowl, thank you please. Yummmmmmm.

The repast stood out in EXTREME contrast to most of my meals on the road. Probably cost about five tanks of gas. Maybe six. And those are *Blue Man's* tanks, not some ten-gallon gas-can car's. Thanks, Eddie!!!