

Travels with Anzie: Trip Home 2015

May 2015

This month-long trip was highlighted by visits with family, old, old friends and memorable experiences that we'd like to share with you. . Some of the highlights: Rowan in NOLA, The Redneck Riviera, oysters in Apalach, the Worm Grunting Festival, Golfing with Gators, black American Beach, jazz at the synagogue, talking with the Marquis de Lafayette. Plus seeing many old friends.

Left San Miguel April 1 – Easter weekend. Two days to New Orleans. Our worst trip ever: stop and go traffic through security checkpoints in Mexico; stop and go traffic on our way through Baton Rouge.

New Orleans

Rented an apt. in Tremé district of New Orleans for a week. Son Rowan and Calli prepared a scrumptious Easter dinner for us, complete with a leg of lamb. We spent the week enjoying downtown NOLA. It was jammed – Easter week-end! Tried to attend Mass at the Cathedral in Jackson Square. Stood in line starting ½ hour before mass began. 45 minutes later we were still 50 yards from the door. We decided to have a religious experience over coffee and beignets. Spent the rest of the week exploring, eating and listening to music.

Lunched with childhood friend, Slater Swartwood, who has made a success in the real estate game ever since his college days.

Apalachicola

On our way across the Florida panhandle, aka “Redneck Riviera”, stopped in Miramar Beach, outside of Destin, to lunch with Paul and Tammy Murphy. They are building a beautiful house at Hidden Dunes, a beach and tennis resort where they have vacationed for several years. Born in Elmira, Paul, along with Rick Colucci, another Elmiran, started a restaurant – JacMel – in Hammond, LA, where Paul’s brother and Slater went to college. Paul and Rick went on to build two other successful restaurants – Brady’s in Hammond and Nuovalari’s in Mandeville. It is so great to see people I grew up with, former hippies, turn out so successfully.

Apalachicola, known locally as “Apalach”, is a laid back little town located in the armpit of Florida, where it bends south. We both felt that we had arrived in what Florida must have looked like in the 50’s. No high rises here. Quiet, wide downtown streets overlooking the Apalachicola River. Known as the oyster capital of the world, the docks are crowded with fishing boats and shrimp trawlers. The opposite bank was all marsh.

One could see other bridges in the distance which took you to St. George's Island, a barrier island with beautiful sugar-white sand beaches on the aquamarine Gulf.

The "small world syndrome" struck again our first night. We belly-ed up to the bar at the **Tap Room at the Owl** just as the barista was explaining to another guest that she was from Boston. "We're from Newburyport", we ventured. "I'm from Plum Island," replied the barista. Turns out that Amy was brought up in Plum Bush Downs. A long discussion ensued about mutual acquaintances and how she came to live in Apalach. "After my divorce I just got in my car and drove south until I ended up here." Being the small town that it is, Lisa, our landlady, mentioned a couple of days later, "I understand that you and Amy come from the same town". The night before we left we returned to the Tap Room to say goodbye to Amy. It was her night off. We expressed our regrets. I was in the process of writing her a note when who should show up behind the bar but Amy. I told you. It's a small town.

Had our first oysters there – raw. We weren't impressed. We discovered that you have to put something on the oyster to make it taste good: lemon, horseradish, hot sauce, etc.

It's a great walking-around town: lots of interesting shops, including a good old-fashioned bookstore. **Boss Oyster** sits right on the river and serves oysters every which way. **Papa Joe's** is right across the main street from where we stayed. Had oysters covered with peppers and melted cheese. **Caroline's** on the river serves a tasty breakfast.

Tupelo honey is famous around here. The former editor of the local newspaper runs a general store downtown that specializes in it. The honey's biggest claim to fame is that it never crystalizes. The flavor is advertised as extraordinary; however, my jaded taste buds couldn't distinguish the difference.

Took a boat trip up the Apalachicola River. Saw several gators and birds. In some parts the river was lined with houseboats, most of them empty.

Attended a play, "To Kill an Angel", at a wonderful community theater. We expected a drama. Instead the story was about two hunters who think that bird they shot out of the sky was actually an angel. At times we had trouble understanding their thick southern accents.

On our last morning we had a big breakfast at a Caroline's. As we settled into our Prius for the long drive to Amelia Island, a car passed us, braked with a screech, then reversed direction. When the car came parallel to ours, the lady driver screamed at us, "I can't believe you support that f-----g nigger!" She then powered off. She was obviously referring to the Obama sticker on our car. This incident revealed the dark side of the South – a visceral hatred for our President that has to be based on racism. Regardless, we will return to Apalach.

Worm Grunting

We decided to take the backroads east. We meandered through a swampy area of the Apalachicola State Forest known as **Tate's Hell** and into the town of **Sopchoppy**, where signs announced their **Worm Grunting Festival**... I kid you not. The streets and sidewalks were crowded. So, what's Worm Grunting you may ask? And so did we. The participants hammer a wooden stake, about 2" diameter, into the ground. When the top of the stake is a foot above the surface, they rub a thick piece of flat iron across it. This creates a vibrating sound, like grunting. Very soon earthworms come to the surface all around the stake. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Worm_charming Note that they (probably the Office of Tourism) are attempting to polish the image, moving from "grunting" to "charming".

This is how they catch fishbait. The worms sell for \$25.00/lb. The festival is held every year around mid-April.

Amelia Island

Situated on the Northeastern-most part of Florida, Amelia Island is a mature, well thought-out development. A far cry from Apalach, it sports at least two golf courses and a Ritz Carlton resort. The town of **Fernandina Beach**, the downtown area of the island, offers several toney shops and restaurants. We heard about Amelia from friends, Leanna and Brad Galagher. Brad bought his house there twenty years ago. We rented a condo overlooking the beach in a complex located between the Ritz and the Galagher's beach.

I played golf twice on the **Amelia River Golf Club**. The staff is welcoming and helpful. On the first hole I sculled a ball into a ravine just in front of the green. I was about to descend into that abyss when my partner cautioned me. He pointed out a large alligator and her three adolescents. Further on he pointed out another, larger gator – probably 12–15 feet in length – sunning itself alongside a water hazard. It was dark purple! The second time I played with Anzie. Other than the occasional gator, we found the course to be quite forgiving. The club restaurant is also excellent.

Attended an excellent production of "Inherit the Wind", about the Scopes "Monkey" trial. Everything about the production was professional: the acting, the sets, the sound and lighting.

American Beach

We discovered one portion of the island that presented a huge contrast to the rest: modest homes of a 1940-50 vintage, most in need of paint and maintenance. It's a quiet, separate community bordered on either side by upscale developments. The origins of American Beach are a cautionary tale.

In the early 1900's a black man, Abraham Lincoln Lewis, started an insurance company, Afro-American Life Insurance Company, in Jacksonville. He sold burial insurance to an all-black clientele. He became the first black millionaire in the United States. A man of vision, he decided to use his wealth to develop a black-only resort, which he began in 1935. You look at old photos of American Beach, it was thriving and crowded. It offered restaurants and nightclubs. Cab Calloway and Ray Charles played there. It continued that way into the late 60's, early 70's. What brought about its demise was desegregation. All of a sudden the black population could visit almost any beach. So the popularity of American Beach waned.

Desegregation and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 also sounded a death knell for the Afro-American Life Insurance Company. Large national insurance companies awakened to the idea that they, too, could sell to African Americans. They employed many more agents than did the AALIC. Plus, the family members who inherited the management of the company did not inherit the gift of Abraham Lincoln Lewis' leadership. They virtually ran the business into the ground.

In 1977 Lewis' great-granddaughter MaVynne Betsch returned from Western Europe after several years as a successful opera diva. Her mission was to save American Beach from the onslaught of developers. She gave away all her wealth to environmental causes. She became known as the "beach lady". She grew her hair so long that she had to wind it up and carry it. She resided in two spots: in a rocking chair on the porch of the family manse, which was now vacant; on a beach chair on Nana Beach, where she could oversee, and forestall, the attempted encroachments of the predatory developers.

The live oak is indigenous to Amelia Island. Draped with spanish moss, it lends a cathedral-like quality to many of the Island avenues. Developers prefer to cut down the ancient live oaks because they take up a lot of room. They would replace them with palm trees. MaVynne fought to protect the live oaks in American Beach, and she was successful.

Mayvne Betsch continued her work preserving the ecology of American Beach. For this she was finally recognized at an Environmental Protection Agency conference. She died of cancer in 2005. In that same year she was honored by the Dalai Lama as an Unsung Hero of Compassion.

The Golden Isles

Next stop, Jekyll Island – one of Georgia's "Golden Isles", coastal barrier islands. On the way we visited **St. Simon's Island**. **Sea Island** is adjacent, and is home to the Cloisters, a posh resort where I attended a sales meeting way back in 1976. Visitors are not allowed on the island without a reservation. We tried to enter and failed.

Jekyll Island is pretty, tranquil and historic. Back in the late 1800's, when America's 1% vacationed together, Jekyll was the winter mecca; Newport was the summer counterpart. The **Jekyll Island Club** was the bastion of America's Brahmins including names like Morgan, Rockefeller, Pulitzer, Vanderbilt and Goodyear. Still a working resort, it's a vast wooden structure with several outbuildings. Its popularity waned when Mr. Flagler built a railroad down the east coast of Florida to Key West. At that point Palm Beach replaced Jekyll Island as the winter place where the elite meet.

Another "Don't Miss" is the Georgia Sea Turtle Center. Here sick and wounded turtles are nursed back to health. We could only spend an hour there, but would have preferred to stay much longer. It's absolutely fascinating to see the technicians working on the turtles. I'm sure that they derive a tremendous sense of satisfaction from their work.

This is our second visit to Jekyll. We always enjoy this idyllic, tranquil setting.

Savannah

It's a short trip from Jekyll to Savannah, GA – one of our "favoritest" towns. The layout is so appealing: 22 squares, each nicely landscaped with gardens and a statue of someone important in Savannah history. Each square is surrounded by buildings of significant architecture. Savannah exudes an atmosphere of laid-back *noblesse oblige*. The author of the famous novel about Savannah, "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" had it right. In Savannah they don't ask you where you're from or what you do for a living. They ask, "What do you drink?"

So much interesting history. A British General, Oglethorpe, was responsible for initiating the city plan of squares. During the Civil War the Union General Tecumseh Sherman was approaching the city. His reputation for burning everything in his path preceded him. The town fathers agreed to surrender the town provided Sherman would do no harm. The surrender occurred just before Christmas. General Sherman sent a message to Abraham Lincoln: "Mr. President, I have a Christmas present for you: the town of Savannah."

We rented a duplex located just south of Forsyth Park. As we toured the city we were amazed at how the Savannah College of Art and Design, aka SCAD, has grown. Founded in 1979, it has developed several storefronts as studios and classrooms, besides the main complex down by the train station, as well as a substantial museum. It recently acquired a large motel, and is turning that into a dormitory. Interestingly, the original name was Savannah College of Art and Music. It was changed when the administration realized that SCAM would send the wrong message.

We spent a day at **Tybee Island**, about 18 miles from Savannah. Although the water was a tad chilly, the beach was crowded. Dined at **Spanky's**, just across the street from the beach. Good food, good service.

We were surprised to discover a dearth of jazz in this otherwise “cool” town. Then we noted an ad for a “Jazz Shabbat” at the local synagogue. We visited the temple, which, according to history, was the second synagogue built in the U.S. The architecture is so unlike any other synagogue; it resembles a gothic Christian church, complete with stained glass windows. The only thing missing is a cross.

We arrived to a fairly packed house Friday evening. The quartet – keyboard, sax, bass guitar, drums and a female vocalist – was introduced by the rabbi. He’s a young, handsome stand-up comedian. He explained that the music, composed by the drummer, was based on the Torah. He also added that the vocalist was the music director at the Unitarian-Universalist church. The first piece was greeted with enthusiastic applause. The rabbi stepped up, bowed, and said, “Many thanks. Now, let’s hear it for the band!” Funny guy.

After the service we went downstairs for a buffet dinner. Yes, a concert and dinner, all for \$8.00! The synagogue employs a full-time chef. We sat with three Jewish couples who had moved from the New York/Long Island area after retirement. They were delightful dinner companions.

We met up with the rabbi after dinner. Anne exclaimed that she was in such agreement with the thoughts expressed in the words of the Torah that were included in the service, she was ready to convert.

A visit to the **Bonaventure Cemetery** is a must. Made famous in the “Midnight in the Garden ...” novel, it’s a wonderful setting: on the bank of a river, nicely landscaped, interesting and sometimes peculiar statuary. We paid our respects to composer Johnny Mercer and author Conrad Aiken. Tradition has it that one must sit on the bench at Aiken’s grave and drink martinis.

We attended a lively and professional musical revue, “Jukebox”, at the **Savannah Theater**. The whole audience sang along to tunes from the 50’s-80’s.

Other Savannah spots of note:

The trolley tour is worthwhile.

The **Six Pence Pub** dispenses good pub food.

Olde Pink House is expensive but excellent. We like the downstairs Tavern.

Colonial Williamsburg

This is our 7th or 8th visit. We find it fascinating because we learn something new every visit. The living history is so well done. This year we listened to the following historic figures speak: James Madison, Marquis de Lafayette and George Wythe. Who is George Wythe you may ask? A lawyer by trade, he was the first law professor in America. He was also mentor to the likes of Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall and

Henry Clay. He didn't have much good to say about Patrick Henry. Concerning Henry's claim to be a lawyer: "Yes, Mr. Henry studied Law ... for about three weeks."

The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Museum of Folk Art has been expanded to include an auditorium and several eye-catching exhibits. One that caught my eye is a room full of antique weathervanes. Included is a rooster that bears a close resemblance to the weathercock that adorns the First Religious Society here in Newburyport. It was made by a member of the Drowne family, the same name as our fabricator. Except it was made almost 100 years after ours. Plus, ours is three-dimensional and is gilded. I wrote to the curator that our weathercock was removed from its perch and is currently earthbound. She wrote a letter back saying that the museum would be interested in discussing a possible acquisition. I conveyed her epistle to our church hierarchy.

Had another interesting conversation over dinner one night. Our waiter, Miko, at the **Seafarer** restaurant, is a Serb. Since spending two weeks in Croatia in 2006 we stereotyped Serbs as "not nice". Miko lived through the war. At one time his neighbors and close friends were Croats. After hearing Miko's side of the story, we understand that history always has two sides. Miko has a degree in Law, and would eventually like to work in the Serbian embassy in Washington.

Hartford and Home

After a month on the road we were looking forward to getting home. We stopped for lunch at the home of Babs and Rob Jackson in Vienna, VA. They recently returned from Cameroon, where Rob served as Ambassador. We met originally in Dakar, Senegal when Rob was Deputy Chief of Mission. Babs and I did some acting together.

We had an enjoyable overnight in Hartford with friends. The next day we met with George and Will Dominello, our investment advisors for many years. We arrived home later that day, May 5, and prepared the house for our first B&B guests on May 8. So thankful to have the chance to experience such wonderful adventures.

Chuck & Anzie

