

Road Romp 2004

Day 13: Tuesday, 22 June 2004

FOCK 2: Jeroming

I started to drive east, to catch a look at the eastern overlooks in bright sunshine, but the mileage and time involved just didn't inspire me. I decreed, "Enough Hole: I am going to go to Jerome!"

Jerome had been a serendipitous find in '03, but there was unfinished business there. It had just been a drive-through; that town had marrow that was ripe for the sucking.

At 1:11 pm, at the 5125-mile mark of this rambling ramack, Moby and I left GCNP. I'm sure there will be a Next Time, and I'm sure it will include a South Rim hike. We took AZ-180E



from AZ-64S, towards Flagstaff, through the San Francisco Mountains, which includes Mt. Humphries (left). These are the mountains that you see from the Bright Angel Overlook at North Rim. The sky had clouded up since leaving the Hole, and I wondered if it was still sunny up there.

At 6500 feet elevation, no AC was needed. The windows were down, and the clean, crisp, dry air roared through the Mobe. There were no towns along this road. It would have been wrong to label

this terrain "desert"; it's more like "open range," or "high plains," Drifter -- not quite desert, but not far from it; just a tad greener, with less sage and more grass. Then the trees got bigger and we were in a forest. They weren't towering trees, but not shrubby ones either: a full 16-29' high. I smelled rain. It smelled good.

Apparently, I had been in Kaibab National Forest – which didn't seem all that foresty to me – and now I had graduated into Cococino National Forest. The trees soon got much taller, with full-sized cedars or firs abounding. The striking thing was that there was nothing at all on the forest floor: no underbrush, no baby trees, not even any fallen branches or leaves that I could see – just brown grass extending way off into the forest. You could see a long way under the lower limbs, which were a good five feet or more above ground level. It would have been an excellent forest to go running in.

(There's that dumb instinct again!) You wouldn't need trails or anything. No worries underfoot, just an occasional branch to duck, and you could roam wherever you wanted, in and out between the trees, slaloming and zigging as you please. My mind went for a very good jaunt in there as Moby and I watched, amused.

Several miles farther south, there was the inevitable burned-out area. The fire was probably more than a year ago.



The grass had grown back, but a whole swath of trees was wiped out, including a whole hill. The charred trunks that were left looked like someone stuck dark toothpicks into a big rounded pincushion. I wondered if that was why the underbrush was absent before. Some of these trunks were scorched black, yet the trees lived on just fine and dandy above.

Humphries Peak is a noble peak. It stands out so much against this mostly level region! Though the San Francisco Mountains are granted association with, it, Humphries does not give the impression of being just a slightly taller member of a range; it is simply a big looming mountain. It dominates the landscape and commands your attention.

Northern Arizona is awesome. Having now explored both north and south, I definitely prefer the north. There is a fine variety of landscapes: Utah-ish rocks, Big Hole, Corkscrew Canyon, Marble Canyon, cool deserts that have some character, Vermillion Cliffs, Flagstaff, Oak Creek, Jerome. The south has sage, cacti, Tombstone, and a lot of heat.



Aspens appeared just we reached the 8000' elevation sign. There were hundreds of them, in several clusters. Then there was a sign that said, "Elevation 8046." I deduced that it must be the highest point on this road: why the heck else would they point out a number like that?

At the foot of Humphries Peak, just past the entrance to Snowbowl Ski Area, there is a very large outdoor area that is designated NO SMOKING, due to "Extreme" fire danger. Seemed like a damn good idea to me; those forests weren't looking too moist and soft.

There wasn't much exploration of Flagstaff this time – not that there had been a lot last time. I pretty much snaked my way through past the little malls and plazas and town buildings, following the signs for the Interstate.

There was a little bakery right near a busy intersection that had a clever name: "Late For The Train." Good place to grab a quick cup o' joe and a warm blueberry muffin, I bet.

Aside from that, nothing really leaped out at me. My two recent visits to Flagstaff have been cursory at best. The area seems great, but I need to explore the city more. Next Time, I guess. That list is pretty long.

I got onto I-17 at its point of origin, and headed south. The highway was clean at this point, in sharp contrast to the mess of debris and trash that it was just north of Phoenix in '03. It's a very good feeling to pull onto the terminus of a highway – end, beginning, call it what you will. I pull onto I-17, and I don't have to make way for the traffic that is already on it because there is nowhere for any traffic to be coming from, no side-view mirror check is necessary, just roll through the ramp and take ownership of your highway.

Lips are definitely a bad place to be sunburned: armpits and foot-tops suck too. The soles are even worse, but that shouldn't happen anyway – you have to pass out on your belly, with the soles of your feet facing up for quite a while. Armpit burn sucks because, for the next day or two, you walk around like you're playing the air-bagpipes.

One of the options I had considered was returning to Page, about an hour northeast of the Navajo Bridge. Page was where Corkscrew Canyon was last year, so I assumed it would be there this year as well. That squirmed Canyon was amazing, and the photos I got were excellent.

So, no: no Page. Marra has been soaked. To do the three-hour ordeal for a 45-minute walk through a canyon that I already had primo photos of would be folly. But, Jerome, a town that I never thought I would ever go back to, would fill the bill.

A sign on I-17 said, "Bicycles Use Shoulder Only." I couldn't tell if that was an informative statement, letting us drivers know that we need not watch for bicycles in our travel lanes, or if it was an imperative directed at the bikers. I suspected the latter. Then, I thought, WTF are bikes doing on an Interstate?? I reckon that happens when there is a dearth of alternate routes.

We dropped down out of the high ground that Rand seemed to identify as the Mogollon Plateau, and found ourselves back in arid terrain. The drop was precipitous enough to warrant a Runaway Truck Ramp. Once again, the temptation was there to veer that way and splash into the gravel. I hope I never give in to that temptation. I'm sure the overall experience – the discomfort of sudden deceleration, the difficult extrication, and the mechanical toll -- would be somewhat less than excellent.

Sagebrush were sage bushes now. Nothing really different: just an inflated version. It was desert hot again, so AC came back into play. The temperature had soared incredibly in the five mile descent – of course, having the sun come out helped a lot, but still, the elevation drop must have had something to do with it.

Jerome – a National State Historical Park (not to be confused with a National Park, or even a State Park) – was reached at 4:00. A welcome sign said, "Elevation 5246," but I'm not sure at what point they took that measurement. This is an incredibly vertical town: some three-story houses have their roofs below their neighbors' basements. The downtown alone must vary by at least 100 feet.



The Mobe seemed daunted by the steep climb into the town, so I did the D2 downshift and left him in second gear the whole time. He was happy with that. He hummed smoothly to let me know. We drove right through the town without stopping; I wanted to see The View before sampling the victuals and libations of Jerome. I knew that such sampling would take some time.



Jerome proudly calls itself, "The Mile-High Town With Fifty-Mile Views," and the view looking east is darn good: a wide, flat valley, and then back up to hills and the western edge of that Mogollon (no, not Mongolian) Plateau.

The road through Jerome – highway 89A (**not** to be confused with 89 or Alt-89, grrrr) – becomes a two-lane twisted snake for miles, and it took a bit of driving to find a safe place to

turn around without fear of getting plowed into by somebody careening around a blind corner. But I found one, reversed course, and headed back into town. I was hungry and thirsty, and I had time on my side – an enticing combination.

With such narrow and switchbacking streets, parking was a bit of an issue, but I found a public lot and pulled in next to a truly classic car. This Thing was a beast. I guess it was still functional, but, man, it was a piece of work. It was a VW Thing, with no bumpers, no side windows, and almost no paint. The drivers seat was more duct tape than upholstery, the "glove compartment" was an open slot, the doors were bare metal on the inside, the back "seat" was exposed rusty metal (with jumper cables on it), and the dashboard had one gauge. This no-frills jalopy was probably a hoot to drive, but I had to assume it was a seasonal vehicle. It was unlocked.



My first destination was The Jerome Palace. I was very psyched to be going there, and walked with spring in my step.

As a brief recap, I stumbled upon Jerome by accident the year before, when I was in the Northern Arizona Exploration phase of SW03. I knew I wanted to see Flagstaff, Phoenix, and GCNP (SR) before zooming off into Utah for a few days, so I had consulted my buddy Rand and he showed me some green dots. Well, you know the old adage: Green Dots Rule The Ramack.

I had just come off green-dotted and historic Route 66 (US-66), and had driven into the green-tinted (National Forests) area of the map. There was a small red line (2-lane road) labeled 89A that led from Flagstaff through a few small towns that I had never heard of, then through Prescott, before meeting AZ-60, which would express me down to Phoenix. Looked good, so that became my tour route.

First, Oak Creek Canyon floored me with unexpected scenery, then the very cool town of Sedona kept the route rockin'. But when the roadway turned upward, and took Chief and I to Jerome, that was the real kicker.

The town wowed me with its quaint shops and history. But as I reached Clark Street –



it's the top street, the one that is above the rest of the town (Hill Street goes higher, but is not a through way ... or a throughway) – I slowed to examine a green-and-white building on my left. It was a two-story wooden house, with a sign identifying it as the Jerome Palace, with "The Haunted Hamburger" in bold letters.

That was intriguing, but

the real lure was the porch, which wrapped around the house and offered a meal-time view of the entire valley. What an awesome place that would be for the Burger-n-Beer combo that I so often crave. I immediately regretted my Burger King “supper” in Sedona and the waning afternoon. I gazed at that porch longingly, but knew I had to make some tracks to cover the remaining 130 miles to Phoenix. But I kicked myself the rest of the trip for not stopping there.

So now, with an unanticipated free afternoon, Jerome offered itself up to me. This was proving to be a No-Nate benefit; this town would not have made the cut if our original hiking plans had held true.

I entered the Palace, and liked it immediately. The inside bar was cozy and informal, but not underbelly. The far end, by the big window, was bright, but the end with the bar was comfortably dim. It had a “No Sniveling” placard over the door to the porch, reminding me of the Green Parrot in Key West, which hoists an identical edict.



The porch was excellent, though the tables that had the real commanding view, on the east side of the house, were all taken. Go figure. I chose one on the north side – the side you can see from the street, and settled in. The tables along the railing were in very hot sunshine, but the tables along the wall were in nice cool shade.

I didn't get the Haunted Hamburger – it had a lot of stuff on it that didn't dribble my basketball, like mushrooms, titanium slices, and eye of newt – but it was not the acclaimed burger that had been my goal anyway. I aspired to sit on that porch, savor the view, and enjoy a good, tried-and-true, bacon cheddar burger, medium rare, with fries, please. And a bottle of Fat Tire Amber Ale while it's sizzlin' back there, and a second one when my burger comes to meet me.

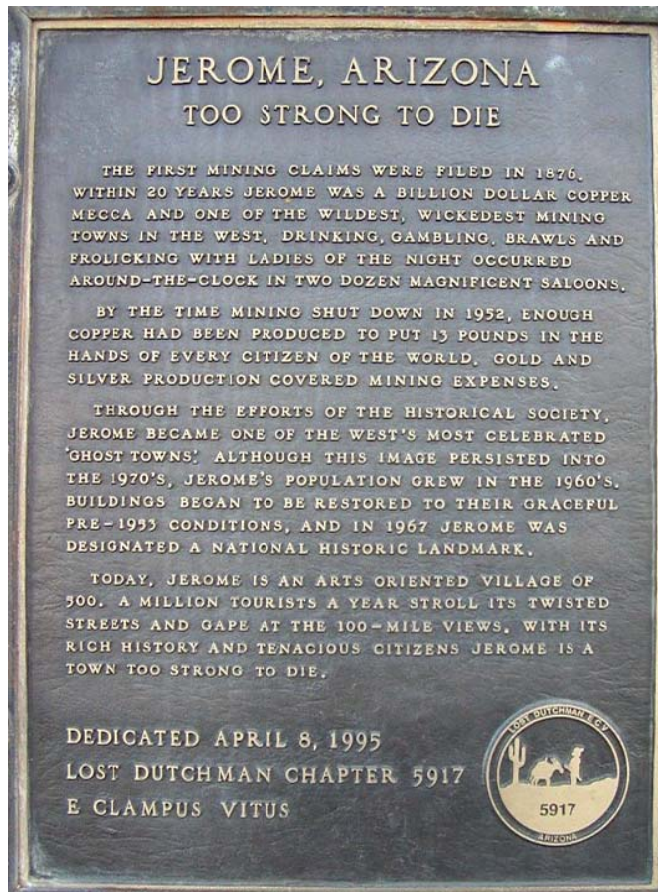
The waitress was cool. I never caught her name, but she really seemed to like her job, which can be pretty unusual in that profession. She could tell something was up, because

when she brought my ale, she asked me if it was my first time here. I told her that this visit was the culmination of a year's yearning, and that it took Nate's fate to create this date. She tolerated my little tale better than most servers would, but had to dash when someone yelled for her inside.

I don't know if she tipped off the cooks that I was expecting a magical meal or what, but that burger was excellent. It was thick, juicy, cooked just right, with just the right amount of cheese, a very fresh bun, and fries that were cooked hot all the way through without being burnt outside. And my second Tire arrived with it. I sat there in utter contentment digesting view, atmosphere and food – all of which were top notch.

My arrival was just at the end of the slow afternoon hours. When I was ready to leave, the Palace had filled up. The porch was full – two people were very psyched when my choice table became





available. The inside dining room was filling up as well, and I moseyed off to explore the rest of The Town Too Strong To Die.

That was the other title that Jerome proudly bore, and it was certified by the esteemed organization E Clampus Vitus.

ECV has a long history, dating back to the first half of the 19th century, and Clampers are documented throughout the west as being hard working, hard drinking, hard laughing, and hard to discourage.

A synopsis of the groups' history can be found on the website listed below. The passage ends with this paragraph, summing up the spirit of the Clampers:

"The prime requisites to becoming a Clamper are a sense of humor, an interest in Western history, an open mind, and a cast iron stomach. If a man has those qualities, and strikes up a friendship with a Clamper or two, he may find himself taken in to (and by) the Ancient and Honorable Order. But one can't simply walk up and say, "Can I be a

Clamper?" It is for the Brethren of ECV to invite prospective members to join. And if a man is asked, he should know that the invitation is only given once. If it is refused, it is never tendered again. But a man of any intelligence and character so invited would hardly be likely to turn down such a signal honor. And remember, as the Brethren of E Clampus Vitus maintain, Clampers are not made, they're born. Like gold, they just have to be discovered."

[<http://www.sonnet.com/eqdir/clamper/skunks.html>]

I hope I meet some Clampers sometime, though I hear that their initiations are purdy dang tough on the liver.

At any rate, Jerome seemed to hold the approval of E Clampus Vitus in high regard, as that plaque is posted very prominently on Main Street. There is also a plaque proclaiming the town a National Historic Landmark, but it does not outdo the Clampers' honorarium.

On one of the streets, there was a recessed lot between two buildings that remains mostly empty. Pedestrians are kept out by a steel-barred fence. Inside that fence is an odd collection of items, from a wheelbarrow to an old railroad handcar to an



outhouse. The ground is littered with thousands of coins. A sign propped up near the front explains it all: "PITCH IN. Historical Preservation & Restoration. The Past is our Future. Thank You. Jerome Historical Society."

A sign high up on the outer wall of the outhouse states the aspirations of the fundraisers: "Goal \$50,000." Somewhat surprisingly, the "thermometer" chart that is below it was reddened to about the halfway point. That's a pretty good take for tourist-tossed small change.

There is also a sign inside the outhouse, just behind the hole: "Expert Pitch." I tossed a few coins. I didn't come close, but at least I contributed.