

Road Romp 2004

Day 6: Tuesday, 15 June 2004

FOCK 1: Toolin' Around Tombstone

Arizona was State #7.

That's all?? I couldn't believe it when I did the count. There was only one other state left before the Pacific, and I was only on State #7? And, really, it might as well be #5, for all the input that Alabama and Mississippi had.

On ramacks that launched from Boston, State #7 might well be Maryland (MA, RI, CT, NY, NJ, DE, MD), a scant 350 miles, and a little more than six hours away. I used to try to reach Virginia before packing it in on the first night.

But, facts are facts, geography is geography, and miles are miles. Six states had been covered, and the seventh was eagerly anticipated. SW03 had explored northern Arizona, from Phoenix up, but the southern half of the Copper State would all be new.

I had picked up an extra hour of sleep just by reaching the border last night. Arizona, rebel that it is, does not do Daylight Savings Time, so we went into Mountain Standard Time, which knocked the clock back an hour. Such a deal.

As I sipped my morning Diet Coke and munched on a few Nillas, I perused the Rand to see, in detail, what I was in for. The route to Tucson and Saguaro National Park was simple: I-10 West. That was familiar. But my eyes wandered onto the little town names near the highway. There was Portal (appropriately, at the border), and Paradise, and Turkey Flat, and Oracle, and Pan Tak, and Cochise, and ... Tombstone. Tombstone was in Arizona? I thought that famous Wild West town was back in stupid Texas somewhere. Tombstone, huh? How much of a detour would that require?

The town was about a half-hour ride south of I-10, and only about 30 miles from the Mexican border. Tombstone was definitely do-able – an hour extra, plus touring time. Mexico was an NFW though. Been there once, and it left **no** desire in me to return.

The sane realization that I would probably never be in this neck of the wape again convinced me that a Tombstone visit was in order, and off we went. I would end up being glad I did.



Tombstone, like Roswell, really has only one lure. Theirs is the OK Corral. The whole historical part of town – which is closed to motorized vehicular traffic (horse-drawn wagons and buggies are allowed) -- has been preserved and/or restored very well, right down to the

wooden sidewalks, hitchin' rails, swinging saloon doors, and period costumes on the bartenders and other workers. They treat it as if they are ad-libbing their way through an impromptu Wild West show every day, and it goes over quite well.

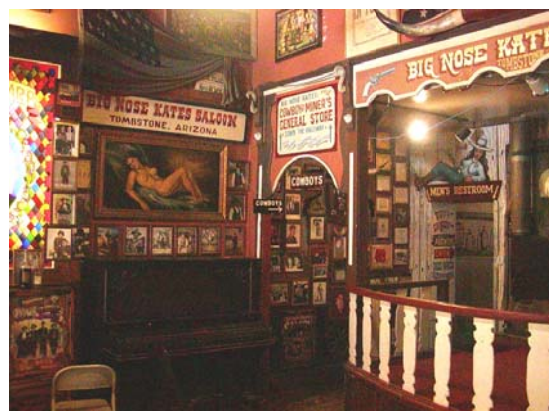


But all of that would be for naught if the infamous Shootout at the OK Corral had not happened here. That is the hook. Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp, the Flying Burrito Brothers, and some of the other superstars of Wild West lore knocked heads in a blazing gunfight that put this grimly-named town on the map of history.

The gunfight is recreated daily on the actual site. The actual site is, of course, fenced off from view; you have to pay to see it, and you have to pay even more to see the show. Maybe it's great, I'll never know; I was there at 10:00 a.m. and the show wasn't until late afternoon.

What pleased me no end, though, was that in this little Wild West sideshow of a town, the bars were wide open! It was early, for sure, but life on the road has its advantages, one of which is the early clearing of conscience by virtue of the knowledge that it is well past noon in my natural eastern habitat. And, for me, on a vacation day, if I've been up for three hours, it's definitely time for a frosty.

I swung my way through the doors of Big Nose Kate's Saloon, and bellied up to the very ornate bar. A skinny, long-haired, pistol-totin' guy about my age sauntered over to serve me. I was his first customer of the day, and he was giving me the same approach that I always gave my first bar customer of the day: *I'm not overly eager to work, but if you're having a drink this early, you're probably all right by me.*



Dave was his name, and he turned out to be a right friendly feller. He was Arizona born, and appropriately shaggy. He poured me a tall cold Killian's and we chatted about life in Tombstone. He performed in the show sometimes, he said, and he reckoned that he was expected to be there today, but he was probably not going to show up. I hope he didn't have a major role.

He encouraged me to have a look around the saloon and take it all in.



The current bar was actually more like the lobby and/or ballroom of the, ahem, hotel that Big Nose Kate ran. The original bar was in the cellar, so the noise would be less of a disturbance to the, ahem, guests. That cellar is now the gift shop where items are about as overpriced as you would expect them to be.

The funniest part of BNK's, though, was in the bathroom. It was a trough-style device, like Fenway Park used to have back in the day, but they did something that I had never seen done before: it was filled to the brim with ice. Yeah, ice cubes from the ice machine dumped

into the trough till it was full. Weird. Maybe it's a game to see how fast the clientele can melt the ice, or maybe it's just an odor killer, I don't know. But the hoot was the sign above it:

BIG NOSE KATE'S SALOON. The ice in this bathroom is hardly ever used in the mixing of our drinks. Best saloon this side of the Pecos.

I again lamented that I would be missing the Night In Old Pecos Cantaloupe Festival, and returned to the bar to drown that particular sorrow (good a reason as any, eh?).

The cook had just brought some food out to Dave: bloomin' onions! At least, that's what Outback calls that item. He brought out six of them. Dave was beginning to box a couple. "Want an onion?" he offered. I politely declined. "Well, you missed it, you know: we had our Onion Festival here last weekend."

Damn, another celebration of produce! My timing was just plain off, I guess.

Dave went on in his rather bland way about



the parade down Main Street, with wagons just loaded to overflowing with onions of all sizes and descriptions. Contests were held for creative onion recipes, and for elaborate onion displays. Every place in town had onions up the wazoo and was getting rid of them anyway they could: onion soup, onion rings, diced onions, onion tea. They'd be eating onion fondue, cleaning their ears with onions, and making peanut butter and onion samiches. He didn't seem too surprised that I was unimpressed. "I'm gonna be damn sick of onions," he deadpanned.

Eventually, I bid Dave farewell and moved on to explore other parts of town. As I left BNK's, there was a horse at the hitchin' rail. He wasn't doing anything, and some thick-bodied and thick-headed costumed dude was standing near the rail trying to flirt with a very disinterested young lady, also in costume. I gave the three of them a wide berth, and went to cross the street and check out another bar. But as I walked behind the horse – a good eight feet or so behind it, Thickhead shouted at me, "Hey! Don't walk behind him! He'll kick you so hard..." What a blowhard. Obviously trying to impress the lady by bullying the tenderfoot tourist.



Part of me really wanted to get in an argument with this shithead. If the horse was so wild, why was he allowed in a tourist town? If he could kick back eight feet, he must have magic telescoping legs. If Thickhead couldn't control his animal that well, maybe he should be out digging graves or something else to match his intellect.

But the energy just wasn't there, which was just as well, and creating a stir was not in the plan for this morning. So, I looked over my shoulder, dryly said, "Chill out, cowdude," and continued on my way. He pretended he didn't hear me, but the lady got a loud giggle out of it.

My next stop was The Bird Cage Theater, where a large portrait of Fatima, a famous local madame, hung in the lobby. I guess that was about the best way for a woman to get famous in these parts back then. It was too early for any entertainment – if they even did that at all -- and they didn't serve beer, so I moved on.



The Crystal Palace was the next stop. Killian's was only \$2.50 there, a much better deal than BNK's \$4.00 draughts. The barmaid was friendly, but, at that point, a few jots in the Notbook were in order, so I just let her fantasize. I penned a few pithy observations, drained my glass, and decided that the road had to be hit.

My running shoes made almost no sound on the plank sidewalks, and I wished I had a pair of cowboy boots so I could make the apt clump-clump-clump as I walked along.

Tombstone's atmosphere was very relaxing. I could have stayed and unwound there for a few more hours. The town was not done in a cheesy way; it was done with reverence for the past and the way life was lived then. It was more museum-ish than arcade-ish.

Sandwiches. That sign just said "Sandwiches." My mental reflexes caught the sign while my consciousness was fixed on other things. Feed me. Now.

The sandwich shop was actually The Tombstone Coffee & Tea Company but it served lunch as well. It was decorated Wild West all the way, and even had a stage coach inside. It was an authentic "Movie Star" stagecoach, i.e., one that was used in a few movies. There was a small window under the driver's seat where the reins passed through to the real driver of the coach, who controlled the horses from inside the passenger compartment while the actors flailed dummy ropes in the filmed scenes.



It had been owned by Planet Hollywood, but TCTC bought it at a Sotheby's auction (price not disclosed). John Wayne had ridden on this coach. So had Gene Autry. It appeared in Dustin Hoffman's movie *Little Big Man*, and in the TV shows *The Lone Ranger*, *Bonanza*, and *Maverick*. I wanted its autograph.

Stagecoaches, according to the sign that was there next to it, traveled an average speed of 5 MPH, and each passenger in the six-person compartment had fifteen inches of seat space. Tombstone to Tucson was a 68-mile journey. In Moby, an hour or so. In that coach, 13-14 hours. No AC, no tunes, smelly horseshit. No thanks.

My chicken salad samich was ten shades of yum, and I returned to Moby with a contented tummy and a lightly buzzed mind. Forty miles of empty, desert roads awaited, with I-10 just beyond.

But, as luck would have it, there was construction on green-dotted Route 82. It was one of those signalman things too: one lane open at a time, with the "follow me" pilot car driving back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, over the same damn stretch of damn road way all day long. What a boring job that must be. But at least the pilot is in a car, which is probably air-conditioned, and he probably also has music.

The really crapass job is the signalman, the guy with the Slow/Stop sign. Maybe on a nice road in northern Utah in May, that would be relaxing. But in southern Arizona at midday in June, it has to suck.

The guy who was doing it looked Mexican, so he was probably accustomed to the sun and heat, but he was looking a bit drained. I had the whizbang luck of being second in line. A woman in a run-down U.S. Postal Service Jeep was in front of me, and I had to wonder how much she had missed the "Slow" by.

A couple of minutes went by. I was far from miserable. Though there was nothing to see, really, except empty prairie with parched grass and the ubiquitous sagebrush, I was diggin' it. It was Arizona, baybee, and I have always liked 'Zona. I had the music rollin', the cool breeze swirlin', and a chilled beverage in the rack. Life was good.

So, after a bit, I felt pretty sorry for Sign Guy. I grabbed an ice-cold bottle of Dasani from the cooler, got out of the van, and walked with a leisurely bounce, up the road to him. He looked up as I approached. I held out the water with an easy smile, but without saying a word.

He waved it off, saying, "No, thanks, I have some already."

I extended it further until he took it. "You'll need it sometime," I said, and sauntered back to Moby. The woman in the mail truck nodded her approval. The four elderly in the Buick behind me seemed irritated at my cavalier approach to this delay.

I reached into Moby and grabbed another Dasani. I nodded back at the old folks and livelied back up the road to the Jeep. The woman, in her open-sided mail delivery vehicle, had looked rather wilted as I passed her a moment ago. I stepped up beside her and she noticed me just before I spoke. "You look like you need one even more than he does," I said.

Her smile looked relieved, and her "thanks" was low but genuine. When I got back to Moby, she was taking a big long slug of that cold, cold water. Sign Guy was sipping his as well. My work here was done.