



Fock 1: Q, Beaver, and One Cool Cool Crater

The Beaver State will always hold a special place in my heart: it was the last of the 48 contiguous states that I set foot and wheels in. The earlier ramacks, though noble, had ventured neither north enough nor west enough, and the Pacific Northwest was left for last.

And it's just not right that it was that way. I have always loved the deep hues and soft floors of evergreen forests. As a runner whose career began at the same time as Steve Prefontaine's blossomed, the connection between my favorite sport and this state was solid. Oregon sang to me, but it stayed out of reach until RAM Tour 90, when Bobby and I plunged into it, fresh from the Goodwill Games – and its attendant revelries – in Seattle.

Those revelries definitely left Bobby with a worse impression of Oregon than I had. Reeling and retching (literally) from a night of ludicrous excess at several Seattle slosheries, he and I got Ed to Sea-Tac International Airport just in time for his flight home to Boston, then started our own long, convoluted, and groundborne route thither.

I don't know how Ed survived that flight. The initial lurch of takeoff would have been enough to unsettle the slumbering demons within and get that cold sweat going. With any luck, he simply passed out, drooling, on the shoulder of the horrified old lady in the aisle seat next to him.

As for Bobby, he was totally green around the edges. I think he was green all the way through, actually. He had started the day with a purge, and had succumbed to another just before the airport.

Somehow, I was doing OK. There was a headache and some quease, but nothing that I wasn't all too accustomed to. I guess being a full-time lush has its advantages.

But Bobby's inner rebellion just would not be quelled.

Q is quite a letter, isn't it? I mean, how can They – the infamous They – assign letter status to something and then say, "Oh, you can't use it by itself. Well, maybe at the end of a few really weird words." Letters are like elements, the fundamental building blocks of language. Just as the elements blend and merge into compounds, which blend and merge into organisms and things, letters blend and merge into words, which then blend into sentences and paragraphs. Are there any elements out there that can only be used in combination with another? Wouldn't that undercut its elemental designation?

That is so strange. And Q can only used with U. Maybe it's just a plot to bolster U, which is by far the least used of the vowels.

Vowels, in general, just seem a little arrogant, don't you think? *Hey, we're the elite few. You can't have a word without us. All you consonants can just suck our hoobies.*

Vowels take four of the top 6 spots on the usage chart, with E, A, O, and I accounting for more than one-third (34.3%) of all letters used.

U, however, lags along in just 13th, dead in the middle, with a mere 2.8%. E leads the pack with 12.7%, and the other vowels all rate 7% or more, so you get the feeling that they tolerate U with a heavy sigh, like its an embarrassment to the caste.

And that's extra remarkable when you consider the vulgarity factor! Just as K is aided by those hard-edged words, U relies on the unspeakables for a significant portion of its employment. Suck. Fuck. Anus. Cunt. Puke. Go U!! U certainly seems to be the black sheep of the vowel enclave.

Besides being the underbelly vowel, it's also so negative! U introduces an almost limitless number of negative words. Say you have a normal word, and you want to produce its negative opposite, what do you do? Put "un" on the front! Appealing? Unappealing. Loved? Unloved. Iversity? University! Cle? Uncle!

That's pretty despicable, feeding on those words like that. How far down the charts would U be without those unseemly jobs? Ugh.

But, U's shortcomings aside, Q is just a total freaking loser. I think we should ditch it altogether. Make the alphabet 25 letters. Is 26 significant for any reason? No. In our increasingly decimal-oriented world, 25 is a tidy number. 26, except for my birthdate in June, is lame.

Let "Kw" take over. K is ready and eager to take on more work. I don't have the stats down to the 1/100th, but X, Q, and Z, in that order, are all credited with a barely-present 0.1% usage. It just would not be missed. Maybe after a few months, some literary scholar might lift his head from his volumes and

wonder aloud, "Has anyone seen any Q's lately?" Or some astute typist will notice that the left pinky seems a tad less active these days. Other than that, who will care?

School kids wouldn't give a crap in a cradle, I can guarantee that. Q was the biggest pain-in-the-ass letter in penmanship. They would revel in its demise. The lower case letter was twisted all wrong, like you were trying to bend your leg behind you and touch your foot to your shoulder blade. And the upper case? Don't get me going on the upper case Q! It was fancy-schmancy 2!! A frickin' numeral! Hold the phone and take messages, please! Words start with a 2 now? Well, only if the 2 is followed by a U. Fuck Q.

Disenchanted with Palmer's prototype, I have fashioned my own upper case Q, and it's pretty cool. I do an O, and when I get back to the top, I keep it going on a sweeping curve right through the middle and out the bottom. It's damn stylish. The RAM Q, it should be called.

Q should only count as half a letter, but I hate to give more credit to U. Q needs to take a stand and kick the leeching U off its back. We see a Q, and we *knowwww* how it's pronounced; we don't need no stinking U! *Quick* could just as easily be *qick*. I could deal with that, no problem. And it'd be qicker. The U is never the operative vowel anyway; there is always another one on its heels giving the word it's real sound. Quiet, Qeazy, Qell, Qestion, Qerulous, and Qirky all work just fine for me, Qeeny.

And, finally, what is up with that *que* combo at the end of words? Haven't we progressed beyond that damn French drive! *Clique* this, please, monsieur.

So, whether Bobby was queasy or qeazy, he was one very hurtin' pup as we headed south towards Oregon. We made our first scheduled tourist stop at Mount Saint Helen's in southwestern Washington. It was very mellow -- we were many miles from the volcano -- but when Bobby made a dash for the bathroom with his hand near his face, I knew he was in for an eruption of his own.

As things turned out, he was *far* from done. Mount Bobby had no more lava to expel, but there would be numerous tremors and wheezes. It got so he just stayed in the back of Max and opened the side door while I drove -- even on the highway. "I'll let you know if you need to stop," he laughed between hard swallows.

And that was how I entered Oregon for the very first time. Touching, eh? Kinda brings a tear to the eye...

The entry into this state was much better in 2000. Coming in from the south on I-5 early on a sunny summer afternoon, Oregon slammed me with a verdant visual feast. A long climb was followed by an eight-mile, 6% decline, with wide sweeping vistas. Row after row, layer after layer, level after level, hill after hill, ridge after ridge of beautiful tall healthy green trees. Green was everywhere. There were hundreds of shades and variations in light and shadow, but it was all green. Hills were saturated with green. Deciduous and coniferous trees alike exuded thriving life throughout the ruggedly hilly landscape. The air was clear and smelled of forests. Northern California had been nice, but this was *lush*.

Near the bottom of a long hill were some HUGE stacks of fresh timber. From the looks of the area, I doubt it had been trucked very far. The trunks, stripped of all branches, were all long and thin. In reality, I bet I couldn't get my arms around any of them, but they were so lonnnnng, and so far away, and there were so many of them, that they looked like ragged, unfinished pencils.

But the weird part was that there was a guy *watering them*. Standing next to a truck, he had a high-powered hose and was spraying the stacks as casually as if he were watering the petunias in his garden. I was a bit befuddled by that, since I thought the wood was supposed to be drying out so it could be cut more easily, but I guess I'm just stupid. Maybe it was a fire-prevention measure. I didn't stop to ask.

At the first rest area, I got a good look at the Oregon state flag. That blue thing off to the right here is the back of it. Yes, Oregon has a two-sided flag; no other state does that. Many states will have the same emblem on both sides, which is easy if you're Texas or New Mexico or Arizona or Alabama, but not so simple with the more ornate ones. Still, that's just a one-sided flag shown on both sides, while Oregon has a different design on each side.



The backside, as you see, is a yellow beaver. That's all. No silly complicated emblems with banners, stars, sunsets, tall-masted ships, wagon trains, trees, eagles, plows, pickaxes and wheat here. Just a beaver. I guess the founding fathers looked at the backside and decided to – are you ready? – leave it to beaver.



Hahahahahahahahaha. Ohh, I kill myself sometimes. Most people can only kill themselves once.

Anyway, that aforementioned clutter – ship, wheat, pickax, etc. – is all depicted in yellow on the front (at left). Well, they call it gold, but it's really just a darker yellow. So, a third grader might need only one color crayon, but he'd need a whole lot of 'em. Another emblem out of control.

The planned route here in 2000 was simple: I-5 North straight through to Washington. There was only one stop planned: Eugene. A run, some supper, and a pilgrimage to UO's Hayward Field, the shrine of U.S. Track & Field.

As luck would have it, the beautiful summer weather of northern California continued those few extra feet into Oregon, state number 21 on the RR2K list. Shortly after the tree-watering guy, there was a gas station, so I pulled Blue Man in for a chug. It was a not-very-modern place with a small clapboard building and a row of pumps that was way overdue for an upgrade.

I pulled up to the pump and I fished out this, set aside that, and carefully stashed "the other," a woodsy-looking man came ambling over. He was about 60, I guess, hadn't shaved for a couple of days, and wore brown faded boots. (He wore other stuff too, but you don't really need his full attire, do you?)

He reached for the pump as I climbed out of BM, and asked in a tone that was neither friendly or unfriendly, "What grade and how much?" I was being waited on! At a gas station! This was actually a *service station!* Holy crap, I had no idea they still existed. Kiosks had become such the norm, that this really threw me off stride.

My usual ritual of place-the-nozzle, dump-the-thrash, grab-the-squeegee, wash-the-windows was sent reeling off into the Oregon forests, but man is an adaptable creature, and I, being a man, adapted. The trash still needed dumping. Even in my most service-oriented days as a teenaged Texaco employee, it was never the province of the gas jockey to empty your bin.

Those were the days: back at Dedham Avenue Texaco in bucolic Needham. I only got the job because big brubba Bob worked there. I was the "athlete" of the family, and Bob was the gear head. His skills came in a lot handier than mine.

Saturday night and Sunday morning were my usual shifts during the school year. CC and Track took up the whole year, so there was never any off-season except for summer. I almost always worked alone, and, except for an occasional flat tire, never had to deal with any of that repair nonsense. It was a fairly mellow job, though it really bit badger balls on frigid winter days and nights.

It was the tail end of the era when gas stations competed with one another partly on the quality of service. I had my assigned Texaco attire – shirt and jacket – and had to greet every new car promptly, with a "Yes, sir (or ma'am), fill 'er up?" Windshield washing and oil-checking was standard procedure, and you could only let those slide if the customer specifically told you not to do it, like if he was hiding a dead body under the hood or something. I had my own special touch that I threw in, and washed the back window, headlights, and taillights whenever there was time. I wielded the squeegee with precision, skill, and pride.

You can trust your car to the man who wears the star / The big, bright Texaco star! Remember that shit? Yikes.

One Sunday morning stands out vividly in my mind. It was a beautiful spring morning in May of 1972, and I trotted out to wait on my first customer of the morning. Mr. Willox was a regular customer, who, like most people of the day, drove a big car, and who preferred to fuel it with what used to be commonly called "high test." Where that term disappeared to, I have no idea.

I gave him the usual cheery greeting that I hoped sounded sincere (though I was actually irked at having to get off the couch in the office), and reached for the premium pump. He was halfway through his usual, "yes, and check the oil, if you would, please, Rick," when he stopped short in the middle of "oi---."

His abrupt halt gave me pause as well, and looked at him to see if he had been shot through the throat with a crossbow or something. He hadn't. I was glad because I didn't feel like cleaning that up.

His eyes, though, were locked on the price sign. In those days, we posted the price on a changeable placard within a plastic case, and mounted them on top of each pump. His eyes were fixed firmly on it.

It had somehow escaped my vigilance, probably because I had had the previous night off, that the boss had raised the price of a gallon of high test from 39.9¢ to 40.9¢. Mr. Willox was appalled. Maybe even aghast. No, not quite aghast, but really close to it.

"Sir?" I asked.

"IS THAT CORRECT??" he demanded.

"Ummm, yeah, I gue---"

Mr. Willox flung his car door back open and put one foot inside. "You people are **crazy!**" he bellowed, pointing angrily at the sign. "People will **NEVER** pay more than forty cents a gallon for gasoline!!" He plunged into his seat, slammed his door for emphasis, and roared off, leaving me with pump in hand.

At this point of RR2K, forty cents a quart was looking pretty good. [By the time I finished compiling this volume, forty cents a **pint** would be an enormous improvement.]

So, anyway, back in Oregon, Woodsy Man was doing my windshield, and there was still a lot gas to pump, so I had leisure to wander around a little bit. It was a small lot, so there wasn't far to wander, but the air was clean and the trees were pouring out those wonderful negative ions. There was a payphone on a pole near the corner of the lot. It, too, needed modernizing. A rotary dial would have seemed to fit, but there was an early-model touch-tone face instead.

On the pole, immediately above the phone fixture, was a wooden sign with somewhat faded lettering. It read, "No Self Serve. State Law." It struck me as very odd. What, you have to get someone to dial the phone for you??

Then, of course, my fog wore off and I realized that the law applied to gas stations. I wandered back to Blue Man, and mentioned the sign to Woodsy Man. He rolled his eyes a little, as if to say, "I am so fucking tired of explaining this to these morons." Without looking up from the pump, he rattled off an irritated spiel that I couldn't hear much of, and loudly jammed the nozzle back into the pump.

"Thirty-eight-fifty," he grumbled. I gave him two twenties. He grouched, "I have to go inside to get the change." I'm sure he wanted me to say, "Oh, no, you keep it," but you just don't always get what you want in life. If I really wanted to tool on the old coot, I would have waited in the van and made him come back out and to me, but there were flaws in that approach. He might "forget" to return, or he might be distracted by another task, or he might just sit in there and wait for me to come in. In any case, I did not see him walking back out promptly. So, I followed him inside and took my dollah-fitty. Neither of us said "thank you," nor did we bid each other a fine day.

My good mood was still intact, though. The codger had not been able to dislodge it with his humbuggery. That was testimony to my enthusiasm for my arrival here.

Rand McNally tempted me with a detour eastward to Crater Lake National Park, and the lure was mighty indeed, but I held to my no-repeat decree. If I could blow off the Grand Canyon and Yosemite, I could slide by CRNP as well.

But there would be a Next Time for that place because Crater Lake was such a coolo place the first time.

Which brings us back to 1990 once again, when a largely-but-not-fully recovered Bobby and I wound our way down to that National Park on an absolutely brilliant summer day. Our ride down had



been along snaking roads through the southern half of the Cascade Range, with lush green mountain scenery everywhere we looked.

We stopped a few times at normal, unassuming turnouts and discovered beautiful foot trails that led to gorges and waterfalls and tremendous vistas.



Thankfully, Bobby's pallor was finally giving way to something resembling flesh tone. Remarkably, he had not lost his inherent good nature the whole time, often prefacing yet another bout of futile retching with a hearty laugh and a "here we go!!!!!!!" I have to think that the negative ions had a lot to do with his rebound.

Crater Lake is inland from the Pacific by about 125 miles, and as we rambled down the eastern slopes of the Cascades, we found ourselves in terrain that was strangely brown and dry. The verdant forests thinned and yielded to an almost arid environment. Trees were still abundant, but roadsides and fields were patently drier. There was a parch upon the land.

I opened another beer. So much for parched.

It was well into the afternoon when we finally reached the Crater Lake NP boundary. We passed through the North Entrance Station, which was the official name for the north entrance station, and eagerly anticipated Lake.

Trouble was, Lake was nowhere in sight. In fact, what we saw was the driest terrain I had seen on the whole trans-Canada-Pac-NW trip. A small roadside sign even put a label on the bleak fields that we saw: Pumice Desert.

And this went on for miles. We steadily climbed. We had taken note of an "Elevation 5850 feet" sign at the entrance, and we figured, since water runs downhill, and we are heading to a lake, that maybe we should be running downhill too. Hmmm. Dumbasses.

Finally, after about ten miles of uphill driving, we reached North Junction (7025'), and another road (hence, the term "junction", I reckon). Almost immediately, there was a turnout to our left, so I wheeled Max across and into an uphill parking space. We couldn't see anything yet, but we *could* see that beyond the three-foot-high stone wall, there was nothing but sky.

We dismounted eagerly and were blasted away by an amazing sight. LAAAAAAKE!!!!!! Lots of it, and waaaaaaaaaaaaay down there! In the brilliant afternoon sun, the colors were dazzling, with the deep clean water powerfully reflecting the azure sky above. It was so freaking **BLUE**.

The walls of the crater plunged down at a ridiculously steep pitch, falling almost 1000 feet to the surface of the lake.

"WHOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAA!!!" I bellowed, mindless of the other tourists who viewed the impressive the scene in awed and respectful silence.

My voice was merely a vocal manifestation of the zeal that was bursting within. Totally carried away, and with camera firmly in hand, I bounded over the end of the retaining wall and ran out onto this promontory that hung over hundreds of feet of empty air. It was called Merriam Point, and the view was unbelievable. Not only was the lake all around me, but the perspective of conical Wizard Island was outstanding.

Pumped and primed for tremendous photos, I tight-roped a twenty-foot balance beam of rock at a dead run, and landed safely on the last knob of the promontory. I clicked away with alacrity, and was exhilarated by the view and the high clean air. Bobby snapped my photo from the safety of the overlook. (I'm the little pink and blue figure in the center.)



When the wave subsided, and I was momentarily sated, I turned to go back. I was left scratching my head, though, wondering how the heck I had just gotten there. The rock rim was like the taut strand of skin that stretches between your outstretched thumb and fingers. It was barely wider than my foot, and plunged very steeply down on both sides. Adrenalin had carried me across it without a care, but now it had NFW written all over it.

But I made it. Duh.

Crater Lake itself is the caldera of a volcano named Mount Mazama, which blew its top about 7000 years ago. The crater is close to six miles wide, with a circumference of almost 20 miles. It's big! With a maximum depth of 1,932 feet, it is the deepest lake in the United States, and the seventh deepest lake in the world. Only six are deeper. I have no idea how many are shallower. At lot. Way more than six.

And it is so impressive! You can't tell the depth from the rim of the crater – it could be 100 feet, you wouldn't know. But what is really striking is the depth of the crater from rim to water. Very cool sight indeed.

But, just because I know you're wondering, here are the planet's six deepest lakes:

1. Baikal, Russia: 5,315 feet
2. Tanganyika, Africa: 4,800 feet
3. Caspian Sea, Asia-Europe: 3,363 feet
4. Malawi (or Nyasa), Africa: 2,317 feet
5. Issyk-Kul, Kyrgystan: 2,303 feet
6. Great Slave Lake, Canada: 2,014 feet

The last of those six is fed primarily by the Mackenzie River. ☺

But how about that Russian lake? Over a **mile** deep!! That's like filling the Grand Canyon with water. To paraphrase the prophet Ezekiel: "holy shit!"

Crater Lake National Park is only open four months of the year, as the average annual snowfall of 533 inches – that's more than **44 feet** -- yes, **44 FEET** -- as in, as high as a four-story building – often keeps the roads impassible from October through May. As dazzling as the blues and browns of summer were, I can only imagine how blinding this place would be under a thick cloak of snow and unmitigated midday winter sun.



After many minutes of wowing and high-fiving and toasting the lake with chilled malt beverages, Bobby and I continued on down the road to see what other grand sights this place might have in store for us.

We stopped at the next turnout and gazed for a while at essentially the same view. That was just fine; it wasn't like we were tired of it yet.

When we got to the third overlook, there was an ambulance and rescue vehicle blocking the end parking spaces. We pulled in a little farther down and walked back to see what was what. There was a ranger standing there, with one foot up on the two-foot-high retaining wall, looking down the steep acclivity towards the water.

"What happened?" I asked him.

He didn't look up. "Ahhh," he began with a tone of disgust, "some idiot had to go beyond the wall to get a picture and fell."

"Shhhhit," I replied, "how far did he fall?"

"All the way," said the ranger flatly, still not looking up from the water. "They're just trying to recover the body."

"Oh."

We slowly backed away, and turned, retreating back to Max. Visions of myself on the promontory waved at us. I made a “ssshhhhhh” motion at them.

Poor picture-hungry bastard.

We took the rest of the daylight hours – about four of them, I think – to drive less than half of Rim Drive. We got out and hiked a good way to crest a high ridge on the east side and line up some good sunset shots. The view was indeed excellent, but the sky was so clear and dry that the sun just slid blindingly behind the planet without any of the high brilliance of splashy glow that makes for classic sundown photos. We would have been better off on the west rim, watching the shadow climb this eastern ridge.

One very cool thing about the hike, though, was the ground. The small rocks all along the path were about as heavy as Styrofoam peanuts. “Tofu rocks,” Bobby called them. I took one as a souvenir; it’s about the size of my thumb and weighs about as much as my thumbnail. It’s fun to hand it to someone and watch their *what’s-with-the-freaking-rock?* look change to a look of amusement. They flip and it and roll it around, and go, “well, I’ll be a penguin’s proboscis,” or something like that. As daylight left Crater Lake National Park, so did we. I was very confident that there would be a Next Time. The immediate impact would not be as intense, which is probably a good thing; it should keep me behind the wall.