

Road Romp 2004

Day 16: Friday, 25 June 2004

FOCK 3: Natchez Tracing

At exactly 6:00 pm, Mississippi was reached. Another redundant state. It's no big deal when you cross a state line and you can't even add the state to your list because you have been there already.

Tupelo is the birthplace of Elvis Presley. And there is a tale or two to tell of Tupelo from previous ramacks. They are chronicled in the RAMblings section of www.ramack.us, but I'll recount them briefly here:

Doug and I visited it back in '85. Strangely, it ended up being the "destination" of that trip. We left Boston with no particular place to go, and no real reason to be going anywhere, other than the nonspecific desire to go *somewhere*. It was classic roadtrip for roadtrip's sake: the quintessential ramack. We did the spine of Virginia, and the top half of the NTP, and then our allotted time ran out. Dugg only had a week off from work, so we were on a limited time budget. Tupelo was where we were when we hit the turnaround time. So, if Tupelo was it, Tupelo was it, and we hung out a while to enjoy our vacation hot spot.

The first place we went was Papa Gino's. Or maybe it was Pizza Hut. One of those two; I always get them mixed up. Doug had recently turned eighteen, and though the laws in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts decreed that he was too young to drink, the strictures in Mississippi were more lenient. The Magnolia State said, "Drink up, son! If you're here, you probably need a good drink." So he confidently purchased a pitcher of beer, and I was there to witness it. I felt so proud of him. Lump in the throat, and all that. You know the feeling.

Anyway, as we left Papa Hut's we noticed a batting cage in the lot behind it. It was just a single cage, with a noisy pitching machine, and neither of us had ever been a baseball wizard, but, we figured we'd give the ol' horsehide a few whacks with the old aluminum wand.

The cage was manned by a boy. He was about fifteen, skinny as a rake, tanned, with dark hair. I guess his hair was tousled, whatever that means. My pocket Webster's says it means "mussed." Damn, I like that word. Mussed. I gotta use that more often.

So, anyhow, Eb's dark shaggy hair was mussed. Oh, yeah, Dugg and I nicknamed the boy Eb, just because he seemed like an Eb. Eb's are usually mussed. Have you ever seen an Eb that wasn't mussed? I rest my case.

Eb had a younger buddy hanging out with him. The other kid was about nine or ten, kinda pudgy, and didn't say a word the whole time we were there. We paid him no attention at all.

Dugg and I took turns slugging away while Eb kept loading up baseballs for us. Our conversations, our Red Sox allusions, and our foreign accents eventually prompted Eb to ask us, somewhat warily, "Y'all fr'm Tupelo??" Sharp kid, despite the muss. We reassured him that we were not, and that, after today, he would never see us again.

It was still really hot and humid out, so we went topless to keep our precious shirts from getting all sopped. Between the sweat and the slugging, and the fact that I was in pretty good shape that summer, I had a decent buff goin' on.

We were starting to tire of the batting cage experience, when we saw Eb's face get all excited. Then he pointed to the road behind us, drawling, "Golly, looky thar!"

Now, I didn't think that real, live people ever actually said "Golly, looky thar!" I thought it was just in movies, and on the old *Andy Griffith Show* with Opie and Aunt Bea and that loser Barney Fife. But, there it was: I saw and heard it with my own eyes and ears, respectively. "Golly, looky thar!" I guess some stereotypes exist for a reason.

So, Dugg and I turned to looky thar, and we saw a thin, elderly black man, in dark pants and a long-sleeve shirt, standing very unsteadily by the curb about twenty-five yards away. He wavered back and forth, and side to side, as if the sidewalk were made of Jello. Then, he lost all sense of verticality and just plopped flat back on the ground. The four of us jogged over to check on him. It looked like he had whacked his head pretty good when he toppled.

We tried asking him if he was OK. His eyes were open, and he seemed to hear us fine, but he made no response. After a moment, a police car pulled right up to us. It didn't occur to me right away what I must have looked like: this sweaty, **white**, athletic dude, holding a **baseball bat** on his shoulder, and standing above a **fallen black man** who could neither speak nor rise. I can't imagine what the cops might have thought. Certainly, if the colors had been reversed, they would have arrived with guns drawn.

Instead, they walked over calmly, pretty much ignored the four of us, and began speaking to the fall guy by name. Mr. Hobson, they called him, obviously familiar with him and his misguided drunken attempts at foot travel. They eventually hefted him up, deposited him safely in their back seat, and drove away.

We thanked Eb for the extra balls he let us hit, and he enthusiastically thanked us for coming. We were his only hitters all day, he lamented. Eb must've been about thirty when RR2K was happening. I wonder if he was still mussed?

The next Tupelo visit was remarkable as well. It was in '92, with Patrick and Neal, fresh off our whirlwind Wheeling experience, but before the deer-beheading incident. Part of our original plan for that trip had been to swing far enough west to go to Memphis, especially to Graceland, Elvis Presley's famous mansion. As the Elvis fan of the group, he was psyched to be goin' to Elvis Mecca.

The transmission setback had set us back time-wise, though, and we had to streamline our route to get to Nawlins in time to rendezvous with our fellow revelers. The new route was jussssst fine with me, since it would take us down Natchez Trace.

This also meant another pause for the cause in Tupelo, which, I had not realized until Neal pointed out a sign, was the birthplace of the very same Elvis Presley. Well, dip me in shit and call me a fudgicle. How about that? And the sign indicated that the exact home of his birth was just down the next side street.

We took the left, and down at the end of the narrow street, the last house on the right was the Presley home. It was tiny. It was like Max times two, and that was all. There was a small sign out front, but no other special whoop-de-doo about it. The front porch had a swing: a nice, two-person seat, suspended from the ceiling by chains. We made so bold as to walk up and sit in it for a spell. Neal was lovin' it. Patrick and I thought it was pretty cool too, but to a true Elvis fan like Neal, it must have been something to savor.

We stayed quite a while, actually. The sun had already set when we got there, but we didn't leave until it was fully dark. Since NTP looks like just about any other road in the dark, we were in no special rush to get back on it. We decided to sample the nightlife of northern Mississippi's largest city.

After a short ride up the main drag, one place on the right stood out. It was large, low, and painted black with white stars all over it. The big words "Twilight Zone" sprawled across



the front wall. The parking lot was big, and there were a few pickup trucks and Jeeps already there, so we pulled in to see what might be what.

Twilight Zone was a good name for this place, because it was strange. Maybe not otherworldly, but definitely strange. First of all, it was enormous; it used to be a bowling alley, so it was wide, long, flat, and empty. You could put 500 people in there and it would still look vacant. When we arrived, there might have been 50 "customers", and you'll see why I put that in quotes in a moment. The fifty or so were spread out all over the room, at small plastic tables, almost like outdoor patio furniture, and folding chairs.

We gave it a well-since-we're-here shrug and walked across a good amount of hard tile floor to get to the central bar. The bargirl was somewhat pretty. I guess that makes her pretty pretty. So, she wasn't very pretty, just kinda pretty. But, anyway, she greeted us amiably (maybe her name was Amy), and asked what we wanted. Being neophytes to Mississippi club life, we asked her what kind of beer they sold.

"Oh, we don't have any beer," she replied, and stood waiting for our second choice.

Taken seriously aback, we faltered. How could they not have beer? It is the staple of all bars. There are some that are limited to selling just beer and wine, but I had never heard of one that sold only liquor and no beer. "Uhhhhh... how about a rum-and-Coke then?"

"Oh, we don't have rum. Fancy a Coke, then?"

"No, not really. What do you have?"

"Oh, we have Coke, Diet Coke, ginger ale, orange juice, cran--"

Seeing the trend, I stopped her in mid-list. "So, you don't sell alcohol?"

"Oh, no, we sure don't." I don't know why everything she said had to begin with "Oh."

We looked around, perplexed, at the various people that we saw around the room, kicking back with Bud bottles, Miller Lite cans, and various types of cups or tumblers. "Well, isn't this a bar?"

She smiled, "Oh, it sure is! Biggest bar in Tupelo!"

"So... if you don't sell booze, where did all these people get theirs?"

"Oh, they brought it in with them." She could tell that she had stunned us with that last one, so she finally offered a bit of an explanation. "Oh, you can bring your own, all you want."

At that point, we noticed that there were coolers at almost every table. Some were small, \$1.99 styrofoam jobs that wouldn't last the night, and others were huge Coleman Colossals big enough to ice down the moose you just shot.

Having been a barkeep myself, I wanted to ask her, "So why the hell are you even here?" but I decided to leave that mystery unsolved for the time being. We agreed to take the absurd concept and roll with it for a while. Bringing our own beer into a bar was a novel concept. Certainly seemed like a good way to save money. We double-checked with the door dude on the way out, and he confirmed that what Amy had told us was indeed true.

Our cooler was loaded, heavy, and situated among many bags and belongings in Max, so instead of lugging the whole thing in, we each grabbed about three beers, cracked one, and started to walk in. Door dude stopped us.

"You can't bring that in here," he said, gesturing slightly.

"You just told us we could," we countered, puzzled.

"Not the open ones," he splained, "y'all can't cross the threshold with an open container."

"Wow," we said, almost in unison. This was really getting tricky. "OK, we'll finish these and carry the others in. That's OK, right?"

He was beginning to think we were zooing on him. "Yup."

A few minutes later, we were back, with sealed beers in hand. I had to ask though, "If we had been carrying a cooler, and had put those open beers inside it, would that have been OK?"

He eyed me with disdain. I could see the phrase "fuggin' yankee asshole" forming in his brain. But he replied levelly, "If the cooler was shut." Patrick pulled at my arm, and we went inside.

There was music in there, but it wasn't very good. The acoustics in this place sucked worse than a high school gym. What would you expect from a bowling alley? The club was easily big enough to have live bands, and to pull in good crowds for concerts, but the sound was so bad, I can't see why anyone would have played there. There were some people dancing, but they weren't very good either. In fact, there were no guys dancing at all. Women danced with women, while the guys sat back and sauced. We figured that dancing would be a pansy thing for a Mizzippi man to do.

About a half-hour is all we could take of that place. All we could figure was that they had lost their liquor license, probably just had it suspended for a while for serving to a minor or something, and they were making a go of staying open anyway. I think they sold cold, pre-made sandwiches and some snacks, along with the soft drinks, but we never really found out for sure. But they still had to staff and power and air-condition the place, and that's not cheap. I have no idea how they expected to make any money.

When I passed this way in 1997, on my way home from a track school in Baton Rouge – and the accompanying binge in The Big Easy -- I didn't really feel the need to fortify The Tupelo Experience any further. Trouble was, there's no place else! Tupelo lies right along the NTP, and every other dinky town around seemed like some scary little in-bred burg where Massachusetts tags would only get me in trouble. So, Tupelo it was.

This sultry summer Sunday began with a return to Elvis Presley's birthplace. It was noticeably dressed up since '92, and porch-swinging was clearly frowned upon. Large picnic shelters had been built out back, and the Elvis Presley Museum in the adjacent lot was now open for gouging, uh, I mean, business.

My profound distaste for the commercial twist at that site was somewhat mitigated by the fact that I was able to purchase gasoline around the corner for just \$.89/gallon. Damn! I hadn't seen that since the '70's. And a bag of ice for only \$.79. EIGHT pounds! Not this five pounds for \$1.19 shit that you get up north. The South was doing ice right.

I saw no sign of the T-Zone, though I can't say I was really looking for it. I did see the famous pizza place, I think, but I still can't remember which chain it was. The batting cage was long gone.

Tupelo did prove to have a tantalizing side to it though. As I passed through the deserted downtown blocks -- everybody was at church, I could hear them singing -- I noticed the banners. Long, green-and-gray, roughed-vinyl banners adorned the downtown streetlight poles. They were of simple design, with a silhouette of the city "skyline" (the tallest building was about eight stories), and the words "DOWNTOWN TUPELO" spanning the top and bottom edges. The banners themselves weren't as appealing as the trophy aspect of them was: the I-stole-a-souvenir thing that got so out of hand in New Orleans and Atlanta on our Olympic Trials.

And they were EASY. They must have been: there were only two banners left, and about eighteen empty brackets on the other poles. Hanging with the bottom rung at about eye level, and with no twist-ties anchoring them, and no end-knobs preventing the easy slide-off, they were just taunting me! I drove around the block three times casing one, refusing to

believe it would be so easy.

But I didn't do it. All I could picture was me standing there, next to my Massachusetts van, tugging this city-owned property off its frame, when fatass, tobacky-chewin' Sheriff Bubba would drive around the corner and say, "Whathafug yew doon wid mah siine, boy??" and toss my pretty white ass in the hoosegow for Grand Larceny. So, I let the banner be. [But if it had been nighttime, that sucker woulda been MINE!]

So, here in 2004, Tupelo welcomed me with a billboard that boasted, "TUPELO: The Place To Go."

Are they serious? Can you imagine a less imaginative slogan? Would that even be possible to do? Just by trying to imagine it, you're using more imagination than the committee that came up with this catchy gem. "The Place To Go." That is so lame.

Then there was an official looking sign that said, "Miss Highway Patrol..." I thought it was a female pageant winner, then I realized that Miss was short for Mississippi. Even if they used their USPS abbreviation (MS) it would still look like a woman.

Diesel and Regular gas were both \$1.679 here, a far cry from those '97 prices. In various places around the US on this Romp, those two fuels were 50-60¢ apart, with diesel costing less.

It was 7:12 when we reached the NTP. Moby was grinning from fender to fender. As good as it is for the driver, it's got to be even better for the drivee.

The early evening had become overcast and showery, but this was still the quintessential cruisin' road. I set CC at 53, sat back, and reeeeeelaxed.

You know who needed to experience this road? Nate. The International Nateline himself. Maybe it would have driven him nuts, going at less than maximum speed, but he needs to do this cruise sometime. Some roads are made to get you there; others are made to savor. Natchez Trace is definitely the latter, through-and-through. It defines the word Parkway. It does not wow you with spectacular scenery at every turn, but for overall motoring comfort, you can't beat this road.

As I drove northeast – strange direction for a route to Florida, eh? – the roadside fields were like ponds. Those low-lying areas were waterlogged from recent rains. They reminded me of Arkansas' sucks.

A light rain began to fall, dimming the waning daylight even further, but I still loved the road. Wet or dry, light or dark – and with Tangerine Dream thrummin' on the tunebox – the NTP is just plain good for the soul (GFTS).

There was a field of trees on the northbound lane on my right, just after mile marker 285, that would be a tremendous place to play Frisbee. Dennis and I could've done it really well. We both had a knack for curving our throws around trees and such. Zack and I could do it well, I bet. You'd need accurate throwers, but it would be a lot of fun.



There was a sign pointing to Brown's Bottom. I chose to skip that particular attraction.

In the final mile of Mississippi, cowcoons abounded. The little bovines were all curled up inside, and they would awaken someday as, well, probably as cows, I reckon. How disappointing for them.

It was about quarter-past-eight

(843.75 Centric Time) when Moby mobed us into northern Alabama. In 155 miles, I had been in four states (AR, TN, MS, AL) – a far cry from the long drone of Texas almost a fortnight before.

The light rain had stopped a while ago, and though it was still overcast above, the sky near the horizon had cleared up, and the last blast of sunshine was blazing through, painting the ceiling a brilliant pink. The roadgods were rewarding me for my pilgrimage here with a fabulous afterglow. As Dash and Ban would say, The Hall Of Fame works in mysterious ways.

I stayed on the NTP for about 25 more miles. There were a few routes available to cut over to I-65 and drop back south again, but I passed up on the first couple so I could hang with the Trace for a while longer. Even at dusk, the road was still a treat. It looks better by day, for sure, but it keeps that roadlove feel in the dark.

You don't want/need to speed on NTP. I found myself creeping ahead of the speed limit, and I immediately reeled myself back in. It's not a matter of whether you will be caught; it's a matter of respecting the road, and doing what's right. This road is a caressing lover, and to go beyond the caressing, to rush to the culmination without enjoying every smooth curve would be so wrong; it would be foolish; it would be *crass* – it would be the very definition of "crass" – except maybe, yelling "Hey, fuck that shit, Father" in the middle of the sermon at church. That would be a tad crasser.

I shudder at the thought of actually living in Tupelo, but if I did, every Sunday would be an NTP day. I'd just take the day and go for a ride. One week I'd go north, the next week I'd go south. I'd chill myself, listen to TD, and for four hours in the afternoon, I'd just roll, roll, roll. I wonder how long it would take to tire of that.