Great American Road Trip (2025)

The idea for the 'great American road trip' actually began on a very sad note. My brother's wife of 41 years, Teresa, passed away unexpectedly after a brief battle with a rare form of cancer. She was only 66. My brother, Joe, was devastated. They were just days away from a scheduled cruise to Alaska to celebrate their impending retirement when she suddenly took ill. She died seven months later at the beginning of 2024. My brother's grief was overwhelming. He had lost his best friend, a loving life-long companion who raised three beautiful daughters with him. And I lost the greatest sister-in-law in the world. As Joe began to put together the pieces of his new widowed life, a difficult transition for any man happily married for such a long period of time, he mentioned to me that for her 66th birthday they had planned on taking a road trip along the famed Route 66 that stretches from Chicago to Santa Monica, California. I was so moved that I offered to do the trip with him in her memory. But as we began planning the venture, the hellish forest fires along California's coastline later that summer made us postpone our trip for another time. In the interim, I went ahead and booked tours for Costa Rica and Southeast Asia.

In January of 2025 I came across a travel guide book outlining some of America's most iconic road trips. The one that caught my eye was the Great River Road which follows both sides of the Mississippi River from its origins in Lake Itasca in north-central Minnesota all the way down to Venice, Louisiana (just to the south of New Orleans) where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The Great River Road is not actually a single road, but rather a collection of rural and interstate roadways that meander around the Mississippi River through ten U.S. States. It was recently voted the most scenic roadway system in America. I ran the idea past my brother, asking him if he would like to do this particular road trip in lieu of our previous plan to traverse Route 66 (which we had agreed to do at some later date). He wholeheartedly agreed, and so I began organizing the trip, researching the cities and stops along the way.

I rarely do any planning nowadays when I travel. I have grown accustomed to taking guided land tours with travel companies who arrange for all the details. When

I was younger (during my Peace Corps days) I wouldn't think anything of sleeping in a bunk bed inside a youth hostel and sharing a single bathroom with half a dozen strangers; or camping out on the floor of a public station waiting in some backwater town for the next available bus or train to pass through. But I was now 64 years old. My increasingly arthritic bones need the comfort of a nice bed and a hot shower. So I had to do quite a bit of planning on this trip. My brother and I ended up taking a 17-day odyssey, driving over 4,700 miles through a total of 14 States. In addition, we logged over 60 miles of walking on this trip.

It took me several months to map out how we were going to begin and end this adventure, and which cities and sites we were going to visit, plus all the details in between: from the car rental to the hotel reservations to the purchasing of advanced tickets for the more popular attractions. It was a pretty stressful chore trying to balance travel times and hotel bookings with sightseeing stops. At one point I even thought that perhaps we were biting off more than we could chew. I mean, really, two geezers with enlarged prostates on the road for 17 days. *What was I thinking*? The pee stops alone could derail us!

Another thing I was concerned about was the idea of sharing a hotel room with someone else, even if it was my own brother. Since my divorce, I have lived alone for nearly thirty years now. I tend to value and protect my independence and privacy. I was not sure how Joe and I were going to get along on this trip. We have always been close as brothers, but we also hadn't hung out (at least not like this) in over four decades. Marriage and life has a way of separating siblings over time. Each of us had developed our own idiosyncrasies and personal (and, yes, *annoying*) habits over our lifetimes. I'm a morning person, up before dawn most days, while my brother is a very late riser. Not the best combination on a long road trip. But we got along very well. In fact, and this may seem almost impossible to believe, we never once turned the radio on in the car. We had great conversations, caught up on old times, laughing and joking and reminiscing about our parents and our childhood. We were also good roommates. I like showering in the morning and he likes to shower at night. It turns out we were a perfect fit for such a lengthy road trip.

As I began planning our adventure, trying to decide which places to visit for our free time, I asked Joe what his expectations were. He surprised me by saying, "*I don't have any*." Neither one of us had any real experience traveling in the Midwest

or the Deep South. Having been born in New York City and raised in New Jersey, most of our travels within the United States had been confined mostly to the east coast and the occasional trip out west. So Joe was open to seeing whatever we could see. As he put it, *everything* would be relatively new to us. In certain cities we did have some personal preferences, but all in all, the majority of the sites we visited were gleaned from travel websites like Trip Adviser and Viator. I would Google the list of the ten most important things to see and do in each city and then simply picked two or three places that were featured in the top five of all of the lists I looked up. Like my brother, I didn't know what to expect on this road trip, and to be perfectly honest, it made the journey more exciting.

One thing hanging over our trip was the rapidly changing political landscape of the country. The victory of Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election ushered in a new era in U.S. politics. And not in a good way, either. I haven't seen this much vitriol and divisiveness in our country since the anti-war movement surrounding the Vietnam War. One would think that our nearly 250-year-old judicial institutions would have evolved in such a manner as to make safeguarding the core principles and values of our 'unalienable rights' under the constitution a given. But since the installation of the new Trump administration at the beginning of the year, and, for that matter, going back to Trump's first term in 2017, the country has undergone a massive overhaul concerning what is now considered legal or constitutional or even *factual*. There was a time in America when we were on the same page concerning such topics as vaccinations, due process, free trade and standing by our allies. Not today, though. Thanks to Trump, Americans have begun to question the very principles upon which their freedoms are based. A very hard, right-wing shift in our national politics has made our democratic institutions teeter down a seemingly precarious and unpredictable pathway.

To make matters worse – and emboldened by Trump's personal haphazard style of political leadership, with many of his outrageous executive orders upheld by sympathetic conservative judges – Red States have rushed to appease his 'vision' of what America should be, no matter how convoluted or nonsensical his claims or ideas have become. In the process, many of the civil rights and political freedoms we used to take for granted now seem vague or downright unrecognizable. Women, for example, have lost the rights to their own bodies. In certain states a woman can now be charged with murder for having an abortion. Federal law enforcement

agencies, hellbent on enforcing Trump's increasingly racist and xenophobic immigration policies, routinely trample the rights of due process, one of the very principles on which our coveted legal system is based.

In addition, Trump has appointed many individuals to run important and sensitive government agencies who lack credible experience in these areas. Case in point, we now have a kook (for lack of a better word) running our health administration, whose paranoid, conspiracy-laced theories are dismantling vaccine programs and making Americans mistrustful of valid, science-based health information. It's as if Trump has convinced his most diehard MAGA supporters that two plus two doesn't equal four. No wonder American life expectancies (and general IQs) continue to trend slowly downward. Our economy, one of the most vibrant and successful free-market, capitalistic systems since the last century, is now governed by a draconian tariff system implemented by Trump that has steadily decreased job growth, raised the prices of almost all goods and services and has earned us the ire of the entire world. *Holy shit on a cracker, how did we get to this point*? It almost makes me miss the pandemic!

With massive ICE raids becoming routine and a continual eroding of civil rights for traditionally marginalized or discriminated minorities, traveling across the South and Midwest during this time seemed a tad worrisome. At least, judging from all the nasty discourse online and in social media. I was concerned how two older Latino Americans like us would be received on the road, especially since we would be traveling through mostly Red States. But, like everything else you see or read online, much of our fears turned out to be overblown. I don't like to throw in spoiler alerts this early in my narrative but we had a fantastic time. In fact, with the exception of Mississippi (and, let's face it, no *real* surprise here), we didn't encounter any of the angry MAGA masses we thought were lying in wait in every small town we came across. It was just the opposite. Everywhere we went, people were genuinely friendly and nice, even in the big cities. Quite frankly, it made me feel proud to be an American even in these troubling times.

After careful planning and considerations, our road trip had two basic components: the first part of the journey was to drive north from Miami all the way to Green Bay, Wisconsin before heading west towards Minneapolis to hook up with the Great River Road for the second part of the adventure, the return trip south along

this famed roadway system. The trip would allow us to experience a huge slice of the *Americana* that makes the regions we saw so special. In certain areas we encountered the vestiges of America's past right alongside the growth of some of its key future cities. The scenic views were at times awe-inspiring. I have visited dozens of countries now in my years of traveling, and I can honestly say that the United States is as beautiful and wonderful as any I have seen abroad.

The day before we left, my brother and I headed over to the National Car Rental center near the Miami International Airport to pick up our vehicle for the trip. We were given the option of selecting our own mid-size sedan from their lot and Joe picked a brand new black Nissan Sentra with under 10,000 miles. We were delighted its license plate was from Kentucky instead of Florida. We were afraid of being targeted by local cops on the road, especially in rural areas. With Kentucky plates we looked like a couple of 'good ole boys' passing through.

On the morning of May 12th, 2025, my brother and I began our Great American Road Trip…

Day One

(State of Florida)

I awoke around 3:00am, unable to sleep any more due to the impending journey, which is usually the case on the dawn of a new trip. The night before I had finished packing so I quickly did my morning exercise routine before jumping in the shower, first calling my brother to make sure he was already awake. Joe arrived at my condo by 5:30am and we proceeded north along the Florida Turnpike under a light but constant rain shower. Our first night's stay was in Marianna, Florida just miles from the Georgia border. We had tickets for the 4:30pm guided tour of the cave system within the Florida Caverns State Park located on the outskirts of this small city. A fellow postal worker and his family had visited the site years ago and his description of the caverns had always intrigued me. I had no idea Florida even had caverns, so I selected this site for our first stop.

One of the problems living in the southern part of Florida is that it takes over eight hours to reach the nearest border. In order to exit the state we would have to spend the entire day on the road. Joe did most of the driving. And by 'most' I mean he did *all* the driving on this long trip. I did offer to do my fair share, but Joe – who works in the casino management industry – used to be a truck driver in his youth and loves to drive. Besides, he was suspicious of my navigational skills. Anyone who has read my past journals knows that for someone who made his living as a letter carrier I have a terrible sense of direction. Perplexed, people often ask me how was this even possible citing my long career as a mailman? Well, you don't have to be Magellan to deliver the mail. The next stop is usually the house next door. *Duh*.

Marianna, Florida served as the perfect first night stop for us. It would take us almost to the border of Georgia (the next state we would be traversing) and the caverns would allow us to see a natural and very unique part of our own state we had never experienced before. To give me a better perspective on the regions we visited, I researched key facts and historical details about each of the 14 states we would be traveling through. As we ventured on our journey, the roadways became a roving lesson on American culture and geography. Below are some interesting facts about Florida.

Located in the southeastern corner of the United States, Florida is the third most populous state in the country with over 23 million inhabitants. It is the only state that borders both the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean with roughly two-thirds of its land mass situated on a peninsula between these two bodies of water. As a result, Florida has the longest coastline in the contiguous United States, measuring 1,350 miles (2,170 km) not including its barrier islands. With a total land space of 65,758 square miles, Florida ranks as the 22nd largest state in the union.

The demographics of Florida is a constantly changing mix of newly arriving retirees or transplants from other states, immigrants from mostly Latin America and the Caribbean, and the state's local population which includes descendants of the original white settlers dating back to the formation of our country. The politics of Florida has become increasingly more conservative, shifting towards the Republican party in recent decades but I think if migration patterns continue to redefine the state's population, that might change over time. The southern part of the state, which includes Miami, Broward and West Palm Beach counties, is the largest metropolitan

area in Florida, with over 6.2 million people. Although, the city with the *largest* population is actually Jacksonville in the northeastern part of the state with just over one million inhabitants. There are a total of 67 counties in Florida, which breaks down into a mean population of approximately 350,000 residents per county. Some of the state's numerous smaller, rural counties have populations much, much lower than that.

The economy of Florida since the mid-20th century has been on quite an upward spiral. In 2024, Florida's *gross state product* (GSP) was reported to be $1.647 trillion, the fourth highest in the country. To put that into perspective, if Florida was a sovereign nation, it would have been ranked within the top 20 economies in the world. Not too shabby. The state's growth can be attributed to many factors. While tourism makes up a huge slice of our economy, we also have a robust combination of other economic drivers: construction, international banking, agricultural industries, healthcare (for our growing geezer population), scientific research centers and innovative technological sectors like our aerospace and defense industries.

One area of Florida's economy that has been taking a terrible hit as of lately is the housing market. Home owners' insurance rates have skyrocketed as a result of several devastating hurricane strikes along our western coastline in recent years. Another factor in our housing slump is the new state legislation governing condo associations. In the wake of the Champlain Towers South condominium collapse of 2021 in the city of Surfside, Florida, which left 98 residents dead, all condo associations (like mine) must perform regular ten-year structural surveys of their buildings. Owners are now legally required to hold in reserve a percentage of the monies needed for potential future repairs. This has led to huge increases in the monthly HOA (Home Owners Association) fees condo owners must pay for routine maintenance. Combined, the increases in both home owner's insurance and HOA fees has made owning an affordable home in Florida much more difficult. In fact, condo owners by the droves are trying to sell their units but to no avail. Currently, few are buying and condo units are languishing on the real estate market for upwards of a year or more.

Another factor impacting our economy, and particularly the housing market, is Trump's tariff wars and his incredibly insensitive statements shortly after the start of his second term when he outwardly mused over the idea of Canada becoming our

51st state. Canadians, and rightly so, were terribly offended by Trump's words and tariffs. *I mean, c'mon, Canadians are like our favorite cousins*! These wonderful, friendly people have always been in our corner and they are now refusing to visit the United States in large numbers. Many Canadians own vacation condos in Florida and have been putting them up for sale, further flooding the real estate market with new listings. Also, tourism is down not just in Florida but all across the country thanks to Trump's anti-immigration policies and skewered political rantings. Canadians make up a large percentage of the tourism industry in Florida, and their absence hurts the local economy.

The drive along the Florida Turnpike north, a major state highway, was unspectacular. We could have elected to take a more scenic route, but the added time worked against us. The 4:30pm guided tour of the caverns was the last scheduled tour of the day and we had to arrive at least 15-minutes early to check in. Fearful of not making it there on time if we made any additional sightseeing stops, we opted to take the fastest route. Also, we'd been living in Florida for over three decades now and were very familiar with the state. For us, the main portion of the journey was what lay beyond Florida's borders.

We stopped to get gas and have breakfast at a Cracker Barrel restaurant near the Fort Pierce exit and then continued on the Florida Turnpike until it morphed into route I-75. Near Lake City, Florida we turned west on I-10. Marianna lies just off this highway in the Florida Panhandle roughly 66 miles west of Tallahassee, our state capital. The entire drive took us almost eight hours, including breakfast. We arrived in Marianna by 1:30pm, but because this portion of the state is in the Central Time Zone (something I was not aware of when I was planning this trip) it was actually 2:30pm local time. We decided to check into our hotel, a local Days Inn, before heading over to the Florida Caverns State Park, which was only 4 miles away.

Situated along the Chipola River on its eastern boundary, the small city of Marianna serves as the center of Jackson County with a population (according to the latest census) of roughly 6,200 inhabitants. It was founded in the 1820s by a Scottish businessman who named it after his two daughters, Mary and Anna. Its nickname is "The city of Southern Charm", which grossly belies some of its racist, violent past. Following Marianna's formation in the early 1800s, many planters from North Carolina moved here to take advantage of its fertile soil, establishing plantations that

relied on the labor of enslaved African Americans brought into the region through the domestic slave trade. During the Civil War, Florida's governor, John Milton, who hailed from Marianna, was vehemently opposed to the Confederate States rejoining the Union. The descendant of an American Revolutionary war hero, Milton owned the large Sylvania Plantation with hundreds of slaves. He positioned Florida during the Civil War as a supplier of food for the Confederacy and *allegedly* committed suicide just prior to the end of the war, preferring death over capitulation to Washington federalists.

If the plight of African Americans in Marianna was bad during slavery, they didn't fare much better under the early years of Reconstruction, either. Former plantation owners in Jackson County – through the Ku Klux Klan – targeted Republicans, many of whom were newly emancipated slaves, killing 150-200 of them in a bid to ensure white supremacy at the polls and limit land ownership by former slaves. In the early 1900s, the city gained notoriety for several high profile mob lynchings of black men. It might surprise many Americans to learn that the Republican party was actually considered the more 'progressive' of the two political parties governing the United States at the end of the 1800s. The Republican Party emerged in the 1850s to challenge the right-wing Democrats after the dissolution of the Whig Party. White southerners joined the Democratic party because, prior to the Civil War, Democrats were either opposed to ending slavery or campaigned on allowing individual states to decide the issue for themselves. It was only during the first half of the 20th century when the two parties seemingly flipped ideologies and began morphing into what they've become today. The national Democratic party slowly began adopting a political viewpoint against the Jim Crow laws, among other things, that were undermining black voting rights in the South. This would lead to a mass exodus of white southerners to the Republican party where they have remained ever since. What history teaches us here is that a political party's orientation can gradually change over time depending on the current issues or trending social norms. I'm certain that if Ronald Reagan were alive today, he would be shocked at the direction his party has taken in recent years under the leadership of Donald Trump. But let me not go off on another rant here.

After unloading the luggage in our hotel room, Joe took a one hour nap since he barely slept the night before having pulled an afternoon shift in the casino where he works. I made a cup of instant coffee and wrote in my journal and scrolled the news

on my iPhone while he slept. At 3:50pm we set out for the Florida Caverns State Park located just to the north of the city.

From the hotel we drove along Lafayette Street (the city's main road, also known as Route 90) through what appeared to be the heart of the 'shopping district' of Marianna, passing several strip malls and small businesses. While this time of day would usually mark the start of rush hour elsewhere, the city was devoid of any real traffic. Marianna was one of the Pan Handle communities severely damaged by Hurricane Michael in 2018. The downtown historic center suffered extensive damage, which spilled onto Lafayette Street. I read online that roughly 80 percent of the homes and businesses within the city were heavily damaged or destroyed, with blackouts that lasted three weeks. Millions of dollars of business revenue was lost. Maybe this was why the city didn't have a lot of traffic. Perhaps the local population started trending downward following the aftermath of the storm.

We turned left onto Route 71 shortly after crossing the Chipola River and drove through a rural area on the outskirts of the city until we reached the entrance of the park a few minutes later. From the visitors' parking lot we headed over to the souvenir shop where we registered for the cave tour. A total of 12 people were present for the tour, which was led by two young guides named Tom and Diya who took turns explaining the different parts of the cave system. The tour started at exactly 4:30pm and lasted about 45 minutes. We entered the cave system through a door near the visitor's center and gathered around the tour guides in the first chamber while Tom gave us a brief historical outline of the caverns.

The geological history of these caverns can be traced back 38 million years ago when the southeastern coastal plains of the United States was submerged in water. Coral, shells and sediment gradually accumulated along the sea floor. As sea levels began to drop, these materials hardened into limestone. Over the last million years, acidic groundwater began to dissolve crevices just below the limestone carving out the cave system. The park's bluffs, springs and caves are referred to as karst terrain. Continual dripping of naturally acidic rainwater within the caverns has created dazzling formations of stalactites, stalagmites and flowstones. The entire system measures about a mile, but this includes the actual spaces within each chamber and not just its total length, so as far as caverns go this is not a particularly large system. But it is still very impressive, made even more so by a series of multi-colored lights

that bathe the natural formations in cool blue, green, pink and yellowish hues, giving the entire system a surreal vibe. The caves also serve as a natural habitat for blind cave crayfish, salamanders and several species of roosting bats. We came across one sleeping bat on our walk through.

Most of the land that comprises the Florida Caverns State Park was acquired during the 1930s and was developed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Projects Administration, which both emerged as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal program that sought to provide jobs during the Great Depression. Statue monuments dedicated to these CCC workers have been erected near the entrance of the park. From 1933 until 1942 (when it first opened) the men who labored on this 1,500-acre park worked tirelessly, according to Tom, developing not only the pathways that run through the cave system but also other aspects of the park like a fish hatchery, a museum and the visitor's center. The park also has several hiking trails along the bluffs near the Chipola River.

After this brief orientation we set out slowly through the cave tunnel, crossing different chambers. At times we had to crouch low or squeeze through some tight rock formations as we made our way through the system, but as someone who suffers from claustrophobia I can tell you it wasn't that bad. Each chamber contained unique mounds of stalagmites rising up from the cave floor and hanging stalactites in curious shapes and sizes, garnering nicknames based on their bizarre contours like the Heart, the Wedding Cake, the Cathedral Room and the Lake Room (which contained a shallow pool of water). We saw fossils of ancient shells and sea urchins embedded in the ceiling. At one point during the tour, the guides turned off the lights so we could experience the cave's darkness. It was frightening, I couldn't see my hand in front of my face!

We exited the caverns near the parking area, close to the park's different hiking trails. The museum was closed by the time we finished the cave tour so we opted to take the 30-minute Bluff Trail. A well-traveled rock and dirt pathway led us along an upland hardwood forested area. We saw species of plants that only flourish within the park's unique boundaries (according to the posted signs). The further up the trail we climbed we were treated to better views of the karst topography of the Marianna Lowlands, hiking a section adjacent to the bluffs which overlooked the Chipola River below. The walk back down was a little tricky, with thick tree roots and jutting

rocks making the pathway more difficult to maneuver. But we made it back to the parking lot in one piece by 6:00pm.

Heading back to our hotel we stopped first at the local Walmart to pick up some bottled water and snacks for our road trip and then had dinner at an Arby's. We reached our hotel room shortly before 8:00pm, thoroughly exhausted. It had been a very long day. Joe took his evening shower while I jotted notes in my journal. We turned the TV on but soon found ourselves drifting off to sleep.

Days Two and Three

(State of Georgia)

We were both wide-awake by 4:30am. I made some instant coffee and we went over the travel route for the day's journey. By 6:30am I showered and then we went downstairs to the hotel lobby for an included breakfast. It consisted of the typical morning fare offered at many mid-level hotel chains nowadays. Afterwards, we used the bathroom one final time before loading our luggage back into the car and hitting the road again. Next stop: *Atlanta, Georgia*.

It was Tuesday morning and we encountered absolutely no traffic exiting Marianna. We followed State Road 71 out of the city. As we drove through the adjacent rural community of Greenwood, Florida we stopped to photograph the Great Oaks manor, a beautifully-preserved plantation home constructed just prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. It was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1972 and is considered an excellent example of the kind of Greek Revival style plantation homes the farming aristocracy of the south built in those days.

We turned onto State Road 2 after passing through the 'town' of Bascom, Florida (pop: under 100) and headed east momentarily before crossing the Chattahoochee River and entering the State of Georgia. The river crossing not only delineated the border between Florida and Georgia, but also Alabama (which was less than two

miles further north along the river at this point). Once inside Georgia, we drove northward along a series of scenic rural roads before hooking up with US Route 27 in the city of Blakely, Georgia. Route 27 runs south-to-north along the western part of the state near the Alabama border. We continued following it north for about 90 miles (or roughly an hour and a half) before turning northeast onto I-185 in the city of Columbus, Georgia.

The Columbus metropolitan area has over 330,000 inhabitants, making it the second most populous city in the state of Georgia. It was named after Christopher Columbus and was founded in 1828 along the beginning of the navigable part of the Chattahoochee River. Back then the river served as the city's connection to the rest of the world, enabling its biggest commodity, cotton, to reach international markets via New Orleans. Columbus' importance grew during the 1850s with the arrival of the railroad. In addition to its plantations, textile mills sprang up along the river adding a thriving industry to a previously agricultural economy. By the time of the Civil War, Columbus was regarded as an important industrial hub of the South and become one of the key centers of industry for the Confederacy, manufacturing everything from wool (for uniforms) to machinery, cannons and munitions.

When General Lee surrendered to the North, news of this had not yet reached Columbus, and one of the last land battles of the Civil War (the *Battle of Columbus*) took place here on Easter Sunday, April 16, 1865. Many of the city's industrial buildings were burned down. A notable confederate officer wounded in this battle was Lieutenant Colonel John Stith Pemberton, who sustained a saber wound to the chest. Pemberton became addicted to morphine as a result of his wounds. A physician by trade, he tried to curb his addiction by concocting several different types of elixirs combining alcohol, toxins and cocaine, marketing them as alternatives to opioids. In 1886, when his county enacted temperance legislation prohibiting the use of alcohol in his products, Pemberton created what would become the world's most iconic soft drink: *Coca-Cola*.

From Columbus we drove north on I-185 (which merged into I-85 near LaGrange, Georgia) and continued all the way to Atlanta, passing through the outskirts of many small, nondescript towns and cities with populations numbering only a few thousand. I believe the largest of these cities was Newnan with a sizeable 42,000 people, forming the county seat of Coweta County. The city was named after

a North Carolinian general, Daniel Newnan, who rose to fame fighting Seminole Indians during the Patriot War in what was then Spanish Florida. Like much of this area of the South, the city of Newman prospered due to the growth of its slave-labor cotton industry, becoming a magnet for doctors, lawyers, merchants and other professionals. Interestingly, Newman survived the Civil War relatively unscathed by functioning as a hospital city for both Confederate *and* Union forces, which spared it from the kind of devastation other southern cities had endured. Today, the city is known for its rich antebellum architecture.

We reached the city limits of Atlanta roughly an hour after passing Newman and merged onto I-75, which is the only interstate highway that traverses the entire state of Georgia, running from the Atlantic coastal plains of the southeast up to the rolling mountains on its northern boundary. We reached the *Wingate by Wyndam Atlanta Galleria/Ballpark Hotel* by 1:00pm. This establishment was a noticeable improvement over the previous night's Days Inn in Marianna, Florida. It is located directly across from Truist Park, the official stadium of the Atlanta Braves baseball team. Joe's brother-in-law, Lou, works as a scout for the team and he was nice enough to hook us up with tickets for that night's game against the Washington Nationals.

At 4:45pm we crossed the street and walked through the Battery Atlanta section surrounding Truist Park stadium in search of a place to eat dinner before the game. In 2013, the Atlanta Braves announced they would be leaving Turner Field – their former stadium – for this new ballpark starting in 2017. Turner Field was originally built for the 1996 Summer Olympics and was considered a relatively new stadium, but it required hundreds of millions in renovations and the Atlanta Braves organization crunched the numbers and decided it was better to just move into a new facility. Another motivating factor for switching stadiums was attendance. According to Braves' executives, fewer fans in later years were willing to traverse metro Atlanta's infamously bad traffic congestion to see a live game. Turner Field was located just to the south of Downtown Atlanta and had limited parking spaces, so it made good sense to switch ballparks. Truist Park is situated approximately ten miles northwest of Downtown Atlanta.

Surrounding the stadium is a thriving mix-use development complex called the Battery Atlanta that incorporates a well-planned out blend of commercial,

residential, and entertainment buildings in what I would describe as a very family-friendly atmosphere. In addition to the mix of shops, restaurants and entertainment venues, the area is home to several large hotels and corporate offices, including the headquarters of Papa John's Pizza. Joe and I walked the open-air pedestrian streets of the Battery exploring the complex. For dinner we stopped at the popular Antico Pizza restaurant where their open kitchen cranks out endless Naples-style thin, crispy pizzas. The place was packed. We shared a whole (and very tasty) sausage pie with soft drinks. Afterwards, we continued to explore the Battery Atlanta complex before heading into the stadium at 6:45pm. According to our e-tickets the game was scheduled to start at 7:15pm, giving us some time to walk around the stadium.

The company that designed the stadium was Populous Holdings, Inc, a global architectural firm specializing in sports facilities, arenas and convention centers. Of the current professional baseball stadiums in use in the United States, 19 of them have been designed by Populous Holdings, Inc., including the beautiful home of my beloved Florida Marlins. And they did a great job here, as well. Truist Park is a wonderful sports venue, its design blends easily into the surrounding Atlanta Battery, making the entire complex one giant integrated experience that is truly unique in American baseball stadiums.

Due to its limited land space, Truist Park was designed with a more vertical layout than most baseball stadiums. It was built into a sloping, rocky landscape that allow visitors to enter at mid-level and descend into their seats if they are near the playing field. Spectators – including those in the 'nosebleed sections' – also sit much closer to the field than in their previous venue at Turner Field. Another defining feature is the extensive use of brick, a nod to the masonry patterns commonly seen in the southeastern parts of the country. In addition to the brickwork, pre-cast stone was used and is featured prominently at all the entranceways. To give the stadium a sense of scale and warmth, various elements were incorporated into the masonry like canopies, porches, trellises and varying angles. I must say, I was very impressed.

Our seats were located on the third level behind home plate. On our way up to our seats we stopped to visit a display section outlining the history of the ball club. I had no idea the Braves started out in Boston, Massachusetts, playing there for 82 years before moving to Milwaukee, Wisconsin for another 12 years. They achieved great success in both cities, winning 14 pennants in Boston, 2 in Milwaukee and a

World Series in each. In 1966 they moved to Atlanta. The display cases had uniforms, photos and information boards describing the team's history and a really nice tribute to Hank Aaron, which included a life-size statue of Hammering Hank knocking one out of the ballpark while a continuously running TV reel shows the momentous occasion on April 8th, 1974 when he broke Babe Ruth's homerun record. From here we took our seats and enjoyed the game. Although the Braves were trailing early on, they finished strong, beating the Nationals 5-2. The game lasted less than two-and-a-half hours thanks to the new rules implemented in recent years by Major League Baseball to speed up the game. We had a great time, leaving half-way through the top of the ninth inning to avoid the large crowds exiting the stadium.

We made it back to our hotel room by 10:00pm. We stayed up for another hour before calling it a night, once again thoroughly exhausted.

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We were able to get a good night's sleep, waking up just after 6:00am. My brother is a late riser, usually going to bed after 1:00am most evenings, so it was a bit of an adjustment for him to wake up so early each morning. But as the trip wore on he became more acclimated to this new sleeping schedule. As for me, I'm asleep by 10:00am nightly and up before the crack of dawn each day. It's when I do my best writing. We had to cover a lot of ground on this trip so it was essential for us to be up and ready to go early in the morning. By 8:00am we went down to the lobby where the hotel had set up a breakfast buffet in one corner. After eating we used the bathroom in our room one final time before loading our luggage back into the car's trunk and heading out. Our next night's stay was in Nashville, Tennessee, but we had a lot of sightseeing to do before we got there.

Our first stop was a visit to the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum located east of the Downtown Atlanta area. I've always read that the rush hour traffic in Los Angeles is considered one of the worst in the country. Having lived in Miami

for over 28 years I was convinced *we* had the worst traffic congestion in all of America. But I'm here to tell you that Atlanta can give any U.S. city a run for its money when it comes to nerve-racking gridlock. The previous evening, when we first checked into the hotel, Joe had asked the receptionist what would be the easiest way to get to the Carter Center complex the following morning and she told us to take I-75 south to the downtown area, but she implored us to wait at least until 9:00am to let traffic 'thin out'. So we left the hotel at 9:20am. And traffic was still ridiculously heavy heading into the city. It took us nearly 40 minutes to cover what should have been an easy 15-minute drive. I think the problem is that the population of Atlanta, which is approximately 520,000 people by recent counts, is overshadowed by the overall population of the Atlanta Metropolitan Area, which includes 24 counties and has an estimated population of just over 6.4 million, the eighth largest metropolitan area in the U.S.. That's a lot of commuters entering and exiting the city on a daily basis.

Below are some interesting facts about Atlanta:

For thousands of years prior to the arrival of white settlers from Europe, North Georgia had been inhabited by the indigenous Cherokee and Muscogee Creek peoples. A Muscogee village (*Standing Peachtree*) once stood in what is now the uptown commercial and residential area of Atlanta. But throughout the early 19th century, European Americans continued to encroach on Native American territories in northern Georgia. Under the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the entire population of various tribes (the Muscogee, Cherokee, Seminole, Chickasaw and Choctaw peoples) were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands and resettled west of the Mississippi River. The forced exodus of over 60,000 indigenous peoples resulted in great hardship and much loss of life, known today as the Trail of Tears. This constant upheaval and forced relocation eventually cleared most of the eastern part of the U.S. of its Native American population by the mid-1800s.

In 1836, the Georgia General Assembly voted to build the Western and Atlanta Railroad to link the port of Savannah to the growing territories of the Midwest. After engineers surveyed various sites it was determined to make the terminus of this new railroad on what is now Foundry Street, Five Points (in Downtown Atlanta). With the expansion of the railroads, which brought more and more commerce and construction into the area, the once tiny village around the railroad terminus soon

grew into a major city, being renamed Atlanta (in a nod to the Western and Atlanta Railroad) in 1847. By the time the Civil War broke out, the nexus of railroads in the city made Atlanta a strategic distribution hub for the Confederate army, transferring military supplies for its forces.

In 1864 the Union Army captured Chattanooga, Tennessee (another important railroad hub of the Confederacy) and moved further south to invade northern Georgia. Several key battles were fought around Atlanta, culminating with the *Battle of Atlanta*, a four-month siege of the city led by General William Tecumseh Sherman. The Confederate forces had to retreat from the city on September 1st, 1864, setting many of Atlanta's public buildings and other assets on fire to prevent the Union Army from using them. Once the city surrendered to General Sherman, he ordered the civilian population to evacuate. As he continued onward with his *March to the Sea* military campaign, Sherman had the city's remaining assets burned to the ground, leaving Atlanta in ruins.

After the Civil War the city was gradually rebuilt during the Reconstruction era. Because of its superior railroad system, Atlanta became the new state capital of Georgia in 1868, attracting many new residents and workers, making it the most populous city in Georgia by the 1880s. The city continued to grow into the 20th century, becoming a key educational and industrial city of the 'New South', its neighborhoods expanding in all directions. During World War II, Atlanta played a vital role in the war effort. The president of Georgia Tech, Colonel Blake Van Leer, lobbied major military industries and the federal government to set up manufacturing plants and military bases in and around the city. By the 1950s Atlanta had a growing white middle class that continued to move into the suburbs, further expanding the metropolitan area but causing the city's population to decline.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Atlanta experienced a profound demographic change, impacting its physical and cultural landscape. In 1990, the black population of Atlanta was roughly 67 percent of the total population. But as more and more upper and middle-class blacks joined their white counterparts in moving to the suburbs, the booming economy of the city started to attract new groups of immigrants from different parts of the country. A growing mix of younger White, Asian and Hispanic college-educated professionals emerged in the three-mile radius of Downtown Atlanta. Today, the black population of the city is less than 50

percent, a significant drop from just three decades ago. In addition to this influx of new urban professionals, the city's transit and cultural venues were expanded and improved. As we drove to the downtown area, through sections of the upscale Buckhead commercial and residential district in the northernmost part of the city, we were both impressed by Atlanta's skyline and its modern feel. This was a city I wouldn't mind exploring again in the future.

We took exit 248c in the downtown area and proceeded east along John Lewis Freedom Parkway until we reached Freedom Park, one of the largest public parks in Atlanta. It stretches west-east along the parkway and is shaped like a cross; the center of the park is where the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum is located. I was the one who wanted to stop here. I was a big fan of the late president, even though I'll admit his one term in office was not particularly stellar. I was 16 years old when Carter was running for president and during his campaign he stopped in North Bergen, New Jersey for a political rally which I attended with some high school friends. Earlier, I had seen Carter on an episode of the popular TV show *"What's My Line?"*. The show featured a celebrity panel that would ask a series of questions to determine the mystery guest's occupation or hobby. In Carter's case, he was the former governor of Georgia who was running for president. He came across as a very sincere and affable individual, so when he stopped in my county for a political rally months later I wanted to see him in person. I couldn't vote back then, but I watched the debates he had with Gerald Ford on TV and rooted for him all the way. I was delighted when he won the election.

Carter's term in office was mired by many obstacles. The 1970s was not a particularly good decade for America. In 1974, President Nixon, on the verge of being impeached for his role in the Watergate Scandal, became the first president to resign from office, sparking a political crisis in the nation. In addition, we had 'lost' the Vietnam War, pulling out of Vietnam (and later Cambodia) in a very unceremonious fashion. Our country's image was sullied in the eyes of the world. The U.S. had been divided over the war and it still lingered over us like a really bad hangover during Carter's administration. And our withdrawal from Southeast Asia seemed to fuel a proliferation of communist revolutions in Central and South America. Another thing that occurred before Carter took office was the Arab Oil Embargo of 1973, when key oil-producing Arab countries, angered over our support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War, suspended oil shipments to the United States

and several other countries, creating the world's first oil crisis. As one can imagine, our economy was negatively impacted by this action. I can still remember the gas-rationing plan put in place to get us through the crisis. In New Jersey (where I grew up), an alternating odd-even license plate system was used in which cars could only get gas on the days when the vehicle's license plate ended with the corresponding odd or even number. Holy shit was that frustratingly inconvenient. By the time Carter took office in January of 1977, the American economy was in rough shape and the country's mood was soured by all the bad events it had endured earlier in the decade.

Unfortunately, things didn't seem to fare much better under Carter's administration. His Washington staff consisted of several dedicated supporters from his home state who didn't seem to grasp the tricky political partisanship of Congress. And I'm not even going to mention the behavior of his buffoonish brother Billy who became an increasing embarrassment to Carter throughout his term. To make matters worse, in 1979 the Iranian Revolution would upend that region of the world and bring about another oil crisis that stalled our economy and drove up inflation. In poker parlance, Jimmy Carter was dealt a terrible hand and couldn't overcome the growing political unease settling over the country despite his many notable achievements while in office. In 1980, Ronald Reagan would trounce him in the polls, ending his political career.

So why was I such a big fan of the late president? Because Jimmy Carter was an *exceptional* human being. He was born in a time of racial segregation in the south, yet as a child he befriended the children of the black farmhands who worked on the family farm. Later in life he was active in the civil rights movement and fought the vestiges of racism in his own state as governor, which was not a politically popular stance for a white politician in many areas of the south during that era. He brought his dedication of protecting and enforcing civil rights to the White House, and as a former president became famous as a great humanitarian due in large part to his diplomatic role as an 'elder stateman' ; on numerous occasions (and at the behest of several succeeding presidents) he would meet and even negotiate with world leaders and try to temper down political hot spots all over the globe, earning him many awards including the Nobel Peace Prize. I think his greatest legacy has to be his advocacy for basic human rights worldwide. In essence, what he couldn't do as

president, he made up for with his role as *former* president. As a result, he acquired a new-found popularity late in life.

I would like to add a personal aside here: I was inspired to join the Peace Corps right out of college because of Carter's mother, Lillian, who had served in the Peace Corps in 1966 at the age of 68. At the time, she was the oldest person to ever apply for the volunteer service. A skilled nurse, Lillian Carter worked in a leper colony in India during her Peace Corps tenure and had written a book containing a collection of letters she'd written about the experience. I know she must have inspired others because in my Peace Corps group (I served in the Philippines between 1985-87) we had four retired seniors. With a mother like that, no wonder Jimmy Carter grew up to be such a great humanitarian.

We pulled into the parking lot next to the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum and walked around the perimeter of the complex which includes several buildings of the adjacent Carter Center. The entire thing is located in the middle of the nicely-landscaped Freedom Park. Because our time was limited, we confined our visit only to the library and museum section. The Carter Center next door was founded in 1982 by the Carters in partnership with Emory University. Its stated goal is to advance human rights and alleviate human suffering. Currently, the center has about 80 projects set up in countries around the world providing services in election monitoring, conflict mediation, democratic-institution building and human rights advocacy. It is governed by a Board of Trustees consisting of prominent business leaders, educators, former politicians and philanthropists. We took some exterior photos of the center's round-shaped buildings before heading over to the library and museum area.

The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum opened in 1986 and is run by the National Archives and Records Administration. The entire structure measures almost 70,000 square feet (roughly 6,500 square meters) and is divided into two sections. The first is a museum exhibition outlining the life of the former president from his humble beginnings in Plains, Georgia through his naval career and rise in politics, to his life and accomplishments as president and his numerous achievements afterwards. The other section is the presidential library, containing an archive and storage area with over 27 million pages of documents, hundreds of thousands of photographs, and over 40,000 objects including films, videos and audiotapes. I don't

recall how much the entrance fee cost, but we got the senior discount so it wasn't expensive. Upon entering we were encouraged to see a short documentary film about the life of Jimmy Carter that continually runs inside a small auditorium. This was a great way to learn who Carter was as a human being and the experiences that shaped his way of thinking. Afterwards, we spent an hour walking through the exhibition halls where photos and information boards gave a clearer picture of the things he stood for and accomplished throughout his life.

The museum portion was lined with photos from his early life, his marriage to Rosalynn, his career in the navy where he served as an officer on board several nuclear submarines, his return to peanut farming following his father's death in 1953. The museum also showcases his involvement in Georgia politics and victory in the governor's race. Each photo section had quotes that emphasized an important aspect of Carter's core beliefs. One of my favorite quotes was from his inaugural speech as governor in 1971: *"I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over. The test of a government is not how popular it is with the powerful and privileged few, but how honestly and fairly it deals with the many who must depend on it."* For me, this was Jimmy Carter in a nutshell. Even my brother, who is not as political as I am, was deeply moved by learning about the different aspects of this great humanitarian. Shortly after 11:00am we concluded our self-guided tour of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum and headed back to the car.

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We drove west along John Lewis Freedom Parkway for several minutes and turned south onto a street simply called Boulevard NE and proceeded two blocks further until we reached the Martin Luther King, Jr National Historic Park, our next stop of the day. The park, which covers an area of about 35 acres near the downtown section, is where the legendary civil rights leader spent his early youth. Besides the park, it includes several preserved residential blocks including the childhood home of Martin Luther King, Jr and the famous Ebeneezer Baptist Church where both he

and his father preached. The park is administered by the National Parks Service and has a visitor's center and a museum, as well.

Prior to the trip I had told my brother I wanted to pay my respects to Dr. King. I've been a life-long fan of the former civil rights leader and consider him one of my biggest political influencers. In 1968, not long after King's assassination in Memphis, our grade school had an assembly where we were shown a documentary about the man including clips from some of his more memorable speeches like the "I Have A Dream" speech. I was barely eight years old but even at that young age I can still remember being moved by his electrifying manner of speaking. As a child, I had no idea back then what Black America was actually going through in certain parts of the country. For the first half of my formative years (until I was about 11 years old) I grew up in a racially-mixed middle class suburb in Bergen County, New Jersey and had many black friends, so my experience with black people in general was strikingly different from the brutal images I was seeing on the school's auditorium screen concerning the Civil Rights struggles in the deep south.

Later, while studying history and political science at Rutgers University, I would come to regard Martin Luther King, Jr as one of my political heroes, alongside Henry David Thoreau and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The philosophy of *passive resistance*, which they had all adopted, has been around since as early as the 1500s. The idea being that a ruler, even an absolute ruler, must still have the support of the people in order to stay in power and avoid being overthrown. This notion that governance requires the consent of the governed is the foundational idea of modern democracy. Based on this concept, Henry David Thoreau famously articulated his call for *civil disobedience* with his act of tax refusal during the Mexican War of the 1840s. Later, Mahatma Gandhi used this idea of civil disobedience to win India's independence from the British, arguing that if hundreds of millions of Indians refused to be governed by the British, then the colonists would have no choice but to leave. Martin Luther King, Jr utilized this strategy to propel the Civil Rights movement forward. Not through violence, but through civil disobedience. Black people in the south would, in an organized but non-violent manner, go to those southern businesses where they were not served or allowed entry and just wait patiently until they were, which resulted in their removal and arrest by the local police, oftentimes in extremely violent ways. Meanwhile, the rest of the country

(and the world) watched on in horror. Eventually, segregation would be legally outlawed and the Civil Rights Act would be passed.

Today, when people ask me why I am still such a fan of the black civil rights leader, I tell them that Dr. King wasn't just advocating for the civil rights of African Americans (albeit that was the central part of the movement) he was also essentially laying the groundwork for the public to fight back against oppression, unconstitutional laws or whatever else might be undermining our precious democratic institutions. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines, I *witnessed* firsthand how this concept of civil disobedience toppled the repressive and corrupt government of the late dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. Dr. King's legacy isn't just confined to Black America, he showed *all* Americans how to stop tyranny in its track by simply refusing to be governed in that manner. A lesson we might all need to heed once again if right-wing zealots continue to dominate our political landscape and challenge our civil liberties.

We parked in back of the Martin Luther King Sr. Community Resources Center, a brick building dedicated in 2012 to the father of Martin Luther King, Jr who served as senior pastor of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church from 1931 until 1975. The three-story complex is located within the Martin Luther King, Jr National Historic Park. Inside the park we visited the International Civil Rights Walk of Fame, a promenade honoring activists involved in the American Civil Rights Movement and several international civil rights leaders. The walkway features the foot impressions of those honored in granite and bronze. From here we made our way to the Memorial Rose Garden situated at the southern entrance of the park in front of the visitor's center. Next to it was the Horizon Sanctuary, a 1,700-capacity church that now functions as the 'new' Ebenezer Baptist Church. Its current senior pastor is Georgia U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock.

Across the street from the Horizon Sanctuary Church, on the corner of Auburn Avenue and Jackson Street, sits the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church where Martin Luther King, Jr and his father both served as pastors. Founded in 1886, its name is derived from a place called *Eben-Ezer* that is mentioned in the Book of Samuel as the scene of battles between Israelites and the Philistines. We tried to go inside to take photos but the security guard on duty told us the building – which is now a preserved historical site and used for church services on special occasions – had

scheduled daily tours and we would have to register with one of them to go inside. I'm not sure if this was the normal policy or only on the day we visited. Since we were on a tight schedule we decided not to wait for the next tour and proceeded east along Auburn Avenue.

Adjacent to the Ebenezer Baptist Church are the tombs of Martin Luther King, Jr and his wife, Coretta Scott King. The memorial sits within the plaza of the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, a non-governmental, not-for-profit organization founded by Coretta Scott King following her husband's assassination. Their side-by-side white tombs sit above an elongated water fountain surrounded by a wall outlining the basic principles of nonviolent resistance together with images of the civil rights leader. An eternal flame memorial burns brightly in front of the tombs. We made our way along the sections of the wall surrounding the fountain and stopped in front of the tombs to pay our respects.

We continued east on Auburn Avenue to Boulevard NE. On the corner stood the red brick Fire Station Number 6, a historic firehouse dating back to 1894. It is the oldest free-standing fire station in Atlanta and was the first to hire African American firefighters. It is now part of the historical structures within the national park and serves as a museum detailing the history of desegregation within the Atlanta Fire Department. When Dr. King was a child, the neighborhood kids would often play in the firehouse courtyard.

We crossed the street and continued along Auburn Avenue until we reached the boyhood home of Martin Luther King, Jr.. I was greatly disappointed when we discovered the house was closed due to extensive restoration work being done on the inside of the property. The museum that oversees the structure had placed a large sign in front of the house with pictures of the interior, so the public could at least see how it looked when the King family lived there. The house, a two-story frame Queen Anne Victorian style home, was originally built for a white family in 1895 who sold it fourteen years later to Reverend Adam Daniel Williams, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church. In 1926, Martin Luther King, Sr married the pastor' daughter, Alberta Christine, and moved in with her family. Martin Luther King, Jr and his two siblings were born in the house. The civil rights leader spent the first 12 years of his life here before the family moved. The house became a rental property for the King

family until his assassination, when it was decided to restore the property as a museum.

The entire residential street along Auburn Avenue is part of the Martin Luther King, Jr National Historic Park and is lined with old duplex houses constructed in the early 1900s by the Empire Textile Company. They were originally intended for their white mill workers but after the 1906 race riots in Atlanta, whites moved out of the neighborhood and the properties were rented to black families. A sign posted in front of one of the homes described the houses as being one room wide and up to four rooms deep. They were called 'shotgun houses' because the interior and exterior doorways were aligned so a shot could supposedly be fired through them from front to back. The houses, at least the exteriors, have been historically preserved. Several of the homes had additional signs telling visitors to please not trespass as they were private dwellings.

From here we walked back to the car and proceeded to the Georgia State Capitol Building located less than ten minutes away in the downtown area. The building and its enclosed museum were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 and was listed as one of the 'places to see' in Atlanta. It was already after 12:00pm by the time we reached the capitol building and traffic was beginning to pick up again. Joe recommended we make this a quick outdoor photo stop since we still had to drive all the way up to Nashville and had at least one more place to visit along the way just outside of Atlanta.

In the years following the Civil War, the Georgia state legislature moved the capital from rural Milledgeville to the rapidly growing and industrialized city of Atlanta. The new State Capitol Building was completed in 1889 and was built on a five-acre tract of land where the old city hall building used to be. The structure's Neoclassical, domed-roof architecture is typical of many state capitol buildings of the time which sought to mimic the look of the United States Capitol in Washington, DC. The façade features a four-story portico with stone pediment supported by six Corinthian columns that rest on large stone piers. The Georgia state coat-of-arms is carved into the pediment. The open rotunda is flanked by two wings, each with a grand staircase, a three-story atrium and crowned by clerestory windows. A statue named *Miss Liberty* (think *Statue of Liberty*) has graced the top of the dome since its construction. The interior includes marble flooring, Classical pilasters and oak

paneling, which also reflect its 19th century design. The museum within the capitol building dates back to the original construction and includes an extensive collection representing Georgia's natural and cultural history. Over the years there have been several restorations and remodeling projects done on the State Capitol Building and numerous monuments and statues have been added dictated by historical events.

We pulled up to the western side of the building and I took photos of the structure's façade and several of the monuments along the capitol grounds. Two monument plaques described the Siege of Atlanta and the burning of the city at the hands of the Union Army. Wow, memories linger long in the south! There were also statues of former governors (including Jimmy Carter) and memorials to veterans ranging from the Spanish American War to the Vietnam War. At first I thought this was a little odd, but then I remembered this building is 136 years old. That's a lot of history. Before leaving, we drove around the Capitol Building to see the Liberty Plaza built in 2015 in front of the structure's eastern side. It includes a 2.2-acre public plaza with an 8,000 square-foot grass lawn capable of holding up to 3,000 people. It is sometimes used for political rallies. From here we turned right onto MLK Drive and connected to I-75 a few minutes later, driving north out of the city.

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Our next stop was one that Joe insisted on: the Kennesaw Mountain Battlefield National Park. Located on Kennesaw Mountain about a 30-minute ride north of Atlanta, the park is a memorial to several Civil War battles that took place here between June-July of 1864 during the Union Army's *Atlanta Campaign*. The drive there was pretty straight forward, we just stayed on I-75 until we reached the mountain. The park's website mentioned a guided tour of the battlefield areas at 2:00pm, but we arrived a full hour before then and could not wait due to our long drive to Nashville, so we opted to do a self-guided tour of the park.

Growing up in the northeast, my brother could still remember the school field trips to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania to visit the areas where the Battle of Gettysburg was fought, the biggest and deadliest battle not just of the Civil War but also in American history with over 50,000 combined casualties. The battle was won by the

Union Army and proved to be a turning point in the war, paving the way for deeper advancements into the south and culminating in the North's victory two years later in 1865. We were initially excited by the prospect of witnessing a Civil War battlefield reenactment on this trip, but (alas) those are normally done during the summer months. By 1:00pm we reached the visitor's center located at the bottom of Kennesaw Mountain just off Stilesboro Road near the park entrance. The woman who worked the desk gave us an illustrated map of the site and suggested we begin our exploration inside the adjacent museum to learn the history of the area and how the battles unfolded before we headed up the mountain itself.

The museum is not very large, but it pretty much explains everything one needs to know about the battles that took place here and their significance. Below is a brief description of what we learned:

The Battle of Kennesaw Mountain occurred in the summer of 1864 during the North's Atlanta Campaign led by General William Tecumseh Sherman, who had won the Battle of Chattanooga (Tennessee) the previous year. Chattanooga was an important rail hub for the South, and its loss dealt a major blow to the Confederacy, forcing the remnants of its Tennessee army to withdraw into Georgia. The Atlanta Campaign began in May of 1864 and consisted of a series of major battles fought throughout northwest Georgia and the areas around Atlanta, which now became Sherman's next major target. The Confederate forces were under the command of General Joseph E. Johnston, a wily military veteran who had fought in both the Mexican-American War and in the Seminole Wars years earlier. He had been wounded so many times in battle the great American general, Winfield Scott, once joked that Johnston "was a great soldier who had an unfortunate knack of getting himself shot in nearly every engagement."

For several months during 1864, Sherman and Johnston maneuvered against each other in a kind of cat-and-mouse campaign that saw the Confederate Army build strong defensive positions only to have the Union Army move around them, forcing Johnston to retreat slowly towards Atlanta. Sherman commanded about 100,000 soldiers, 254 cannons and 35,000 horses, while Johnston had roughly two-thirds as many men and only 187 cannons. Unable to win a heads-up decisive victory against such unfavorable odds, Johnston strategy was to preserve his army and slow down Sherman's advance by trying to inflict as many losses as possible during the

campaign. But Sherman's tactics forced Johnston to continuously retreat, ceding more than 110 miles of mountainous territory to the Union Army in just two months. By the time Sherman's forces reached Kennesaw Mountain in the summer of 1864, they were only 17 miles from Atlanta. Johnston decided to establish a strong defensive position atop the mountain and draw Sherman's forces into battle, hoping to inflict so many casualties to either dissuade the North from advancing further, or at least give the Confederate Army a chance to prepare and counter for the attack on the city.

There were several battles fought at Kennesaw Mountain. Using their cannons, which were positioned along the top of the mountain, Johnston succeeded in halting Sherman's advance temporarily, which forced Sherman to order a direct frontal assault, something he had been mostly avoiding on his march from Chattanooga to Atlanta. The actual battles did not take place on the mountain itself, but rather on a spur of Little Kennesaw Mountain (now known as Pigeon Hill) and the areas just to the south of it called Cheatham Hill. The battle was famous for its use of cannon fire and the museum has several on display. At first, the Union Army was bombarded from the mountainside but they soon set up their powerful battery of cannons and returned fire. Over the ensuing two weeks more than 5,300 soldiers would die here, and many more were wounded. Johnston was able to successfully repulse the assaults by Sherman's troops at Kennesaw Mountain.

And while the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain is seen today as a victory for the Confederate Army, slowing down Sherman's advance, it did not stop his eventual attack on Atlanta months later. Johnston was still forced to withdraw his forces, retreating across the Chattahoochee River, the last significant barrier before reaching Atlanta. Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, who not only disliked Johnston but blamed him for the loss of so much territory to Sherman's troops since the start of the Atlanta Campaign, would relieve Johnston of his command. His replacement was Lt. General John Bell Hood who was now given the unenviable task of trying to defend Atlanta from Sherman's advancing army. Davis's replacement of Johnston is considered by many historians as one of his more controversial and detrimental decisions, as General Hood was an impulsive officer who had lost many men under his command. Sherman would go on to lay siege to the city, which was later burned down. All of what I just described can be learned at the museum. In addition to the information boards there are various artifacts such as

Confederate currency, maps, uniforms, swords and weapons of all types. One section had a collection of cannons and the different types of deadly cannon ball ammo they used. Another display case had several rare photographs of what a devastated Atlanta looked like after the war. It was all very interesting.

Today, the entire Kennesaw Mountain is preserved as a war memorial to all who lost their lives there, regardless of which side they fought on. It is hallowed ground and one is solemnly reminded of this via signs posted throughout the park. After our visit to the museum, we drove up the main road to the top of Kennesaw Mountain. The park has many hiking trails and we also encountered many people walking or biking up the road. Near the top of the mountain we parked our car and walked to several outdoor exhibits featuring the cannons the Confederates used to rain artillery fire down on Sherman's troops. Along the mountain are statues, monuments and plaques dedicated to different aspects of the battles. Lookout points offered panoramic views of the valley below and the image of Atlanta's skyline in the distance. The mountain was so serene and beautiful it's almost hard to imagine it was the site of so much violence and bloodshed.

After spending roughly an hour and a half at the park, we continued our journey, driving north towards Tennessee along I-75. Forty-five minutes later we stopped to get gas and buy sandwiches at a large Buc-ee's in the small city of Adairsville, Georgia. I had never been to a Buc-ee's before but Joe raved on about this popular business chain with locations throughout the south. Most are gas and general stores situated along major highways that offer a wide variety of both hot and cold food items together with things you'd normally find at a your local grocery store. I purchased a very tasty and filling barbecue pork sandwich and a red velvet muffin for dessert. Not the most nutritional combo, I admit, but, what the heck, we *were* on vacation.

We took fifteen minutes to eat in the car before continuing along I-75. About an hour later we crossed the border into Tennessee at Chattanooga and turned onto I-24, taking this highway northwest all the way to Nashville. For our two nights in Nashville I had booked a stay at the Sentral SoBro Apartments just a few blocks away from the city's famous Broadway Street (in particular, near the section of the street popularly known as the Honky Tonk Highway). The closer one gets to the downtown area the more expensive the lodging, and this property – which has a hotel

along with private condos that some of the owners rent out as an Airbnb – was one of the better deals I found online. When I booked my stay, I didn't realize that I had chosen an Airbnb apartment instead of a hotel room. We arrived at the establishment around 6:30pm and it was a nightmare checking in. The small lobby had a front desk manned by a Generation Z'er who, initially, was about as helpful as having an anvil accidentally dropped on your toes. But, in his defense, everything about the check-in process and the parking (which was not included and presented its own separate nightmare) was technologically designed to be done online or through your cellphone with no human contact whatsoever. We arrived with several other guests, and this poor kid was overwhelmed trying to explain the online check-in process to a bunch of increasingly frustrated and clueless Boomers. Eventually, as we began cursing and/or otherwise making our frustrations known, the young man had no choice but to take everyone's phone and personally check us all in and even set up our accounts with the parking facility next door. We didn't get up to our unit until after 7:00pm.

And it was a nice condo…that is, until Joe flushed the toilet inside the only bathroom and it overflowed. As the saying goes, when it rains it pours, folks. By now, coupled with the earlier check-in process, I was fit to be tied. We went downstairs to complain to the young man at the front desk and he told us he could have someone there in the morning to fix the problem. *In the morning*? At which point I must have conveyed to my brother the following thought out loud: *Well, Joe, I guess we're going to have to urinate and defecate in the sink until then*. The young staffer immediately offered to get us a plunger in case we wanted to try and unclog the toilet ourselves, to which I replied we were not plumbers. And then he offered to move us into the hotel portion of the property which was located on the other side of the parking garage. I asked if we could get another condo since we were already on this side of the property. He gave us one on a different floor which was quite spacious, but to my chagrin it only had a loveseat in the living room instead of a long sofa. Originally, Joe was going to sleep in the bedroom and I was going to take the couch. The idea of sleeping for two nights on this loveseat, with my legs curled up in a fetal position, was not a comforting one. But we were too tired to lug our suitcases back downstairs and across to the other building. So we stayed put. That night, Joe slept like a baby. As for me? I cursed Booking.com for even suggesting this place.

We were too exhausted from the day's activities to venture out anymore; besides, we had plenty of snacks that we purchased at Buc-ee's earlier and I was able to gain access to my Netflix account through the TV's streaming service. I think we watched a comedy special before calling it a night. We had a very busy sightseeing schedule for the following day and had to set out early in the morning. Despite the first night's checking-in fiasco, Nashville proved to be one of my *favorite* cities on this tour.

Day Four

(State of Tennessee)

I slept poorly throughout the night, unable to get into a comfortable position. At one point I even attempted sleeping on the floor, using the comforter from the bedroom and laying some towels underneath it for additional cushioning, but the floors were covered with hardwood tiles and the pressure on my back was horrific. I returned to the loveseat and made the most of it, mostly tossing and turning until the sun's rays began peeking through the window blinds. Joe was already up. And while he looked absolutely refreshed and relaxed, I had the demeanor of a medieval peasant who'd just endured a night inside the king's dungeon. To loosen up my tight and grieving muscles I performed my usual travel exercise routine in the living room, doing extra back stretches in an attempt to get my spine properly aligned again.

The condo had a full kitchen and I boiled water for instant coffee. I wrote in my journal and went over the day's itinerary with Joe before taking a hot shower (which helped relieve my aching body). We had tickets for the 10:00am guided tour of the Grand Ole Opry House. Prior to the trip their website sent me a confirmation email advising me to get there early since their guided tours adhere to a strict time schedule. Joe checked the distance to the site on his Waze app and it was only 15 minutes away. We left the condo around 8:30am, thinking this would give us plenty of time to stop at a local restaurant for breakfast. But as we traveled east along I-40 we encountered some morning rush hour traffic. By the time we got off exit 215b

near the Nashville International Airport it was almost 9:00am. We drove north along Briley Parkway (Road 155) and were able to locate a McDonald's not far from the Grand Ole Opry House where we had a quick bite to eat. Even still, we actually arrived late to the theater because we got disorientated in the mall area where the Grand Ole Opry House is located. We misjudged the entrance of the site and parked in a lot that was a considerable distance away and had to huff it and puff it to the theater only to discover (thankfully) the tour was delayed thirty minutes to accommodate a newly arrived bus-load of tourists. As we waited, we posed for pictures in front of this venerated music hall.

While most people usually trace their love of a particular music genre through influences that can span their lifetime, I happen to know *exactly* when I fell in love with country music. In my preteen years, growing up in Teaneck, New Jersey, I listened to pop classics and Motown. In high school, my friend Alan introduced me to rock music and heavy metal, and thanks to Bob Dylan I also picked up an affinity for folk songs that protested for social and racial equality. But I was never exposed to country music growing up in the northeast, so when I would occasionally hear a country song it seemed a bit twangy and hokey to me. The closest thing to country music that I enjoyed back then was southern rock by groups such as the Allman Brothers Band or Lynyrd Skynyrd. That all changed in the spring of 1980.

I was involved with a political reform group in Union City, NJ where I spent my teen years. I was only 19 years old at the time and a sophomore at Rutgers University. Our political group's leader, a dynamic lawyer named Libero Marotta, had asked me to run for one of three spots on the local school board. At the time, I was one of the youngest people ever to seek elected office in New Jersey. Neither I nor my other two running mates won the election, but it motivated our group for a spirited challenge two years later against the corrupt political machine that controlled the city. During the campaign I didn't have a car and was commuting to my classes at the Newark campus of Rutgers University via bus and train. This severely curtailed my time for campaigning so one of my running mates, a former nun from the Midwest, lent me her car for two weeks while she went back home to visit family during the Easter break. I don't recall the model of her car – an early 1970s Dodge, I think – only that it was a rusty red color. As a teenager, I couldn't drive without listening to music. There were several good rock stations in the tri-state area and when I tried to find them on the car radio, I soon discovered the dial was stuck on

the only country music station in New York City. *I was mortified*. For the next two weeks, every time I drove that car, I was forced to listen to country music. The song that finally broke me, and made me sing along out loud, was Ronnie Milsap's "Misery loves Company". I can still recite the lyrics till this day. During that short two-week time frame I became a big fan of country music, and especially of the 'outlaw country singers' like Waylon Jennings (who I later saw in concert), Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Hank Williams, Jr and so on. Even after I got my own car, a hand-me-down Pontiac Firebird from my brother, I continued to listen to country music over the radio. Eventually, the genre became one of my favorites along with rock and folk. So when we reached Nashville, I told Joe – who was also a big fan – that I wanted to immerse ourselves in the history and spirit of country music. And, boy, did we do that during our brief stay.

The Grand Ole Opry actually refers to a regular live country music radio broadcast from Nashville on local am radio station WSM. It is one of the longest running radio broadcasts in U.S. history, originating on November 28, 1925 as the WSM Barn Dance. The name Grand Ole Opry was adopted in 1927. This live show is staged two to five nights a week depending on the tourist season and features a mix of both famous country singers and current rising stars who perform their hits and other country classics, bluegrass, folk and gospel. The venue can also include clean comedians and comedy skits. Attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, and millions of internet and radio listeners weekly, the Grand Ole Opry is dedicated to honoring country music and its history. Over the past 100 years, this venerated show has made Nashville the 'mecca' for country music and it is an honor to be invited to perform at its current theater, the Grand Ole Opry House.

The original broadcast was done from the fifth-floor WSM studio inside the former National Life and Accident Insurance Company headquarters in downtown Nashville. The letters WSM referred to the company's motto "We Shield Millions". As the live music broadcast became more and more popular, the studio could no longer accommodate the growing crowds who wanted to attend the live sessions, so the National Life and Accident Insurance Company – which owned the radio station and the Grand Ole Opry until the 1980s – agreed to move the broadcast to a larger venue.

During the 1930s, the show was transferred to several different theaters and auditoriums around Nashville, but each venue would soon become inadequate for the growing numbers of attendees. In 1943, the Grand Ole Opry would find a new home inside the Ryman Auditorium in the downtown section of Nashville. The building was originally constructed in the late 1800s as a house of worship called the Union Gospel Tabernacle. Its construction was spearheaded by a local businessman, Thomas Ryman, who had had a religious awakening after attending a tent revival led by the influential revivalist preacher, Samuel Porter Jones. After Ryman's death in 1904, the building was named in his honor. The structure (and its subsequent expansions and renovations) cost quite a bit of money back in those days. It was used primarily as a church and for revival events early on. But as the years passed, and the upkeep and expenses of the building grew, it's auditorium was hired out for local nonreligious events to help pay its bills. From 1943 until 1974, the Grand Ole Opry was broadcast live from the Ryman Auditorium with its 2,362-seating capacity. And during its 31-year tenure there, every weekly show was sold out. *Amazing*. The unique seating arrangement of the Ryman Auditorium consisted of the actual wooden pews leftover from the building's church years. Today, the Ryman Auditorium – which was almost demolished after the current Grand Ole Opry House was built – is a beloved, preserved historical landmark known as "The Mother Church of Country Music". It is still used as a music venue and has become a very popular tourist attraction in Nashville.

By the 1960s, the National Life and Accident Insurance Company wanted to move the Grand Ole Opry into a new facility. The Ryman Auditorium was situated in a neighborhood that was suffering from urban decay and the building was falling into disrepair despite the continued sold-out success of the show. The new 4,000-seat theater, called the Grand Ole Opry House, was completed in 1974. It was constructed over farmland adjacent to the Briley Parkway about nine miles east of the downtown area and became the centerpiece of a complex that included the Opryland USA theme park and Opryland Hotel. And while the theme park no longer exists, the Grand Ole Opry House itself has remained the home of the celebrated live broadcast ever since. In a nod to the Ryman Auditorium, the seats are also pews, albeit cushioned unlike the former wooden ones, which I think is a great idea. I mean, how many times have you gone to a theater venue and felt squeezed in by the size of its seating. And let's face it, this is the south, and southern cooking – as delicious

as it is – tends to produce, um, *oversized* citizens. Pews allow folks to spread their legs and bodyweight around more comfortably. I know because we actually had the opportunity to attend that night's show, which was one of the highlights of this trip.

The tour of the Grand Ole Opry House began at 10:30am. An entertaining, middle-aged female guide walked us through just about every aspect of this famous music venue. We began the tour inside a small but state-of-the-art movie theater where we were shown a brief film about the history of the WSM radio broadcast and the Grand Ole Opry House. From here we walked over to see the unique Gibson guitar 'chandelier' hanging from the auditorium entrance. At a cost of $90,000, the guitars are aligned in a row and hang down from the ceiling in the foyer area just in front of the main theater doors.

We then proceeded to walk through the backstage area, including the backstage rehearsal section where the walls are decorated with over-sized artistic portraits of some of the Grand Ole Opry's legendary performers like Dolly Parton, Minnie Pearl, Reba McEntire, Blake Shelton, Patsy Kline and Roy Acuff. While in the backstage area we also got to see the studio where the popular Hee Haw television series (from 1969 to 1993) was filmed. In another section we were shown a short, very spirited video about the importance of the show to country music performers and how being named as a Member of the Grand Ole Opry is considered a crowning achievement in this field. Overall, there are just over 230 performers who have been selected as Members of the Grand Ole Opry from the thousands of acts that have performed at the venue in its long, storied run. The short film we saw backstage highlighted this selection process, with clips of artists being genuinely and emotionally surprised onstage when they were asked if they would like to become a member. It is not only an honor but a coveted recognition among the world of country music to become an inductee. The short film also featured an electrifying, and deeply moving, performance of the country gospel classic "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" by a large ensemble of country music performers on the theater's stage that had many of us toe-tapping and humming along.

From here the guide showed us the side entrance where performers enter the building on show nights. We then walked the halls of the dressing rooms and visitors' lounge. Pictures of country music stars from both past and present adorned the hallways. We stopped to see several individual dressing rooms, some of them named

after the former artists who used them during their tenure, notably the Cousin Minnie Room and the Roy Acuff Room, and several others with names like the "Honky Tonk Angels" and "Welcome to the Family" dressing rooms. We stopped in front of the Membership Wall with the plaques of all of the inductees. I was surprised to see the names of several comedians on the wall, like Henry Cho, who became the first Asian-American member of the Grand Ole Opry. Next to the Membership Wall is the 'mail room', a section containing a cluster of mailboxes used by the current members to receive fan mail. The guide told us that Dolly Parton gets the most correspondence.

The Green Room, the visitors' lounge for the family and friends of the performers, was decorated with interesting photographs from the history of the Grand Ole Opry. One photograph showed President Richard Nixon on the stage during the inaugural performance at the new Grand Ole Opry House on March 16, 1974. He is the only U.S. president to actually *perform* at the Grand Ole Opry, taking to the piano to belt out a rendition of "God Bless America", "My Wild Irish Rose" and "Happy Birthday" (to his wife Pat who was celebrating her 62nd birthday that day).

From the Green Room our guide led us onto the legendary stage of the Grand Ole Opry House. It was exciting to stand in front of the large iconic 'barn house' back drop and stare out over the audience section and see all those layered rows of red-cushioned pews facing the stage. Even the balcony areas had pews. In the front center section of the wooden stage is the now famous circle that was cut from the original stage of the Ryman Auditorium and transplanted to the new theater in a nod to the show's historic run at the former venue. Today, most artists who perform at the Grand Ole Opry House stand on this circle during the show. Every member of our tour group, including Joe and I, had our picture taken standing within the circle. And it suddenly occurred to me this was probably another meaning for the song "Will the Circle Be Unbroken".

The last part of the tour was to walk a section of the auditorium in front of the stage so we could experience the pew seating arrangement up close. Before closing the tour, the guide mentioned that tickets were still available for that evening's performance. Joe and I immediately shot each other a "*hell, yeah*" look and when the tour was over we rushed to the ticket stand near the gift shop and purchased seats for the 7:00pm show. Afterwards, we spent some time inside the WSM Radio

Museum across the street. It had photos, memorabilia and plenty of information concerning the history of the Grand Ole Opry broadcast. Before leaving we browsed the large gift shop next to the theater. Joe purchased some souvenir hats and T-shirts. We headed back to the car, pretty excited about being able to see a live performance at the Grand Ole Opry House later that evening. In the meantime, we still had a lot of sightseeing to do in Nashville.

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Our next stop was a visit to Nashville's Centennial Park located approximately two miles west of the downtown area next to the campus of Vanderbilt University. From the Grand Ole Opry House we returned to the highway, hooking up with I-440 heading west before exiting on route US 70S (also called West End Avenue); the park is situated about a half mile from this exit on the lefthand side. It is a popular destination within the city due to one main attraction: a full-size replica of the original Parthenon in Athens, Greece. When I first saw the image of the building online I did a double take, thinking I had somehow clicked on the wrong website. But no, I was staring at a full-blown replica of a very famous Ancient Greek structure….*in Nashville, Tennessee*. Holy Hercules! I immediately put this site on our must-see list. We parked in a lot next to the open field in front of the Parthenon and walked onto the field to get a better view of the building. All around us a horde of visiting grade schoolers were running amok and many adults were either exercising or sun bathing along the grass. But they were totally oblivious to us as we stood there, momentarily transfixed by the surreal image before us. Gazing upon the Parthenon gave me the impression that an unseen cosmic force had somehow plucked this marvel from Antiquity and placed it in the middle of this southern U.S. city. We walked around the structure taking pictures from every angle. And the question that kept coming to mind was: *Why did they built this thing here*?

Centennial Park is a large urban park measuring 132-acres. Initially used as farmland prior to the Civil War, it was later adapted as a state fairgrounds. In 1897, the land was heavily developed for the *Tennessee Centennial and International Exposition* and renamed Centennial Park. Ironically, the Expo (held between May

and October of 1897) was a year late, since Tennessee was actually admitted to the union in 1796. Extensive landscaping, featuring the notable blue grass planted in the lawn areas, and a small lake were added for the fair, along with over a hundred buildings used as exhibition halls related to the state's agriculture, commerce, education, fine arts, history, forestry and so forth. In addition, many cities, organizations and even foreign countries built exhibition halls on the grounds. The Expo was a huge success, and a great source of pride for Nashville, attracting almost 1.8 million paying visitors. The idea of building the Parthenon is credited to Major Eugene Castner Lewis, who was the chief civil engineer for the Nashville, Chattanooga and St Louis Railroad Company. He suggested re-creating the Parthenon for the Exposition to showcase the city as the "Athens of the South". Nashville at the turn of the 20th century was famous – just like the ancient Greek City – for its many universities and institutions. In fact, the phrase "Athens of the South" became the central theme of the Exposition. The Parthenon was constructed from brick and plaster and used as an art exhibit during the fair.

As is the case with most world fairs, the exhibition halls constructed for the Exposition were made of temporary materials and were torn down after the event concluded. But the Parthenon was very popular and remained in place as a museum and theater until the 1920s when its plaster façade began showing signs of serious deterioration. It was then decided to tear down the original Exposition Parthenon and rebuild it using concrete and other permanent materials. Completed in 1931, the structure, which sits on a rolling hill next to a duck pond, is now listed on the National Register of Historical Places and serves as the centerpiece of the park, being the only full-scale replica of the famous Athenian temple in the world.

After walking around the structure, taking photos of its massive columns, we went inside. Admission was around ten dollars (minus the senior discount). The Parthenon now functions as a museum, its lower level containing a permanent exhibit of 63 Impressionist oil paintings donated by businessman James M. Conan in the late 1920s. The paintings are from 19th and 20th century American artists. There are also additional gallery spaces for visiting art exhibitions. We made our way along a corridor where the paintings are displayed before reaching the east room of the inner chamber (known as the *naos*). Standing before us was a *stunning* statue of Athena Parthenos (the goddess Athena), which was added in 1990. It was made by Alan LeQuire, a local sculptor, who was tasked with re-creating the image of the

Athena Parthenos statue that once graced the Parthenon in Athens. The statue in Athens no longer exists, lost to the ravages of time, and LeQuire had to do extensive research so that his version would do justice to the original one. Whether or not the Athena Parthenos inside the Nashville Parthenon is true to its namesake, I cannot say, but it is a *sight* to behold and worth the price of admission alone. Standing at 42 feet tall and covered in gold leaf, it is considered the tallest indoor statue in the Western Hemisphere. When we first walked into the chamber and saw it, our jaws slackened and we both went "*whoa*". The goddess Athena stands atop a marble platform at one end of the chamber, her right hand is holding up a life-size statue of Nike (another Greek goddess) while her left hand rests on a massive, beautifully decorated round shield with a spear propped up next to it. Between Athena's body and her shield is a menacing-looking 20-foot tall golden serpent. *What a kickass image*! If anyone reading this is planning on going to Nashville, check this place out, it is definitely worth a stop.

We spent about an hour inside the Parthenon before returning to our rental car and driving back to the condo, first stopping at a Walgreens so Joe could buy a pair of adjustable sun frames for his glasses. I picked up some snacks, as well. After freshening up (read: bathroom break) we hit the streets again around 1:30pm. Our next destination was the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum located only a few minutes' walk from our condo. We decided not to use the car anymore until later that evening. Our plan was to visit the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and then have a late lunch along the 'Honky Tonk Highway' section of Broadway Street, which was just a few blocks further north. Afterwards, we would spend some time walking and exploring this famed stretch of honky-tonk bars, night clubs and restaurants before returning to the condo to get ready for that night's show at the Grand Ole Opry House. A fine way to end our stay in Nashville.

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From our condo we walked north to Peabody Street and then went east for one block till we reached Rep. John Lewis Way; another two blocks north along this street and we reached the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. When I

researched the museum online I discovered that it is the largest repository of country music artifacts in the world, including a massive musical collection, dedicated to the preservation and continued interpretation of country music. The idea for the center was the brain-child of the Country Music Association (CMA), an American trade association formed in 1958 for the purpose of promoting and developing country music worldwide. During the early 1960s, CMA leaders realized they needed a new organization to go beyond the limits of their simple trade association, so the idea of opening a center in Nashville took hold. In 1964, the non-profit Country Music Foundation (CMF) was charted in the state of Tennessee to "collect, preserve and publicize information and artifacts related to country music". The CMF spearheaded a collection drive to raise money for this new center and the original building first opened in 1967 in the Music Row section of Nashville, southwest of the downtown area. Music Row is a historic district considered to be the heart of Nashville's entertainment industry, particularly in regards to country music, gospel and Contemporary Christian music.

Eventually, the original museum became inadequate for its ever-increasing collection and a newer, more easily accessible center was constructed that opened in 2001. This new museum was later doubled in size to its current 350,000 square feet of galleries in a 100 million dollar expansion. Today, this beautifully-designed center attracts over 1.2 million visitors annually. Everything one needs to know about country music can be found inside this spacious center. Hundreds of thousands of items – films, prints, recordings, historic cars, costumes, musical instruments and other memorabilia – are on display, documenting the origins of country music from its roots in folk music to the contemporary country of today. If you're a country music lover, this is definitely a must-see site if visiting Nashville.

Even the architecture of the building is steeped in country music symbolism. The center was designed by Nashville's Tuck-Hinton Architectural Firm. If seen from above, the building is shaped like a giant *bass clef* (a musical symbol). The front windows are shaped like piano keys and the point of its sweeping arch is supposed to resemble the tailfin of a 1959 Cadillac. The tower above the center's rotunda (where the Hall of Fame section is enclosed) is a replica of the diamond-shaped WSM radio tower. And the materials used in its construction – wood, steel, concrete and stone – are representative of the working class communities of the Mid-South. Georgia yellow pine and Crab Orchard Stone from Tennessee are used in sections of

the Rotunda, the Conservatory and the center's Ford Theater. The steel beams supporting the Conservatory's glass ceiling and walls are a nod to the image of the south's railroad bridges, and the water cascading along the Grand Staircase is symbolic of the mighty rivers that connected our country and its musicians and helped pave the way for the various styles of American music to develop and flourish.

Once again, we availed ourselves of the senior (or *geezer*) discount, which knocked a few dollars off the admission price, and headed to the elevators. The museum staff suggested we begin our exploration of the museum on the third floor and work our way down to the main level. This way, they told us, we could learn how country music evolved because the displays and exhibits are set up in a chronological fashion. As we made our way down from the third level we learned about country music's roots, how it expanded and developed over the years, its shining stars and where the genre is today. And we also got to see a *ton* of cool stuff.

My brother and I spent two hours here, fascinated by the musical history on display. As we exited the elevator on the third floor we came upon the Taylor Swift Education Center, a fun, family interactive section that was part of the museum's 100 million dollar expansion. Swift said in an interview that the aim of her center was to attract young visitors and hopefully inspire future musicians. The museum's permanent collection – named *Sing Me Back Home: Folk Roots to the 1960s* – is also located on the third floor and showcases country music's origins and growth. In one corner of the third floor we visited a temporary exhibit, *Rosanne Cash: Time is a Mirror,* which examines the artist's 40-year journey as a singer, songwriter and story teller. This exhibit will run through March of 2026. On the other end of this floor were two historic car displays: Elvis Presley's gold-plated 1960 Cadillac limousine and country legend Webb Peirce's 1962 Pontiac Bonneville (decorated with enough pistols to start another Civil War). There is also a Gold Record Wall on this floor near the staircase leading to the second floor landing.

The second floor was my personal favorite, containing the *Sing Me Back Home: 1960s to the Present* exhibit which I found *very* interesting. The displays offer information boards concerning the evolution of country music from the turbulent sixties to the present day. This floor is dedicated not only to showcasing how the music evolved, but also *why*. I found this particularly relevant because it included

my generation, the different styles of music I grew up with. The information boards outline the political and social issues that shaped or changed our nation during this time and the impact it had on the genre. This floor explained the changing preferences of younger fans and delves into the formation of the 1960's folk movement, the rise of outlaw country music and southern rock and the styles of harmony-based soft rock coming out of the west coast during the seventies. Another exhibit covered today's dynamic stars such as Taylor Swift, Luke Combs, Billy Strings and Lainey Wilson. On one end of this floor is the Hall of Fame Rotunda with the plaques honoring the prestigious group of country music stars and musicians who have been inducted over the years. For a country music star it is a crowning achievement to be named to the Country Music Hall of Fame. Some of the fun memorabilia we saw was the mechanical bull used in the John Travolta movie *Urban Cowboy* and one of the black Trans Am vehicles used in Burt Reynolds' *Smokey and the Bandit* movies. Although our time here was limited, we had a blast learning about the evolution of country music.

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By 3:45pm we left the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. We wanted to have an early dinner prior to the Grand Ole Opry show, which started at 7:00pm *sharp*. The show was being broadcast live, so the theater had to keep to a very tight schedule and we didn't want to risk arriving late again. For dinner, Joe's daughter Kathy had recommended a bar and restaurant called *Lainy Wilson's Bell Bottom Up* located half a block from Broadway Street along Third Avenue S. It is owned by the famous country music star. From the museum we walked east on Demonbreun Street to Third Avenue S where we turned north for one block before finding the place. At that hour of the afternoon the restaurant was not too busy, although the bar was packed solid. A young male and female guitar duo was belting out pop and country songs from a small stage when we arrived. Kathy, who sings professionally part time, told us that the downstairs section of the bar/restaurant offered a dueling piano bar that has become quite popular in Nashville. Unfortunately for us it was too early in the day to witness this. We sat in the restaurant near the stage and ordered crab cakes and chicken wings. The establishment offers a unique and very tasty southern menu

inspired by Lainy Wilson's Louisiana roots. We were both impressed with the food and service.

By 5:00pm we left the restaurant and walked up to Broadway Street to check out its famous *Honky Tonk Highway*. Situated along the lower section of Broadway Street, the Honky Tonk Highway refers to a strip of honky tonk bars and clubs that continually pump out live music into the streets from about 10am to 3am. There are no cover charges, and large groups of visitors meander the streets hopping from one place to another for the entertainment, drinks and great food. Extremely popular, this section is where locals and tourists alike can immerse themselves in the rhythm of Nashville's iconic music scene and enjoy its authentic cuisine all the while surrounded by its historic cityscape. The Honky Tonk Highway stretches from 1st Avenue near the Cumberland River to 5th Avenue where the Bridgestone Arena is located (and only one block south from the iconic Ryman Auditorium). In addition to the numerous bars and clubs, the area is packed with restaurants and small shops and is bustling at all hours of the day and night. And the crowds can be quite boisterous, too, caught up in all the alcohol-fueled revelry and the live blaring music of the street. I no longer drink alcohol, having been sober now for over 22 years, but one doesn't need to imbibe to enjoy the awesome music and overall excitement of the Honky Tonk Highway.

We reached the corner of Broadway Street and 2nd Avenue. A live band was cranking out a spirited rendition of the Eagle's song, *Take it to the Limit*, inside Kid Rock's Big Ass Honky Tonk Rock N' Roll Steakhouse (yeah, that's the actual name of the place) and the patrons were singing along in a delightfully drunken stupor. Many of the bars and restaurants are either owned wholly or in part by famous artists. Next to Kid Rock's joint was Jelly Roll's Goodnight Nashville, and sharing the other corner of Broadway Street and 2nd Avenue was country star Luke Bryan's bar-restaurant called Luke's 32 Bridge. And across the street was the Ole Red bar-restaurant owned by Blake Shelton, a large venue that books quality acts. We turned west and walked the length of the Honky Tonk Highway, stopping numerous times in front of these famous local bars to momentarily enjoy the music before moving on, many of the establishments had multiple floors featuring stages both on the inside and on roof terraces overlooking the street. It was pretty wild, especially when you consider it was only late afternoon on a Thursday! Some of the bars had memorable names like the Whiskey Bent Saloon, Nudie's Honky Tonk and the Lucky Bastard

Saloon. Interspersed between the bars were shops, including several boot stores, like the Boot Barn and Big Time Boots.

Originally, when I was planning the itinerary for this trip, we were going to spend the night exploring several of the bars on Broadway Street to soak in the live entertainment atmosphere of the area. But when given a chance to see an actual performance of the Grand Ole Opry we jumped on it. And we had no regrets; the Grand Ole Opry show was one of the highlights of this trip. We knew we would not be able to return to the Honky Tonk Highway later that evening because we had another long drive the following day and would have to leave early in the morning. But Joe and I agreed that if we ever returned to Nashville, we would definitely spend more time on Broadway Street. The place is a ton of fun, reminiscent of Bourbon Street in New Orleans.

We reached the condo shortly after 6:00pm and after a quick freshening up and shirt change we drove back to the Grand Ole Opry House, parking this time in the mall parking lot directly in front of the venue. Our pew seats were located in the right orchestra section, about ten or twelve rows from the stage. We sat at the end of the pew next to the center aisle. The Grand Ole Opry House offers full bar service in the lobby and apparently many of the audience members had taken advantage of it. One middle-aged woman sitting three pews in front of us became so obnoxiously drunk, constantly getting up and walking the aisle, the staff had to say something to her. But, all-in-all, everyone was in a great mood.

That night's show was entitled Opry Country Classics and featured six entertainers who sang three or four country classic songs apiece, accompanied by the talented musicians of the Grand Ole Opry House. The sound system inside the theater was state-of-the-art and their professional group of in-house musicians were simply flawless. My favorite musician was the man on the steel guitar. Along with fiddles and banjos, nothing says 'country' more than this uniquely sounding instrument. At 7:00pm the red curtain went up, revealing the iconic barn house back drop of the stage. The announcer was Bill Cody, the celebrated country music disc jockey who has been heard over national and international airwaves for fifty years now and has served as a WSM radio host for the past three decades. He came out to great applause and took his position at a podium to the left-hand side of the stage where he welcomed the audience to the Grand Ole Opry. For me, an unusual aspect

of the show was that in between performers, Cody would do ad pitches for the show's sponsors. At the moment, I had completely forgotten that this show was being broadcast live and it wasn't until half-way through the performance that I mentioned this to my brother.

The first performer introduced to the stage was T. Graham Brown, a legendary singer with 13 studio albums to his credit spanning back to 1973. He had 11 singles in the top-ten Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart including three that made it to number one. After more than 300 performances at the venue, he became one of the newest members of the Grand Ole Opry the previous year. I cannot recall the individual songs that he or the other performers sang, but I recognized most of the tunes since these were either their hit songs or country classics going back decades. The next singer was Summer Dean, a Texas native who walked away from a secure music teaching career in her late thirties to pursue her dream of becoming a country singer. She broke into the Texas country music scene with her debut album, *Bad Romantic,* in 2021 and hasn't looked back since. Because she started her singing career relatively late in life, her ballads often reflect the lives and experiences of grown women, and with three albums to her credit now, she has become a force on the Texas country circuit. She is known for her electrifying performances. And she didn't disappoint, she was awesome.

Up next was Jimmy Fortune, a country music star who sang tenor with The Statler Brothers for 21 years until the group disbanded in 2002 and he continued on as a successful solo performer. He wrote several hit songs while with the group and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2008 as a member of The Statler Brothers. Another great performance.

Following him to the stage was the 82-year old Leona Williams, a country singer-songwriter whose career dates back to 1958. She had several songs that made the country music charts (in the 70s and 80s) and is known for a 1976 album called *San Quentin's First Lady*, the first country album ever recorded by a female artist in a prison. I read online that she spent much of her career on the road as a back-up musician/singer and songwriter for Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard (who she was married to for five years) and the back-up band, The Strangers. When Bill Cody introduced her, I knew she had to be up there in years, but let me tell you, this octogenarian blew me away with her voice, which didn't falter once. Another thing

I remembered about her performance was that she was definitely 'old school country' and even made a veiled remark about the current styles of country music, suggesting perhaps there was a straying away from the original genre. But, hey, I think that's pretty normal; I mean, ask any eighty-something-year-old about the 'good ole days' and you'll get an earful on how things today can't compare with yesteryear. And to be honest, I'm almost at that stage in my life now. The older I get the more nostalgic I become.

The next performers were The Isaacs, a bluegrass southern gospel group dating back to the 1970s. They became members of the Grand Ole Opry in 2021. Currently, this family band consists of Lily Isaacs, Ben Isaacs, Becky Isaacs Bowman and Sonya Isaacs Yearly. The family has an interesting background. Although known for their Christian gospel music, the founding husband-and-wife members – Joe and Lily Isaacs – were actually of Jewish descent. Lily Isaacs' parents were Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors who immigrated to New York City after the war. Lily started her first bluegrass band with husband Joe in 1971. When Joe's brother died in an automobile accident they converted to Christianity and began performing mostly bluegrass gospel music. After their divorce, Joe left the group which I believe now consists of Lily and her grown children. The Isaacs performed four songs that night (with Lily's son Ben playing a large upright bass fiddle). Their harmony was simply beautiful.

Half-way through the show (after Jimmy Fortune's performance) there was a fifteen minute intermission. The show ended with the night's Spotlight Artist, country music star Gene Watson, who became a country sensation in the mid-1970s with his hit song "Love in the Hot Afternoon". To date, his career has spawned 48 charted singles, including 21 in the top ten with 5 singles reaching number one. He became a member of the Grand Ole Opry in 2020, but for whatever reason has yet to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. As the Spotlight Artist he performed more songs than the others (I think five or six) including several of his biggest hits. The crowd loved him. It was a wonderful way to end out the evening.

Joe and I were so grateful to have witnessed the Grand Ole Opry live. We returned to our condo following the show, excitedly talking about the performances on the drive back. We reached our condo by 10:00pm. We watched something on Netflix (while munching on snacks from Walgreens) before calling it a night. The

following day we had a long drive ahead of us. That evening, possibly because of all the fun we had during the day, the loveseat didn't seem to bother me as much. I found the *least* uncomfortable position lying on my left side (with my legs curled up) and made the best of it.

DAY FIVE

(States of Kentucky and Indiana)

We were both awake by 6:30am. I slept a little better than the night before, but just *barely*. My body, especially my left shoulder, was pretty sore from all the adjustments and contorting I had to do to fit into that (cursed) loveseat. I took a hot shower to loosen my aching muscles and then made coffee. As we repacked our luggage we discussed the day's activities. We had a 300-mile drive ahead of us, or roughly five hours of roadways, before we reached our next destination: Indianapolis. I had pre-purchased tickets for the car museum inside the famous Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The Indy 500 race was just ten days away and the track was having qualifying rounds that weekend. Neither one of us were necessarily into race car driving, but this was a big thing in many parts of the country and our road trip was designed to immerse us in the kinds of local traditions and customs that have helped shape American culture. And the Indy 500 was a huge event in this regard. Although we would not be able to see the actual race, we wanted to see the track, its museum and witness some of the qualifying rounds before continuing on our journey.

Kentucky was not an original destination stop on our road trip, but we would be spending two hours traversing the state on our way to Indianapolis so I made some adjustments to the itinerary. Joe is a huge baseball fan and used to coach Little League when he was in his early twenties. In fact, that's how he met his late wife; he coached her younger brother on one of his teams. The Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory, where they make the world famous baseball bats, is located in

Louisville. I am a big fan of boxing, something I picked up from our dad who did some amateur boxing as a young man in his native Cuba. He was particularly fond of Muhammad Ali whose tomb is also located within Louisville. The main highway we would be using that day was I-65. When I checked Google map I realized I-65 runs through Louisville. So, this proved to be a perfect 'kill-two-birds-with-one-rental-car' scenario. We could do the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory tour and also pay our respects to the man our late father so admired in boxing. A win-win situation for a couple of traveling geezers.

We left Nashville around 8:30am and stopped to have breakfast at a Waffle House on exit 90 just off I-65. I decided to make up for my un-fitful night's sleep by ordering their biggest breakfast deal: a banquet of waffles, eggs, ham steak, grits and biscuits with gravy. *Holy belly buster*! The ham steak was seared with some kind of *very* salty seasoning, the grits were covered in an oily film of margarine, the waffles I buried under a lake of sickening sweet syrup…in other words, *it was delicious*! When I finished this feast I was reminded of a joke by comedian Jim Gaffigan who once said, '*the South will never rise again because, let's face it, who has the energy after eating a homecooked southern meal?*' I had to fight the urge to nap in the car afterwards, and as the day wore on all that salt and grease wreaked havoc on my internal system, but, hey, at that moment it was worth it. And this *was* a vacation, after all.

The drive to Louisville took about three hours with one gas and restroom stop along the way. We simply stayed on I-65 until we reached the city. As we drove north from Nashville we began climbing the escarpment that borders a physiographic area known as the Northern Rim. This region is part of the much larger Interior Low Plateaus that forms a diverse landscape of temperate forests, woodlands and prairies stretching from north Alabama through the central parts of Tennessee and Kentucky and extending into sections of Indiana, Illinois and Ohio. While much of the open prairies have given way to agriculture and fire suppression tactics, the areas near the river systems in this region are graced by rolling hills of oak-hickory woodlands. It was one of the more scenic highway drives we encountered on our way north from Florida. Some of the interesting places we passed on our drive were Bowling Green, the third largest city in the state, and the Mammoth Cave National Park, home to the longest known cave system in the world.

We made it to Louisville by 2:00pm, delayed more than an hour by a rain storm that reduced visibility on the highway and brought traffic to a crawl halfway through the state of Kentucky. As we approached the Ohio River, which separates the city from Indiana, we got off I-65 on exit 137 near Louisville's East Market District and followed another highway (I-64) west alongside the Ohio River for several minutes, passing the historic Clark Memorial Bridge in the process. The bridge opened in 1931 and was later renamed in honor of George Rogers Clark, the military officer who is credited with the founding of Louisville in 1778. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984. A few blocks after passing this bridge we made a left turn onto N 6th Street and pulled into the parking lot of the Muhammad Ali Center.

For some reason I assumed the gravesite of Muhammad Ali was at the center, but after going inside we were told by the receptionist that the actual burial place was located inside the Cave Hill Cemetery east of I-65. The Muhammad Ali Center was founded as a non-profit museum and cultural center by the late boxer and his wife Lonnie in 2005. This impressive six-story museum has a series of exhibition halls organized around the six core principles which guided Ali's life and work: namely, confidence, dedication, conviction, giving, respect and spirituality. Unfortunately, we didn't have the time to tour the museum because we needed to be back on the road again by no later than 3:30pm. Not only did we have to make it to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway before their car museum closed, the weather forecast for the region was also predicting inclement weather for that section of Indiana, so we couldn't spend much more than an hour and a half in Louisville. The Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory was just four blocks away and we decided it would be faster to leave our car in the Muhammad Ali Center's parking lot and walk the distance rather than spend time looking for parking on the street. We headed south for one block and turned right onto West Main Street.

We were now in the historic West Main District, one of the five districts of downtown Louisville. Because this area contains some of the oldest buildings in the city, featuring one of the largest collections of cast iron facades in the country, a portion of the district is also on the National Register of Historic Places. Walking along West Main Street was lovely, it was a beautiful stretch of historic buildings, with nicely maintained sidewalks decorated by interesting statues and works of art. On the corner of N 6th Street and West Main Street, for example, was a golden, scaled

down replica of Michelangelo's David statue. We also came across colorful horse sculptures and bronze statues of people on park benches and even monuments dedicated to the revolutionary war. The district boasts a museum's row with over half a dozen notable museums all within a few short blocks of each other. We stopped in front of the Kentucky Science Center, a museum with interactive exhibits, and took a selfie at the entranceway of this interesting limestone building and its distinctive cast iron façade that dates back to 1878. The Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory was located one block further west.

If one was looking for the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory along West Main Street they wouldn't have to search for long. Resting against this five-story building is an enormous baseball bat. I mean, this thing is *colossal*. At a height of 120 feet (that's 36.58 meters for my non-American readers) and weighing in at 66,000 pounds, it holds the Guinness World Record for the largest baseball bat ever made. Situated near the entrance, it leans upright from the sidewalk and extends above the building's roof top. Just seeing this thing made us excited about going inside. The company has regularly scheduled 30-minute guided tours throughout the day of the factory floor which ends inside their museum section. Joe and I purchased tickets for the 2:30pm tour. If you're into baseball this is definitely a must-see stop if traveling to Louisville. Joe was so delighted, he was like a kid in a candy store.

For the next thirty minutes we learned everything there is to know about the history of Louisville Slugger baseball bats and how they are made. Our tour guide was an affable man named Tim who loved to answer questions. We began the tour inside an empty room with a huge screen on one wall where we would see a short documentary on where the wood for making bats comes from and how they are factory made. But before we saw the film, Tim told us the legendary story of how the first Louisville Slugger was created.

In 1855, J.F. Hillerich opened a woodworking shop in Louisville. During the 1880s, his teenage son, John "Bud" Hillerich, began working at the company. The company legend has it that Bud Hillerich, who played baseball himself as a teenager, attended a baseball game in 1884 to watch the Louisville Eclipse, the city's professional major league baseball team. The team's star player was Pete "Louisville Slugger" Browning, who was in a batting slump made worse by the fact that he broke his baseball bat on the day Bud attended the game. Bud invited Browning to his

dad's woodshop to hand-craft a new baseball bat for the player to his specifications. On the first day he used the new bat, Browning got three hits and excitedly told his teammates about the Hillerich woodshop, which led to a surge in ball players going to the shop and ordering their own baseball bats. At first, Bud's father was not thrilled about making baseball bats, preferring to make stair railings and porch columns, but eventually he saw the profitability in this new venture.

When Bud took over the family business in 1894, he changed the name of the bats from the "Falls City Slugger" to the "Louisville Slugger". In 1905, the company, now known as J.F. Hillerich and Son, signed a contract with Honus Wagner, who likely became the first professional American athlete to sign an endorsement deal with a sports equipment company. Wagner played 21 years as a star shortstop (mostly with the Pittsburgh Pirates) and was known as the "Flying Dutchman" due to his speed and German heritage. Eventually, many star baseball players would sign endorsement deals and have special bats made for them by the company. In 1916, a savvy salesman, Frank Bradsby, became a partner and the business name changed to the Hillerich & Bradsby Company. By the early 1920s, H&B was cranking out more baseball bats than any other company in America, and legends in the sport like Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig were all using them. In 1916, H&B also began producing golf clubs, which would later be marketed under the PowerBilt brand. The company has moved several times during its history, Tim told us, relocating to its current location in 1996. A year later, in 1997, the Louisville Slugger became the official bat of Major League Baseball, allowing them to use the MLB logo on their bats. Although, I read online that earlier this year (2025) a new company out of Louisiana called Marucci Bats has now become the official bat of the MLB, replacing the Louisville Slugger.

Tim finished his history lesson by telling us that in 2015, Hillerich & Bradsby sold its Louisville Slugger division to Wilson Sporting Goods (a subsidiary of Anta Sports) but still continues to make baseball bats for them under an exclusive contract. They also sold their PowerBilt golf club division in 2016 to Hilco Streambank. Today, H&B has been left with its Bionic Gloves division (which manufactures a line of sports gloves) and its ownership and operation of the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory. Each year, hundreds of thousands of baseball fans take the factory tour and visit the museum, which at times features visiting exhibits and appearances by professional baseball players.

When he concluded, we watched the short documentary film. We learned that in 1954, H&B purchased Larimer and Norton, Inc, a lumber company in Warren County, Pennsylvania to ensure a steady supply of hardwood for their bats. The film begins in the forests of Pennsylvania where the trees are harvested. Three types of wood are used in making Louisville Slugger baseball bats: maple, birch and ash. Once cut, the logs go through a rigid inspection to make sure they are suitable for producing bats; afterwards, they are split into wedges along their natural grain lines. As many as 60 circular billets can be cut from a single tree which are then shipped to the factory for grinding and shaping. Each billet produces one baseball bat. From this room we followed Tim onto the workroom floor where he led us to a large storage bin section. Inside the bins were different types of billets, each bin had a label with the name of a current professional baseball player who was under contract with Louisville Slugger to make their specific bats. Some of the names we saw were Kyle Schwarber (Philadelphia Phillies), Luis Garcia, Jr (Washington Nationals), Cody Bellinger (New York Yankees), Wilyer Abreu (Boston Red Sox), Tyler Fitzgerald (San Francisco Giants) and Vladimir Guerrero Jr (Toronto Blue Jays). And this is just a few of the dozens of professional baseball players who have their bats made here.

Tim held up a sample of the different types of wood billets inside the bins. Each style of wood had its particular set of pros and cons. The maple billet he described as hard and durable but susceptible to becoming brittle and cracking with time. The birch billet he told us produced bats that were durable, flexible and actually harden with continued use. Hm, go figure. The ash billet made a bat that was flexible, had a good feel but might flake with age. Every baseball player under contract with Louisville Slugger had bats that were specifically made for their style of batting and personal preferences. How they go about figuring this out I wasn't sure. From here we headed over to a section of the factory where the billets are placed inside a large red lathe that carve and grind a billet into a fully formed baseball bat in just 45 seconds. We watched two of them being made. *Incredible*.

We also visited an area where the Louisville Slugger logo is permanently watermarked onto each bat individually by hand. As we walked through the factory floor, huge steel bins and pallets containing both billets and freshly carved-out bats were stacked side by side. Hanging down from the ceiling were banners with photos of iconic baseball players. The factory produces about 3,000 bats per day. In addition

to professional baseball bats, they also design custom-made ones – with different sizes and colors – for schools, special events and even the Banana Ball League (home of the Savannah Bananas). Every so many feet, television monitors had continuously running information videos explaining the process occurring in that section of the factory. It was all pretty cool and well organized. At the end of the factory tour we were given sample baby bats to take home as souvenirs. They also have a wonderful gift shop where one can purchase custom-made bats. It takes about 15-20 minutes to create a personalized bat. Joe bought two of them for his grand kids with their names etched on them.

The tour ended in the area where the museum is located. We visited the Bat Vault, featuring different samples and styles of baseball bats made at the factory over the years. You're allowed to grab the bats and give them a swing. Nearby was a plaque wall with the signatures of baseball players inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York who used Louisville Sluggers throughout their careers. It is an extensive list since 88 percent of all the inducted hitters used the famed bats. One section of the museum had life-size statues of some of MLB's greatest players; Joe had his picture taken next to Babe Ruth (who was belting one out of the park) while I had mine taken next to Jackie Robinson. You can also have your photograph taken holding an authentic baseball bat once used by a notable professional player. Joe selected the bat Babe Ruth used during his 1933 season. The bat weighed 42 ounces, which is much heavier than the standard 32-34 ounces of today's MLB bats. *Hmmmm*, maybe that's why he got so many homeruns.

We left the Louisville Slugger Museum and Factory around 3:30pm. We quickly walked back to the car and then drove to the Cave Hill Cemetery for a brief visit to see Muhammad Ali's gravesite. The burial grounds is a sprawling Victorian-era national cemetery and arboretum located to the east of I-65. Charted in 1848, it is the largest cemetery in Louisville. We entered the grounds along the main entrance on Baxter Avenue but had a tough time finding the actual gravesite. The cemetery measures 296-acres and has different roads meandering in all directions. We finally located Muhammad Ali's final resting place just off one of these obscure roads. It was not as grandiose as I would have imagined, considering his bravado and the "I am the Greatest" image he skillfully (and playfully) embodied during his boxing career. His gray tombstone sits on top of a tiny hillside with his actual grave below it surrounded by a semi-circular row of hedges. The tombstone has the name ALI in

large letters and beneath it is etched the following: *'Service to others is the rent you pay for your room in Heaven'*. Nicely said, Champ. After paying our respects we returned to the car and got back on I-65 heading north towards Indianapolis.

It was 4:00pm when we crossed the Ohio River into Indiana. By now, we realized we would not be able to make it to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in time. So we decided to leave it for the following morning, hoping the car museum would honor our dated ticket (which they cheerfully did, by the way). As we approached the city ominous rain clouds had darkened the skies above Indianapolis. We entered the city-limits around 6:00pm from the south and exited I-65 at some point, proceeding west towards the Indianapolis International Airport. Our lodging for the night was a Motel 6 located a few miles from the airport. I had never stayed at a Motel 6 before, but Joe had. And I could tell from the sound of his voice when I told him I had booked a night in one that he was a little reluctant. In my defense, I had to balance our travel budget between high-end hotels and low-end ones. During our two-night stays in the major cities, for example, I had chosen reputable establishments. But for our one-night road lodgings I opted to save a little money, thinking these were just places to sleep for the night. In fact, I had booked two separate Motel 6 lodgings, this one in Indianapolis and one in Green Bay, Wisconsin for the following evening. Each was priced under $80. *What a mistake*. They're cheap for a reason, folks. The Motel 6 in Indianapolis was the 'better' of the two, while the Motel 6 in Green Bay I cannot actually call a dive because, well, that would be an *affront* to dives everywhere. To paraphrase President Trump: "What a shithole".

As we drove through the west side of Indianapolis we also came to the conclusion that this was not one of the city's better neighborhoods. The more we drove the more run-down and economically depressed the area appeared. Mind you, we didn't feel *unsafe*, but neither were we particularly thrilled by our new surroundings. And for the record, I would like to state that Indianapolis is a beautiful city with many wonderful areas…*unfortunately, this just wasn't one of them*. But our concerns were soon replaced by something even more urgent. A storm of biblical proportions was now blanketing the city, and as we pulled into a local Subway to pick up some sandwiches for dinner our cellphones began issuing tornado watch warnings for the area. *Oh*, *Great*, I thought, *could there be a more ignoble way to die than clutching a Subway sandwich inside a Motel 6 while a tornado rips the roof off*? The rain, winds and lightening were so bad we ended up eating our sandwiches in the car right

outside the Subway. During a lull in the storm we hightailed it to our motel (which was only a few minutes away) and checked in. The elevator made so many strange noises we opted to lug our suitcases up to the second floor via the stairway. We also had to switch rooms because the TV didn't work in the first one and Joe wanted to watch the National Hockey League playoff game between Toronto and his beloved Florida Panthers. Eventually the storm and tornado threats passed and we settled in to watch the game. And as bad as our lodging was, I will admit one thing: I slept better here than I had the last two nights.

DAY SIX

(Indiana and Wisconsin)

We were awake by 6:00am. I felt fully refreshed, having slumbered deeply throughout the night; the difference between sleeping on a bed and sleeping on a (cursed) loveseat. By 8:30am we checked out of the Motel 6 and drove to a nearby Cracker Barrel for a satisfying breakfast. Afterwards, we headed straight to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway situated only 15-minutes away along W 16th Street. We arrived just before 10:00am and traffic was already congested around the famed speedway. I think we paid ten dollars to park in front of the site. The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum is located on the infield of the track and I thought our tickets were enough to get us through the entrance, but we had to pay an additional fee on account of the Indy 500 qualifying rounds. We entered through Gate 2, on a walkway that took us underneath the main track and led us directly to the museum. Our pre-paid tickets had yesterday's date printed on them and I was concerned they wouldn't be any good, but the friendly staff honored them without any hesitation. For the next two hours Joe and I wandered around this *incredibly* cool museum, thoroughly delighted and entertained by the exhibits and the sheer number of historic racing cars on display.

The first section of the museum we visited had information boards describing the history of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the third oldest permanent automobile

race track in the world. In the United States, only the Milwaukee Mile in West Allis, Wisconsin is older. The speedway was originally constructed in 1909. The idea for the race track was the brainchild of Carl Fisher, a successful entrepreneur who made his fortune in the automobile industry, highway construction and real estate. Fisher had attended automobile races in France and England during the very early 1900s and realized that America was lagging behind European manufacturers in automobile design and craftsmanship. He wanted to change that by creating a means in which to test American-made cars before delivering them to consumers. He thought a well-planned out race track would suit this purpose. But automobile racing, like much of the auto industry itself, was still in its infancy and most of the races he saw in Europe were either conducted at horse racing tracks or on dirt and muddy roads, which Fisher believed to be both ineffective (for displaying a car's true abilities) and quite dangerous for the drivers. Also, spectators could only get a glimpse of the cars as they sped by.

In 1907, Fisher visited the newly-built Brooklands circuit in Surrey, England, the world's first 'banked' motor racing track. A banked layout refers to a turn or change in direction in which the vehicle has to bank (or incline), usually towards the inside of the turn. If you look at a modern race track today, the roadbed has a transverse down-slope angle towards the inside of each curve or turn. The inclined position of the cars as they make the turn is called the bank angle. Fisher was very impressed by this and wanted to build something similar in Indianapolis. He thought a banked oval track could showcase an American vehicle's speed and maneuverability while also allowing spectators to witness more of the race. He chose Indianapolis for the location. Back then, Detroit, Michigan and Toledo, Ohio were the centers for mass-produced cars in America, but Indianapolis was known as the manufacturing base of high-end luxury vehicles. Fisher thought this would be a perfect fit for the kind of expensive, innovative and state-of-the-art machines necessary to compete on his new speedway. By 1909, he had convinced three other businessmen (James Allison, Arthur Newby and Frank Wheeler) to pony up the money (a total of $250,000) to create the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Company. The track was built that same year on four plots of adjacent farmland and featured a 2.5 mile oval track and a sizeable grandstand for spectators.

Ironically, the first racing event held at the track was actually a balloon race. Fisher was very interested in aviation, as well, and in June, 1909, with the

Indianapolis Motor Speedway still under construction, he invited the U.S. National Balloon Championship to the track. Nine gas-filled balloons competed in the event, launching from the speedway towards the 'finish line' 382 miles away in Fort Payne, Alabama. Fisher himself piloted one of the entries, finishing in fourth place. Several months later the first motorsport races were conducted, but the speedway was plagued with issues concerning its track surface. Originally, the track was made from crushed rock and tar, which proved unreliable and dangerous, resulting in several fatal crashes. After testing different types of materials, track managers chose brick. Over a 63-day period, construction crews working in multiple shifts laid 3.2 million bricks, each weighing 9.5 pounds, around the entire oval. When the paving was completed, the governor of Indiana ceremoniously placed a 'gold' brick on the front straightway. The track has been nicknamed The Brickyard ever since, although by 1961 most of the bricks had either been removed or covered over by asphalt. A symbolic 36-inch strip of the original brickwork was left intact at the start/finish line, and this is now famously referred to as the Yard of Brick. In 1996, after winning the Brickyard 400 race, NASCAR champion Dale Jarret and his crew chief Todd Parrott got on their knees and kissed the Yard of Brick to pay tribute to this legendary track, and a new tradition of 'kissing the bricks' was born.

Fisher envisioned summertime racing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway but during its first full season in 1910, attendance began to decline. It was believed that the scheduling of so many races somehow diminished the awe and spectacle for the public. So in 1911, the owners decided to replace the summerlong racing season with one high-profile event, a 500-mile race held on Memorial Day. This became the first Indy 500 race. More than 80,000 spectators showed up to watch the event. The winner was Ray Harroun, who drove the yellow Marmon Wasp car (for the Marmon Motor Car Company, a luxury vehicle manufacturer that went out of business in 1933). Harroun finished the race in six hours and 42 minutes, receiving a $14,500 first place prize. His winning race car is on display inside the museum, as is the trophy from the event. The first Indy 500 featured 40 qualifying racing cars. To begin the race, Fisher worried that a traditional standing start would generate too much dust and smoke – negatively impacting the drivers and spectators – so he led the start of the race in a passenger car, creating the tradition of a 'pace car' and a 'flying start'.

Normally held over the Memorial Day weekend, the Indy 500 – over the course of its storied 114-year history – has become one of the world's most famous and coveted racing events. Track promoters bill the race as *The Greatest Spectacle in Racing,* and together with the Monaco Grand Prix and the 24 Hours of Le Mans in Europe, it is part of the unofficial Triple Crown of Motorsport. All three races are held between May and June. To date, only one driver, the late Norman Graham Hill from Great Britain, has managed to win all three events during his career. The Indy 500 attracts hundreds of thousands of spectators yearly and tens of millions of viewers worldwide. In 1987, the speedway became a designated National Historic Landmark. Many of the guests at the Motel 6 were there to attend the qualifying rounds that weekend, and I'm certain all of the hotels in the area would be fully booked by the following week for the actual race. For the two of us, it was an awesome experience to get caught up in the excitement of this iconic American event.

The Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum first opened in 1956 on a street corner just outside the track. It had only six racing cars but quickly began to expand its collection through donations and acquisitions, outgrowing the original building's capacity. By 1976, a new museum was constructed on the infield of the track, featuring many historic *Indy series* formula cars. In 1994, the speedway began hosting the Brickyard 400, an annual NASCAR Cup Series points race held in late July or early August and the museum includes a section of NASCAR stock cars, as well. In fact, most of the museum exhibits are linked to these two particular racing events, the Indy 500 and the Brickyard 400, but there are also exhibits covering other motorsports and general information on the automobile industry. At any given time, the museum has at least 75 different racing cars on display, which is only a small portion of its total collection, rotating the exhibits regularly. When Joe and I visited the museum, it had just re-opened a month earlier after completing a lengthy and substantial renovation and modernization project that cost $89 million. Neither one of us were racing enthusiasts but we had a *ton of fun* inside this place. I wholeheartedly recommend it to all my readers.

After reading about the history of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway through the information boards, we began checking out the formula cars on display. The museum has several floors with racing cars dating back to the early part of the 20th century. Despite the evolution of the Indy series formula cars over the years these racing

machines still feature a single-seat, open cockpit, open wheel, twin turbo-charged engine specifically designed for grueling high-speed endurance racing. Perhaps the biggest innovation to their design came during the 1960s when rear-engine models were introduced. Ever since, every Indy 500 winner has been a rear-engine formula car. Many of the models we saw on display were the actual vehicles that had won previous Indy 500 races, including the Marmon Wasp which won the very first race back in 1911. Some of the winning Indy cars we saw included the 1912 National made by the National Motor Vehicle Company of Indianapolis, its president was one of the four businessmen founders of the speedway. The only 'twin-seater' racer we saw was the French-made Delage, winner of the 1914 Indy 500. Another famous race car was the Murphy Special (built by the Duesenberg Automobile & Motor Company, an early 20th century American car manufacturer) which not only won the 1922 Indy 500 but also became the first American-made car to win the French Grand Prix in 1921. An exhibition area near the exit had a showroom filled with Brickyard 400-winning NASCAR stock cars.

The formula vehicles are displayed on both showroom floors and along the walls (in a raised inclined position). Special lighting highlights the cars as you enter each showroom to a really cool effect. The exhibition halls seem to follow a chronological order so by the end of it you're looking at the newer models, including the winner of last year's Indy 500 (the 2024 Dallara IR18). We came across one display featuring the evolution of the flame-resistant jumpsuits and helmets the drivers wear. The suits are custom made to fit each driver for comfort and effectiveness. Today they are made of Nomex, a special flame-retardant fiber material developed by DuPont designed to prevent flames from reaching the driver's skin for a specific amount of time, hopefully allowing them a chance to escape a burning wreck alive. These jumpsuits also help keep drivers cool from the high heat of the engine friction.

We also visited a trophy room, an engine display room, and one simulated theater section with three Indy series cars surrounded by a visual presentation of what the Indianapolis Motor Speedway looks like during the Indy 500 race. As one stands next to the cars, the surround screens come to life and next thing you know you're inside the track, hundreds of thousands of fans yelling, Air Force jets flying overhead. *It was pretty fucking awesome*. The Hall of Fame section featured information on past Indy 500 winners and there was plenty of memorabilia,

including an Indianapolis Motor Speedway entry ticket from 1910. Back then, the cost to enter the speedway was $1. Today? They charged us $35.

We exited the museum around noon and walked to an elevated viewing platform inside the track oval just in front of the Gate 2 entrance. An Indy car was zooming around the track at speeds exceeding 230 mph, every time it passed us the roar of its engine reverberating through the air. I had never experienced this before and it was quite exhilarating. Behind us was a large digital screen showing the driver's name and his current speed. That weekend, the track was having qualifying runs for the Indy 500. Only 33 formula cars can enter the race, this became the officially-allowed entry number after the 1933 race in which a 42-car field resulted in five fatalities. To enter the event, potential drivers must compete in a four-lap qualifying round.

We witnessed several different drivers zooming around the track. I tried to photograph them as they sped by us but it was tricky getting them into focus at the incredible speeds they were traveling. My former (and trusty) Nikon Cool Pix camera had been stolen during my recent visit to Southeast Aisa and I had to rely on my iPhone's camera for the task. After multiple attempts, Joe suggested I get as close to the track as I could along the railing and focus on the cars as they *approached* and not as they passed by. My first successful attempt resulted in a spectacular photo shot. IndyCar driver Colton Herta's vehicle broke loose coming out of turn number 1 on his first lap, slamming into the wall before going airborne and turning upside down. The racing car slid for hundreds of feet – upside down and shooting sparks – directly in front of us before hitting the wall again on the entry to Turn 2 and then came to a stop. My brother and I were shocked, certain this poor guy was done for. But he emerged from the vehicle shaken but apparently not seriously injured and was transported from the scene in an awaiting ambulance. The track shut down for only ten minutes while ground crews quickly removed his wrecked Indy car. *Wow*. What a way to end our visit to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway!

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Our next stop was Green Bay, Wisconsin. During the planning stages of this trip we were going to spend two nights in Chicago, but the cost of this stopover didn't

justify what would have amounted to only one day of sightseeing in the Windy City. We wanted to spend more time in Chicago than that and decided to reschedule our visit for a later date. As I began researching other possible destinations I came across an interesting article about Lambeau Field Stadium, the home of the Green Bay Packers. I became quite fascinated by this sports venue, its history and the iconic role the stadium plays in the state of Wisconsin. Joe was excited, as well. So I had purchased tickets online for the two-hour guided tour of the stadium for the following morning. Incidentally, the stadium tour is also one of the top suggested things to do in Green Bay. The drive took us almost six and a half hours including a lunch break and several gas and bathroom stops along the way. We left Indianapolis shortly after 1:00pm, taking I-465 until it merged with I-65 and continued north cutting through the central part of the state.

Located in the Midwestern United States, Indiana is one of the eight states that make up the Great Lakes Region. Its longest north-south point is approximately 250 miles and by the time we entered Illinois (near Lake Michigan) we had pretty much crossed the entire west-central section of the state. I read online that Indiana's name means "Land of the Indians", a term first used in the late 1700s to honor the Iroquois, a confederacy of Native Americans indigenous to the region. In 1800, the U.S. Congress divided the Northwest Territory into two areas, calling the western section the Indiana Territory. When Indiana officially joined the union in 1816, a part of the Indiana Territory became the geographic area of the new state, so the name stuck. The people of Indiana call themselves *Hoosiers*. The origins of *this* word has been disputed throughout the years, but according to the Indiana Historical Society, "hoosier" was used in parts of Virginia, Kentucky, the Carolinas and Tennessee (a region known as the Upland South) to describe a backwoodsman, a rough countryman, or a country bumpkin. If true, then kudos to the Hoosiers for proudly adopting this phrase as a tribute to their frontier roots.

The geography we encountered along the central and north-central areas of Indiana was mostly till plains, flat terrain with some low rolling hills well-suited for farming. Just outside the city of Lafayette we came across rows of large windmills stretching for miles along agricultural fields. Being from the east coast, I had never seen that many windmills in my life. A terrible road accident on I-65 forced us to detour near Fair Oaks, Indiana, a small farming community. We followed a two-lane county road for several miles through open rural farmlands before making our way

back onto I-65. When we reached Gary, Indiana (on the southern tip of Lake Michigan) we turned west on I-90 and began traveling around the southern rim of the lake into the state of Illinois. It would take us another three and a half hours to reach Green Bay from here. We drove through the outskirts of Chicago and made our way further north, entering the state of Wisconsin near the city of Beloit. At some point, Joe turned onto I-43 and we continued north, hugging the western shoreline of Lake Michigan, passing the cities of Milwaukee and Port Washington in the process, and entered another stretch of rural farming communities before reaching Green Bay by 7:30pm.

Our lodging for the night was a Motel 6 situated near the Green Bay Austin Straubel International Airport. I chose this hotel because it was inexpensive (we were only spending the night, after all) and it was located just minutes from Lambeau Field Stadium. But this Motel 6 made the one in Indianapolis seem like the Waldorf-Astoria. Several hotel 'guests' were grilling their dinner in the parking lot, others were frying fish in their rooms (at least from the smell in the corridors). In fact, I got the impression this may have been some kind of welfare motel because one elderly couple stepped outside of their room as we walked by and it looked like a hoarders' convention in there. The Motel 6 didn't have an elevator (not a working one, anyway) and we were forced to carry our luggage to the second floor, to a room that was located as far as geographically possible from the front desk. When I asked for something closer or on the ground floor, the 'receptionist' told us it was the only room available.

Upon entering our room we found the bathroom sink literally adjacent to the door. Along the base of the sink were used Q-tips that somehow the cleaning staff had overlooked. When Joe took his evening shower he had to let the hot water run for several minutes because the initial burst coming out of the pipes was brownish in color. I was so disgusted I thoroughly checked the mattresses for bedbugs and suspiciously eyed the threadbare linen, wondering if they'd actually been cleaned. To be honest, I think I would have preferred the loveseat back in Nashville. The TV was about the only reliable thing in the room, but even that had seen its better days, bolted to the wall like it was a priceless family heirloom. I made a mental note never to use Motel 6 again.

As night fell, the temperature outside dropped significantly (especially for two Florida geezers). Joe and I drove to the nearby Oneida Casino Hotel in front of the airport for a fun night of gambling. It was Saturday night and the casino, one of five casinos around the Green Bay area owned by the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, was hopping. All of the table games were packed, and gamblers were lined up behind every slot machine dumping their weekly paychecks into the casino coffers. But everyone seemed to be having a great time. Most were local regulars and the atmosphere was very friendly and lively. My brother and I put together a small bankroll. Joe was able to get a seat at one of the two baccarat tables and we managed to win $170 dollars in a couple of hours. We also ate a reasonably-priced dinner inside the casino, although I don't remember what we had. We got back to our hotel room by midnight. Our sleep was delayed by a couple having a loud drunken argument in the parking lot below our window. When I threw back the curtain to get a better look I was confronted by a webbing of duct tape holding a cracked window pane in place. I shook my head and returned to bed, remembering the hotel's old TV slogan: "*Motel 6…we'll leave the lights on for you*". Yeah, cause you have no idea what's lurking in the dark here. That night I dreamt an angry Q-tip had crawled into bed with me.

Day Seven

(Wisconsin and Minnesota)

Both of us were up by 5:30am, unable to sleep any longer. The temperature outside was 49°F (that's 9.44°C for my non-American readers) but with the windchill factor it felt at least ten degrees colder. *Holy icicles*! I had to check my iPhone to make sure it was May 18th, thinking that perhaps we had overslept – like a couple of hibernating bears – and it was now somehow winter again. The duct tape covering the broken window pane provided no insulation from the cold. I glanced over at Joe. He had cocooned himself with his bed cover and sheets, the blue glow from his cellphone illuminating the darkness. When he sensed I was awake he greeted me with, "You know, its 80 degrees and balmy in Miami".

I took a hot shower and then made several cups of instant coffee. We watched a little bit of the local news on TV and went over our itinerary for the day. As I stated at the beginning of this journal, our road trip was divided into two parts. The first part would end tonight with our arrival in Minneapolis. After a two-night stay there, we would begin the second half of our journey which was the return trip home along the Great River Road. Because we had opted to skip Chicago for a future trip, our stay in Green Bay was merely a stopover to avoid having to drive over nine hours to Minneapolis from Indiana. We had tickets for the 10:00am Legendary Tour of Lambeau Field Stadium. Afterwards, we would drive west to Minneapolis, hoping to arrive there no later than 6:00pm. A cold front was expected to drop the temperatures even further once we reached the city. I could hear my thin skin complaining already.

At 8:00am we walked to the Denny's restaurant next door and had breakfast. By 9:20am we checked out of the Motel 6 and drove straight up S Oneida Street for five minutes before reaching the parking lot of Lambeau Field, the iconic home of the Green Bay Packers. It was a cold, Sunday morning and the place was mostly empty except for whatever skeleton staff the venue maintains on such days during the off season. We weren't sure where to go and went inside the large gift shop to inquire about the tour. The cashier instructed us to head over to the entrance of the Lambeau Field Atrium next door. The guided tour would begin in the lobby, she told us. In front of the Atrium entrance, in the Harlan Plaza, are two large statues of Earl 'Curly' Lambeau (the co-founder of the Green Bay Packers) and Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach who led the Packers to five national championships and won the first two Super Bowls during the 1960s. We took photos in front of the statues and then proceeded inside the Lambeau Field Atrium where 14 other people were already waiting to take the tour. We had two guides, both middle-aged men who had been working for the Green Bay Packers organization for many years. I forgot to jot down their names, but I think the main guide, who did most of the talking, was called Tom, so I will just refer to him by that name. And if I'm wrong let me apologize to both guides who did such a great job.

As we stood inside the beautiful Lambeau Field Atrium, Tom told us that Lambeau Field, which opened as the City Stadium in 1957, is the oldest *continually* operating NFL stadium in the country. It was renamed Lambeau Field in 1965 following the death of Packers' co-founder, former player and head coach, Earl

'Curly' Lambeau. The original stadium had a seating capacity of only 32,500, but over the years numerous expansions and renovations have raised the seating capacity to over 81,000, making Lambeau Field not only the second-largest stadium in the NFL but also the largest venue in the entire state of Wisconsin. When it was constructed back in the mid-1950s, it became the first modern stadium built specifically for an NFL franchise. The eleven other existing NFL teams at the time were all playing in facilities either shared by Major League Baseball teams or in other pre-existing shared venues. The first game played at the stadium was during Week One of the 1957 season against their rivals the Chicago Bears. During halftime, the stadium was dedicated by Vice President Richard Nixon.

Tom briefly explained how Lambeau Field came to be. Since 1925, the Packers had been playing at the old City Stadium behind Green Bay East High School. This 25,000-seat stadium had been built almost entirely out of wood; its lack of facilities required the players to use the East High locker rooms while the visiting teams often had to change into their uniforms at their hotel. Apparently, this was okay back then since American football had yet to reach the sports pinnacle it has achieved in today's society. By the 1950s, though, with football's popularity growing, the City Stadium became inadequate for the Packers' needs. Additionally, the stadium itself could not be expanded due to its location along the East River.

Meanwhile, officials in Milwaukee (which is 120 miles south of Green Bay), had built the Milwaukee County Stadium in 1953 in the hopes of luring the Packers to Milwaukee. The Packers had already been playing a part of their schedule in Milwaukee since 1933 and this newer stadium had twice the capacity of the one in Green Bay. Once the Milwaukee County Stadium was built, the other NFL owners were threatening to force the Packers to either move to Milwaukee or construct a new stadium in Green Bay. In 1955, the Packers announced plans to build a brand-new, 32,000-seat stadium in the city. The money for its construction was raised through a public bond issued the following year. The rest, as they say, is history. But even after the stadium was built, the Green Bay Packers continued to play two or three regular season games at the Milwaukee County Stadium until 1995, when Lambeau Field's seating expansion was enough to accommodate their growing fan base. In a nice gesture to honor their former Milwaukee ticket holders (who'd been supporting the club since the early 1930s), the Packers (till this day) offer them a Gold Package which includes tickets to a preseason game and to games 2 and 5 of

the regular season. The rest of the home games are available to regular season ticket holders through what is known as the Green Package.

According to Tom, regular home games have been sold out for decades, and the waiting list to become a season ticket holder tops 150,000 people. Season ticket holders tend to pass this coveted privilege down to their families, so obtaining a season ticket is very difficult. Case in point, both Tom and the other guide inherited their season tickets from their fathers. How then do non-ticket holders attend any of the games? He told us like most sports venues across the country, season ticket holders who don't want to use their tickets on a particular day can simply put their seats up for sale online. The downside? These tickets tend to be much more expensive.

Starting in the 1960s, with the advent of coach Vince Lombardi who would make the Green Bay Packers one of the most successful franchises in football history, the demand for more seats led to various phased expansions. By the mid-2000s, the bowl had been expanded with tens of thousands of new seats added, including the addition of expensive private boxes and theater-style club seats. We were able to see these sections during the tour. The beautiful Lambeau Field Atrium we were standing in was one of the newer renovations (2013-2015). It was built at a cost of over $140 million and includes the Packers Hall of Fame Museum, the Green Bay Packers Pro Shop (a huge gift store) and the 1919 Kitchen & Tap bar-restaurant. One of the goals for all these expansions was to make the Green Bay Packers more profitable. The costs associated with the maintenance of such a facility are enormous and the Packers organization is always looking for ways to raise its revenues. Sections of the Atrium, for example, can be rented out for meetings, social events, weddings and receptions. (As an aside, I think it's safe to assume that any couple who schedules their wedding here will probably be dressing their first-born in Green Bay Packers onesies).

From the Atrium we took an elevator up to a series of offices and terrace suites. On the ride up, Tom told us that the team was named after the Indian Packing Company, a canned meat business, which gave the team $500 in 1919 for their first uniforms. Although much smaller today, the meat-packing industry in Wisconsin was one of the leading industries in the state. Co-founder of the Packers, Curly Lambeau, had worked as a shipping clerk for the Indian Packing Company and

agreed to name the team the Packers in exchange for uniforms, equipment and the use of the business' athletic field.

It might seem odd to some of my readers that we chose to visit another city's football stadium as part of this road trip. After all, neither one of us were Green Bay Packers fans (I root for the Miami Dolphins and Joe is a diehard New York Jets fanatic). Our road trip was designed so that we could witness or experience the sort of traditions and customs which helped shape our national identity. American football has become a unique part of our culture. Today, Super Bowl Sunday has taken on the same kind of reverence as any national holiday. And Lambeau Field holds a special place in that history. Since 1957, the stadium has become something more than just a sports venue. It has become an historical landmark embodying Green Bay's traditions, a source of pride and belonging for the people of this area. Over the years, the stadium (and the Packers) have shaped the city's cultural fabric and transformed Green Bay into one of the most recognizable names in professional sports. It might surprise my readers to know that the Packers are the only publicly owned franchise in the NFL with over half a million shareholders. And believe it or not, Tom told us the shareholders don't make a nickel. The stock can neither be publicly traded nor earns dividends. So owning a part of this team and its stadium is merely for pride, a rare civic arrangement where the Green Bay community has a tangible – if mostly emotional or symbolic – stake in the franchise, making Lambeau Field as iconic to the State of Wisconsin as their dairy and beer-brewing industries.

We spent two hours walking through the stadium with Tom and his fellow guide enlightening us on all the expansions, the details and history of this venerated sports venue. It was quite impressive, made even more so by the fact that the stadium was empty and we were able to see areas not usually accessible to the public. On the upper floors we walked down carpeted hallways to see some of the private suites used by corporations or very wealthy fans. The walls of the corridors were lined with posters, photographs and paintings of the famous moments and people that have made the Green Bay Packers such a successful franchise.

One of my favorite paintings was a depiction of the freezing crowds cheering on the Packers during the 1967 NFL Championship Game between Green Bay and the Dallas Cowboys. The game was held on New Year's Eve and determined which team would go on to play the AFL champion in Super Bowl II. It is considered one of the

greatest football games ever played due to the adverse weather conditions. Tom told us at kickoff the temperature had dropped to a *testicle-shrinking* –13°F (– 25°C), the coldest game ever recorded in the NFL, immortalized today as the Ice Bowl. By the time the game got underway, Tom continued, the windchill factor made it feel almost thirty degrees *colder*. Lambeau Field's turf-heating system had malfunctioned and when the tarpaulin was removed from the field prior to the game, moisture had accumulated which quickly froze, creating an icy surface that worsened as the game wore on. When referee Norm Schachter blew his metal whistle to signal the start of play, it froze to his lips and he had to tear it off, the blood freezing instead of forming a scab. The officials had to use hand signals and voice commands for the duration of the game. The half-time show was cancelled due to the instruments freezing up during the pre-game show. It was so brutally cold one elderly fan died from exposure. Yet the stadium remained packed, over 50,000 adoring fans donned heavy winter coats and wrappings and bared the miserable conditions to cheer their team on. When the game was over, several of the players had developed frostbite on their toes and fingers (including quarterback Bart Starr). Ever since, the stadium has been nicknamed the *Frozen Tundra*. Tom told us that Lambeau Field is now equipped with high-efficiency condensing boilers for space heating in the stadium, melting snow and heating the playing field.

Another portrait Tom pointed out to us was of the Packers' time-honored tradition known as the Lambeau Leap when a Packers player jumps into the end zone stands after scoring a touchdown. Tom said the first player to do that was Hall of Fame safety LeRoy Butler in 1993. And while many teams across the NFL now perform the celebratory leap after scoring a touchdown, in Lambeau Field the fans will occasionally prevent a visiting team's player from doing it, like in the case of Minnesota Vikings cornerback Fred Smoot who intercepted a pass and ran it in for a touchdown; when he attempted to do the leap the fans pelted him with their beverages. *Go, Pack, go*!

During our two hours inside the stadium we visited the higher level private suites and enclosed theater-style club sections, which offered not only a great view of the playing field but did so in a climate-controlled environment. No Frozen Tundra here. Regardless of the outdoor temperatures, fans lucky enough to secure these seats watched the game in comfort, some sections had their own private bar lounges and food concessions. We also went to the highest point in Lambeau Field, standing just

below the iconic white G sign that adorns the exterior façade of the new video board on the stadium's south end. This offered the best view of the entire bowl. Tom had us yell "Go, Pack, Go!" – the Packers' fans rallying cry – and our voices echoed throughout the entire empty stadium. *That was so cool*.

We also visited the Media Broadcast Booths and the Lee Remmel Press Box section (named after the sportswriter and later team publicist who played a monolithic role in shaping the Packers successful image). Along the walls of the press room were framed editions of the front pages of local and national newspapers heralding each of the Packers' championship wins. Tom showed us the media seating chart (the Press Box is divided into four sections, each overlooking the playing field) and the row of tables with special telephone banks that connect the media personnel to NFL executives (including a direct line to the NFL commissioner). From here we went downstairs to the very bowels of the stadium to visit the locker room area. Unfortunately, we could not enter the team's locker room because it was currently being renovated. In the interim, a large photograph poster of the facility was on display to show what it looked like. Tom then led us onto the sidelines through the actual tunnel the players use when they enter the field. He turned on a recording of the fans cheering so we could experience the sensation of walking onto the field on game day. *That was pretty cool, too*. We stood on the Packers' sideline (we were not permitted to walk onto the actual playing field) while Tom pointed out all the areas of interest from this perspective, including all the areas we had visited. As for the playing field, he said the grass used for the home turf is a blend of Kentucky bluegrass and perennial ryegrass. This particular combination is both visually striking while at the same time resilient, capable of withstanding the rigors of a football game in diverse weather. Everyone in the group took photos of themselves in front of the sidelines, the playing field and the goal posts before Tom led us back to the Atrium for the conclusion of the tour.

After thanking Tom and the other guide, we headed over to the Green Bay Packers Pro Shop, the large gift shop located next to the Atrium entrance. We looked around, trying on the Cheese Head hats. Joe bought a souvenir cap and T-shirt. We then walked to the Titletown Entertainment District located on Ridge Street and Lombardi Avenue directly in front of the stadium on its western side. Built on 45-acres by the Green Bay Packers, *Titletown* (as it is more commonly referred to) is a mixed-use development park and plaza providing year-round activities for both

locals and tourists including gameday activities. The name Titletown (we learned from Tom earlier) is more of a nickname for the city of Green Bay than for Lambeau Field. It was popularized after the 1961 NFL Championship Game against the New York Giants. The Packers trounced the Giants 37-0 and fans began hanging signs all around the stadium reading: "Welcome to Titletown, USA". By the mid-1960s, following successive championship victories, the name became a registered trademark of the Green Bay Packers.

In addition to its 14-acre park – which offers a regulation-size football field, a running track, a playground and other public amenities – Titletown also includes a seasonal ice rink (with ice lounge) and a sledding hill. The development features a hotel (Lodge Kohler), a medical clinic (Bellin Health, a sports medicine and orthopedics center) and the Hinterland Brewery and Restaurant and other eating and drinking establishments. The Packers organization wants to continue expanding this area, adding both residential and office buildings around the development. Joe and I walked onto the plaza (with its over-sized statues of the Packers' winning championship rings) and climbed to the top of Ariens Hill overlooking the park. The hill is used for sledding during the winter months and provides a panoramic view of the entire Titletown section.

We returned to our car by 1:00pm and said goodbye to Green Bay. Our next stop was the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota for a two-night stay. We traveled west on state highway WI 29, a major corridor that runs east-west across the central part of Wisconsin. It would take us just over five hours to reach Minneapolis, this included one gas and restroom stop along the way. The scenery along WI 29 was a pleasant mix of small rural towns and landscapes and a few larger urban communities interspersed with wooded areas, especially between Wausau and Chippewa Falls, providing at times a lush green backdrop to the drive. The highway was basically two lanes in each direction. The northern part of Wisconsin has many state and national parks and reservations, and while these were not part of our road trip we were still able to capture glimpses along WI 29 of the natural beauty of Wisconsin's central and northern regions. For example, approaching Chippewa Falls we saw picturesque views of the Chippewa River and Lake Wissota State Park.

Near the town of Elk Mound, Wisconsin we took exit 60A and connected to I-94, continuing west towards Minneapolis. We passed the city of Menomonie situated

around Lake Menomonie (a reservoir on the Red Cedar River), driving now through mostly open farmland and scattered rural communities. We reached Hudson, Wisconsin, the last city before the border, and after crossing the St Croix River there we entered the State of Minnesota. It took us another 35 minutes before reaching our hotel, the Lofton Hotel Minneapolis, which is ideally located in the downtown area directly in front of the Target Center Arena (home of the Minnesota Timberwolves). We pulled up to the valet section shortly after 6:15pm. The temperature was already in the fifties and dropping fast when we arrived. It would feel like the mid-30s the following morning, something Joe and I were definitely not prepared for. If it gets this cold in late May, I thought, how miserable must their winters be? Instead of looking for a place to park I simply added the valet parking to the room bill. When I discovered they charge $60 a night for parking…*the city suddenly felt a little chillier*. But, I have to admit, it was very convenient to just pull up and hand the keys over to the valet. The Lofton Hotel is owned by Hilton, and it was a *very* nice property. We enjoyed our stay.

After checking in and putting away our luggage we decided to visit Canterbury Park Race Track and Casino in Shakopee, a suburb about 30 minutes southwest of Minneapolis-Saint Paul. The casino only had card games, including a huge poker and baccarat section. Joe and I had a very tasty Chinese dinner cooked to order and then tried our luck at the baccarat tables. Using a random bet selection method, we were able to win another $205 in about two hours of play, increasing our win total from the previous night to $375. We used all the monies we won on this trip to help pay for gas and food. We got back to our hotel room shortly after 10:00pm. It was pretty cold outside by then. We were asleep within the hour.

Day Eight

(Minnesota)

We were both awake by 6:00am. The temperature outside was 48°F but with the windchill factor it felt like 36°F. In my world travels I have met many people from the Midwest and Canada who wouldn't think anything of temperatures like this. And growing up in New Jersey I can still remember looking forward to the cooler weather

of fall. But my brother and I were in our mid-sixties now and had been living in Miami for decades. One's body acclimates to warm weather the same way a pair of well-worn shoes embrace your feet, with loving comfort. In South Florida, when the temperature dips below 40°F even the iguanas drop from the trees frozen stiff. Which, by the way, is an apt metaphor; with our increasingly sagging skin and our intolerance to the cold it almost seemed like my brother and I were morphing into a couple of human iguanas. In that spirit I hissed "good morning" to my brother and then slithered into the bathroom to take a hot shower.

At 7:30am we went down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. This was a full service restaurant not a buffet, the place had uniformed waiters and table linen. It was included with the cost of the room and I was grateful, too, because the menu prices would have put a huge dent in our gambling winnings. During breakfast we discussed changes to our itinerary. I initially scheduled six sightseeing stops in the city but as the day wore on we had to improvise because it was Monday and many of the city's museums (including the two I had previously chosen) were not opened on this day. Had I known this prior to the trip I probably would have suggested arriving in Minneapolis later in the week. We waited until it was almost 11:00am before hitting the streets, hoping the temperature outside would be a little warmer. Joe had developed the sniffles and a light cough and I was worried he might be coming down with something as a result of the change in weather.

Our first stop that day was only a short walking distance from the hotel. We set out on foot for two blocks along N 1st Avenue and turned right on 5th Street where the Warehouse District/Hennepin Avenue rail station is located. This light rail station serves the Blue and Green Lines of Minneapolis. It gets very busy during sporting events as it is only a few blocks from both the Target Center Arena (home of the Minnesota Timberwolves basketball team) and the Minnesota Twins' Target Field Stadium, which is right in back of the arena.

We continued for one more block and stopped at the public parking lot on the corner of Hennepin Avenue and 5th Street. In the back of this parking area is a massive 60-ft high and 150-ft wide mural of singer Bob Dylan, covering the entire side of a five-story building. I wanted to see this mural for two reasons. The first, I was a huge Bob Dylan fan going back to my teen years. And secondly, the mural was painted by internationally renowned Brazilian graffiti artist Eduardo Kobra.

During my visit to Rio de Janeiro in 2019 I was able to see one of Kobra's most famous murals called *Las Etnias* (The Ethnicities), which he did for the 2016 Summer Olympics. It is considered the largest graffiti art work in the world and is absolutely stunning. When I read online that Kobra had been commissioned to do the Bob Dylan mural I immediately put this stop on our itinerary. Kobra has created more than 3,000 public art works worldwide, and of the more than 500 murals he has done in the United States alone, the Bob Dylan one is his largest to date.

The mural (done in 2015) has quickly become an iconic symbol of the downtown Hennepin Theater District. Bob Dylan, who was born and raised in Minnesota, was associated more with the Dinkytown area of Minneapolis where he once lived and not necessarily the Hennepin Theater District. Dinkytown is situated within the Marcy-Holmes neighborhood of Minneapolis, centered around 14th Avenue Southeast and 4th Street, on the eastern side of the Mississippi River. It consists of four blocks of small businesses, restaurants, bars and apartment buildings that house mostly students from the nearby University of Minnesota-Twin Cities campus. Dylan's early career connection to the Hennepin Theater District is less clear, but at one time (between 1979–1988) his brother David and him owned the now historic Orpheum Theater within the district. In 2014, Dylan performed a sold-out three night stand at the theater. The following year the mural was commissioned. Whether or not this was why it was made I don't know, but it is a fitting tribute not only to one of Minnesota's favorite sons but also to one of America's greatest musical icons.

The mural takes the form of a triptych, three separate paintings that are hinged or connected. Each painting captures a glimpse of Dylan through the years, the first two as a young and middle aged musician with the last portrait showing how he looks today, a wise and weathered poet of the masses. The lyrics "The times they are a-changing" are incorporated into the mural, it's from the title of one of his earlier protest songs, which could easily apply to our current political situation or even Dylan's own physical and artistic transformation over the years. Using a grid system, Kobra first imprinted a photo-real portrait along the side of the building and then with the help of his artistic collaborators he color blocked the images using brushes, air brushing and spray cans to add shading and brilliant hues to the mural. The vivid colors catch the eye immediately. Remarkably, it only took Kobra two weeks to complete the artwork.

After taking photos of the mural we walked back to the hotel and retrieved our car from the valet. Our next stop was a visit to the historic Stone Arch Bridge that crosses the Mississippi River. We wanted to see the St. Anthony Falls just to the northeast of the bridge. We drove south along 5th street and then made a left turn onto 3rd Avenue in front of the Hennepin County Government Center plaza, passing the side of the impressive Minneapolis City Hall building on the corner. It was constructed (1889-1905) in a Revival Romanesque style made famous by the 19th century American architect Henry Hobson Richardson. This five-story municipal structure takes up an entire street block and resembles a castle, complete with arched entryways, turrets, steep roof slopes and a central courtyard, its exterior covered in roughly cut pink Ortonville granite. If the city was ever invaded by a horde of zombies, this would be the place to take shelter! Along its north side is a prominent watch tower that once held the record for being the largest four-sided chiming clock in the world.

As we drove to the riverfront we passed underneath multiple skyway corridors. The Minneapolis Skyway System is the most extensive second-story pedestrian skyway system in the world. It began in 1963 and has grown into a network of climate-controlled pedestrian bridges, corridors and tunnels connecting more than 150 buildings in the central business district of the downtown area. I would imagine the reason behind these passageways is to allow pedestrians to traverse the downtown sections in winter time without freezing their asses off. It is an impressive network, composed of more than 10 miles of pathways, connecting 80 city blocks. *Wow*. The city actually offers tours of the system. The skyways are normally opened until at least 6:00pm and provide an excellent way to not only get around but also take in the architecture of the downtown area.

Joe and I were both impressed with how clean and well maintained the downtown area appeared. The streets were devoid of trash and we saw very little graffiti. In fact, I thought the city gave off a very inviting and friendly vibe and I wouldn't mind revisiting it in the future to explore a little more. On a sad note, as I type these words, Trump's storm troopers…er, forgive me, I meant ICE agents…are currently upending several parts of this beautiful city with their violent takedowns of suspected illegal immigrants and their increasingly brutal clashes with protesters. I wonder if this is what MAGA voters had in mind when they put this buffoon back into office. One can only hope the mid-term elections in November will jolt

Americans back into coherency and help put the reins on this runaway horse wreck of a president before he can do any more harm to our nation, our economy and our reputation worldwide. *But let me not go off on another rant here…*

We pulled into the parking lot of the Mill Ruins Park along the Mississippi riverfront. The park itself didn't seem spectacular, a stretch of green space that spans a portion of the riverbank on the western side of the waterway, but this unassuming park actually represents an important part of the history of Minneapolis. It's called Mills Ruin Park because it contains the ruins of almost two dozen flour mills and other industrial buildings that were essential to the early development of the city. In the late 1990s, Minneapolis conducted excavations which revealed numerous industrial ruins in the area dating as far back as the mid to late 1800s. Since then, an effort has been underway to preserve them for their interpretive value, the goal being to create assets for education, tourism and commercial development. In addition to the ruins, the park has two dated stone piers and several iron girder piers that were once part of a trestle bridge used by the Minneapolis Eastern Railroad, which operated between Wisconsin and Minnesota from 1887 until 1907. To understand the significance of it all one must delve into the city's history…

Minneapolis is located on Minnesota's eastern border along the central part of the state. It occupies both banks of the Upper Mississippi River and adjoins the city of Saint Paul, the state capital. The two cities, together with the surrounding metropolitan area are collectively known as the Twin Cities. Minneapolis itself has a population of over 430,000 making it the most populous city in Minnesota. Due to its abundance of water – the city has 13 lakes, wetlands, creeks, waterfalls and the mighty Mississippi River – it has been nicknamed 'the City of Lakes'. During the 1930s, as part of the Civilian Conservation Corps project, Minneapolis began creating what is now a 50-mile system of roadways and paths called the Ground Rounds National Scenic Byway which connect the city's park areas in a circular pattern, making Minneapolis one of the most beautiful cities in the Midwest. The Downtown Riverfront area (where the Mill Ruins Park is located) is one of the seven districts of this byway system.

Minneapolis was once inhabited by two indigenous nations. The first were the *Dakota*, a group of Native American tribal peoples who represented one half of the Sioux Nation. The other was the *Ojibwe* (also known as the Chippewa) who were

part of the Anishinaabe Nation that was concentrated around the Great Lakes Region. Indigenous peoples had been living here for about 800 years, but beginning in the early 1800s, it took only sixty years before white settlers and the American government forced them from their homelands.

The rapid growth of Minneapolis was due to one specific geographical feature within the city: the Saint Anthony Falls, the only natural waterfall on the Mississippi River. *And why was this*? Because the waterfall provided a much needed source of energy for the city. The two most important industries in Minneapolis by the end of the 19th century – flour and lumber milling – both developed concurrently as a result of the power this waterfall provided. The number of milling companies along the riverfront by the end of the 1800s earned Minneapolis another of its nicknames, 'the Mill City'. By the turn of the 20th century, Minneapolis outsold every other lumber market in the world, its trees supplied by the ample forests of northern Minnesota. The logs were transported to the Minneapolis sawmills via the region's waterways. As for the flour industry, by 1884 the quality of Minneapolis' patented flour made it the best bread flour on the planet, spawning such commercial giants as Pillsbury and General Mills. In 1900, roughly 14 percent of America's flour was milled in Minneapolis and about one-third of that was shipped overseas. (An interesting, if morbid, aside: due to the occupational injuries associated with the milling industry, Minneapolis also had six different companies that manufactured artificial limbs. *Yikes*!).

The milling industry in the city began its decline around the turn of the 20th century. After World War I, both the lumber and flour milling industries had all but vanished. By 1919, Minnesota's lumber companies had depleted the state's white pine, and with the advent of steam power the Saint Anthony Falls was no longer needed to run the mills, so the lumber industry moved on. The flour industry in Minneapolis suffered a similar fate. Decades of soil exhaustion and stem rust (a fungus that attacks wheat crops) plus increasing freight tariffs led to the demise of the Minneapolis' flour industry by the 1920s, as companies began milling their flour elsewhere. But the wealth these industries once provided had attracted many skilled workers and entrepreneurs to Minneapolis, spurring construction booms and the growth of banking, technology and other manufacturing industries. It is safe to say that even as the milling industry waned it left in its wake a major, modern American

city. And this is why Mill Ruins Park and the Saint Anthony Falls are so important. One can argue they represent the symbolic birthplace of Minneapolis.

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Construction crews were working the area of the Mill Ruins Park in what we learned was an ongoing restoration project that included parts of the Stone Arch Bridge scheduled to be completed the following year. We could not actually go down to the riverfront section because it was closed off. We did manage to see some of the mill ruins around the base of the Stone Arch Bridge, which has its western entrance on this side of the Mississippi River. The bridge, used now as a pedestrian walkway, was also closed off but a construction worker told us we could access the historic bridge from the other side of the river. Adjacent to the park, just further south of us, was the Mill City Museum which opened in 2003 inside the ruins of a large flour mill from the 1870s. This museum focuses on the history and economic impact of the milling industries that used hydropower from the St Anthony Falls. I wanted to stop by for a visit but like so many other museums in Minneapolis it was closed on Mondays. We returned to the car and decided to drive to the other side of the river to check out the Stone Arch Bridge from that end.

As we walked back to the parking lot I noticed a road sign marking the street we were on (West River Parkway) as part of the Great River Road system. The following day we would be taking the Great River Road back south towards New Orleans. This scenic road system was the reason we were on this trip and it's route is marked by white and green signs that show a pilot's wheel with a steamboat pictured in the middle. Over the following days we had to look for these signs to make sure we were on the Great River Road because it is not one continuous interstate highway but rather a series of one or two-lane rural roads and byways that meander around both sides of the Mississippi River. I took a picture of the sign, the first of many I would take in multiple states by the end of our journey.

We crossed the Mississippi River along the Third Avenue Bridge a few blocks north of the Mill Ruins Park, passing Nicollet Island to our left. The island lies in the middle of the river just to the north of the St Anthony Falls and was the site of

the first toll bridge ever built across the Mississippi in 1855. That bridge was later replaced by the current Hennepin Avenue Bridge that now runs over the island. Once we crossed the river we made a right onto 2nd Street (SE) and followed it until we reached 6th Avenue, turning into another public parking area a short walking distance from the eastern entrance of the Stone Arch Bridge. Along the waterfront, just to the south of us, was the University of Minnesota's Southeast Steam Plant, a combined heat and power plant that was originally constructed in 1903 to provide electricity for the former Twin City Rapid Transit street railway system. The Twin City lines operated streetcars and buses in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul area and was the predecessor of the current Metro Transit system. After the company went defunct, the University of Minnesota bought the steam plant for only $1 and now uses it to provide heat and electricity to its campus buildings within the city and several medical centers.

Joe and I slowly walked across the mighty Mississippi River along the Stone Arch Bridge, which is 2,100 feet (640 meters) in length. It was bitingly cold due to the high winds that made the temperature feel at least 12 degrees colder with every gust, but apparently this didn't stop folks from jogging and biking across the river. God Bless these Midwesterners! As we reached the center of the bridge we were able to get glimpses of the city's skyline from both sides of the river. Interpretive signs were posted in various sections, especially near the Mill Ruins Park end, explaining the bridge's construction, the history of the city's milling industry and the importance of the St Anthony Falls.

The Stone Arch Bridge opened in 1883. It is the only arched bridge made of stone along the Mississippi River and it is also the second *oldest* bridge on this famous waterway (only the Eads Bridge connecting St. Loius, Missouri and East St. Louis, Illinois is older). In 1971, the bridge was added to the National Register of Historic Places. It was built by railroad tycoon James J Hill as part of his Great Northern Railway and was designed using 21 stone arch spans and one steel-deck truss span. Minneapolis during this time already had a thriving commercial center on the west bank of the Mississippi, but newer businesses were also springing up on the eastern side of the city. As the population grew, the old Hennepin Avenue suspension bridge (over Nicollet Island) served as the only thoroughfare for commuters and pedestrians. The Stone Arch Bridge changed all that, connecting the west bank commercial district to the city's network of railroads on its eastern side. This would

greatly facilitate the commercial growth of the city. The last passenger train to cross the bridge was in 1978, and in 1994 it was converted into a popular pedestrian walkway. The bridge is now an iconic landmark within the city.

The Stone Arch Bridge offers one of the best viewing points of the St Anthony Falls which is located just to the north of the structure. This was the only natural waterfall along the Mississippi. From the mid-to-late 1800s, various dams were constructed atop the east and west faces of the falls to support the growth of the milling industries along the riverbanks. In 1880, the central face of the falls was reinforced by a sloping timber apron, preventing the upstream erosion caused by the powerful current of the falls. Starting in the 1950s, the timber apron was replaced by a concrete one and a series of locks were added to extend navigation to points upstream. So the St Anthony Falls doesn't look anything like it did back when the city was founded. Today, it is defined by the spillway, the upper dam and the locks just downstream of the 3rd Avenue Bridge and the lower lock and dam just to the north of the Stone Arch Bridge. The entire dam area has been designated the St Anthony Falls Historic District, which features a self-guided walking trail with signs explaining its development. We walked the length of the Stone Arch Bridge (at least to the area closed off by construction crews near the Mill Ruins Park side) and then turned around and headed back to the car.

Our next stop was a visit to the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden located in the Lowry Hill neighborhood of the city. We re-crossed the Mississippi River via the 3rd Avenue Bridge and drove through parts of Central Minneapolis back to the downtown area along Hennepin Avenue. As we approached 16th Street North we passed the beautiful Basilica of St Mary, the first church in the United States to be named a basilica in 1926 by Pope Pius XI. It lies just north of Loring Park, a large public green space from which the surrounding neighborhood gets its name. After crossing highway I-94 near the church we turned onto Lyndale Avenue South and drove to the Walker Art Center, parking inside the museum's garage. Initially, we had planned to visit the Walker Art Center, a very popular modern and contemporary art museum that receives over 700,000 visitors annually, but it, too, was closed on Mondays. *Drats*. Luckily, across the street from the museum is the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, one of the country's largest sculpture parks. We spent about an hour walking through the area, admiring the unique and interesting sculptures on permanent display.

The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is situated on about 11 acres of greenspace just to the west of Loring Park. It is operated by the Walker Arts Center in coordination with the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board. The land for the park had once been used for military drills before it was purchased by the city's park board in the early 1900s and converted into a floral garden. A U.S. National Guard Armory had been constructed on the site, as well. It was known at the time as the Armory Gardens. In 1934, the armory was torn down and the land reverted back to the park board, it was then used primarily as a sports park.

The Sculpture Garden first opened in 1988. It was initially designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, the American architect who also designed the new Walker Arts Center building in 1971. The garden was later expanded after a pre-existing sports stadium at the park was demolished during the 1990s. Today, it is one of America's largest urban sculpture gardens with 40 permanent art installations and several other temporary exhibits that are rotated periodically. One interesting feature of the park is the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge designed by Siah Armajani, an Iranian-born sculptor and architect known for his public artworks. This pedestrian bridge is both a work of art and a convenient walkway, extending for 375-feet above highway I-94 and Hennepin Avenue – a total of 16 road lanes! – connecting the Walker Arts Center/Sculpture Garden campus with Loring Park.

From the entrance of the Walker Arts Center we crossed the street and entered the sculpture garden, following a path around the entire park which brought us back to our starting point. The garden's centerpiece (and arguably the most popular sculpture) is *The Spoonbridge and Cherry*. It was one of the original sculptures when the garden first opened in 1988 and has now become synonymous with not only the park but the city itself. It features an enormous silver spoon (weighing nearly 7,000 pounds) with a large red cherry (weighing nearly 2,000 pounds) attached to the top of the spoon in a gravity-defying position. It is made of stainless steel and aluminum and coated with polyurethane enamel (which gives the sculpture its fascinating matte appearance) and was created by European husband and wife artist duo Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen who were famous for their oversized pop art sculptures of everyday items. The piece is situated near the center of the park over a small pond. When we visited, the sculpture was in the process of being renovated; it was covered in scaffolding and sealed off, the small pond drained temporarily while work was being done on it.

Since the sculpture garden was an extension of the Walker Arts Center, a contemporary art museum, most of the permanent pieces on display were of the thought-provoking variety. For example, we saw one artwork entitled *September Room (Room with Two Reclining Figures and Composition with Long Verticals*) by Dutch artist Mark Manders. According to the posted sign, this piece features 'three monumental heads that recall classical Greek sculpture, yet seem to be trapped between boards or beams, combining human figures with architectural elements in an attempt to invoke both the past and the present, the familiar and unfamiliar'. *Okay*. I'm glad the sign was there to explain all this because to us it looked like three people (there are three sculptures) who were having a terrible run-in with architecture; two of the figures are literally split in half by wall-like structures while the other is being squeezed in a horrifying vice-like grip by two opposing beams. *Hmmmmm*. I'm no art connoisseur, but what I took away from all this was: *Be careful what you build, cause it can kill you.* Nearby was another interesting artistic interpretation simply entitled *Adam and Eve*. And if you're thinking about a naked man and woman in the Garden of Eden you'd be as confused as I was; the misshapen couple looked more like the poor denizens of ancient Pompeii, covered in rock-hardened lava.

Next to this was a cool, monster-looking 12 foot tall sculpture entitled *Hephaestus* (the Greek god of fire, metalworkers and craftspeople). It has a mask-like face and arms that stretch out as if beckoning the viewer. Not far from it was an over-sized human hand made from what looked like clay bricks by Judith Hopf, a German artist. One of my favorite sculptures was the visually-stunning *Hahn/Cock*. At nearly 25-feet tall, it features the image of an enormous, blue-colored rooster perched atop a wide, white platform. The rooster, according to the artist, German sculptor Katharina Fritsch, can be symbolic of pride, power, courage, posturing or macho prowess. Its deep blue color is absolutely mesmerizing. When you see it, you *will* stop and stare.

We continued around the entire park looking at all the odd but interesting artwork. Another wonderfully unusual exhibit was entitled *Arikidea* by abstract expressionist sculptor Mark di Suvero. Made of steel and wood, this monumental sculpture is a crisscrossed section of beams that have been carefully (and safely) balanced so that a simple touch or even passing breeze will cause its elements to sway. A wooden

swing hangs down from the center inviting the public to interact with the sculpture. Joe took a swing on it while I photographed him.

We also came across two bell sculptures. The first one was by Belgium artist Kris Martin entitled *For Whom* (it answers the question in John Donne's famous poem verse "For Whom the Bell Tolls", which is, "it tolls for thee"). Martin acquired the bronze bell after it was discarded by a church in Germany. It has no clapper and is suspended from a wooden beam, programmed to sway silently on the hour. The idea being that the bell serves as a 'blank space' to which visitors can bring their own interpretations of bell-ringing, be it as a call to church service or the time of day. The other bell sculpture is entitled *Hare on Bell on Portland Stone Piers* by Irish-Welsh sculptor Barry Flanagan, who was best known for his bronze statues of hares and other animals. In this particular work, an elongated rabbit seems caught midair in an energetic leap over a bronze bell. Flanagan was intrigued by the symbolic meanings of hares in various ancient cultures and often portrayed them in his work in surprisingly humanlike poses or paired, as in this case, with inanimate objects to showcase their vitality.

One iconic sculpture we saw was LOVE by American pop artist Robert Indiana, which features the letters L and O over the letters V and E, with the O slightly tilted, stacked together in a grid. This famous image was first created by the artist as a personal holiday greeting card in 1964 and would later become an international symbol of transcendent power. Since its creation, the LOVE sign has been used to sell everything from posters to postage stamps.

As we returned to the entrance of the park we stopped to see one final and very intriguing sculpture entitled *Without Words* by American artist Judith Shea. Initially trained as a fashion designer, Shea used clothes in her sculptures as abstract forms and later as surrogates or substitutes for human presence. This particular artwork consists of three separate but equally haunting pieces: a standing dress on a plain headless/armless mannequin representing both an archaic Greek statuary and the sleek couture of the 1950s; a stylish winter coat created as a classical sculpture that appears to be sitting; and the bottom half of a large white head based on the Egyptian 18th Dynasty sculpture of Queen Tiye. Supposedly, the figures in this artwork are carrying on a conversation about modern life and antiquity. At least, that's what the posted sign suggested. And thank goodness for the signs because as interesting as all

the sculptures were, Joe and I were in a constant state of *"What the f…?"* as we made our way around the park.

The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden is open daily from 6:00am to midnight. It is one of the top things to see in the city and I wholeheartedly recommend this site. The only negative was that in certain areas patches of grass were yellowish or brown while in other sections it was overgrown. I'm not sure if this was due to the time of year or neglect on the part of the staff that oversees the park. While it was a little distracting at times, it didn't take away from the sheer splendor of the sculptures.

We returned to our car and proceeded to our next stop, the Minneapolis Institute of Art located within the Washburn-Fair Oaks Mansion District of the city. When navigating unknown areas my brother likes to use Waze and the app sent us through sections of the Lowry Hill, Loring Park and Whittier neighborhoods. We traversed pleasant tree-lined narrow streets with large brick homes and rows of nicely-maintained apartment buildings. We started out along Groveland Terrace near the Walker Art Center but soon found ourselves on Groveland Avenue which crosses over I-94. On La Salle Avenue we turned right and went two blocks before heading east along Franklin Avenue. Once we reached 3rd Avenue South we made another right and within minutes we were pulling up to the large complex that is the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Established in 1883, the Minneapolis Institute of Art is one of the largest art museums in the United States. Its current art collection exceeds 100,000 items, representing six continents and spanning 5,000 years of human cultural development. In 1915, the main museum building opened in its current location, directly across from the beautiful Washburn-Fair Oaks Park. This beautiful building, one of the most famous in the city, was designed in a Beaux-Arts architectural style made popular in Paris during the 19th century, combining elements of the French neoclassicism, Baroque and Renaissance styles. The museum has since been expanded over the years, culminating in a large campus that includes the Midwest Art Conservation Center and the Children's Theater Company. When we arrived, though, all we could do was admire the museum's architectural facade because – like all the other museums we had visited on this day – it was closed. I remember getting a little pissed at this point, thinking, *For fuck's sake, how hard do Minneapolitans party on the weekend that they have to close all their cultural*

centers on Monday!? And for the record, I know that was harsh and unfair, but, hey, c'mon…

The next stop on our list wasn't even in Minneapolis. When I was researching interesting things to do in the city, one of the most recommended sites was actually the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, a city located on the north bank of the Minnesota River roughly 10 miles south of downtown Minneapolis. Bloomington is the biggest suburban hub within the Twin Cities metropolitan area. With a population of around 90,000 it is also the fourth largest city in the state. It transformed from a sleepy little township into a sprawling suburb following the post-WWII economic boom and the subsequent arrival of my people, the Baby Boomer generation. And while it might seem strange that a shopping mall in Bloomington would be listed among the must-see things to do within the Twin Cities, this is no ordinary shopping mall. In fact, it is the largest indoor shopping mall not just in the United States but also in the entire Western Hemisphere. Joe was the one who first pitched the idea of visiting the Mall of America, I think he had friends or in-laws who'd been there and raved about the place. So, color me intrigued. From the Minneapolis Institute of Art we drove to highway I-35W heading south and then continued south along highway MN-77. Not far after passing the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport we took the Lindau Lane exit in Bloomington and reached the mall a few minutes later. *Holy Moly was this place huge*!

We parked in the enclosed West Parking ramp area and entered the mall through Macy's department store, one of the large 'anchor' stores within the complex. We were in the western section of the mall but once you step inside you tend to lose all sense of compass awareness. Luckily, they had many 'You Are Here' maps strategically placed on all the levels to help one navigate this labyrinth of retail shops and attractions. And what a smorgasbord of consumerism! The entire Mall of America property sits on 129 acres (52 hectares) of land, of which nearly 2.7 million square feet is retail space. You could easily get in your '10,000 steps' of cardio just walking one fourth of this retail behemoth. As an example, Joe and I only looped around the western side of the mall and that took us two-and-a-half hours. There is so much to see and explore that one would probably need to make multiple visits to experience it all. In fact, the mall is a destination location, attracting tourists and shoppers from the surrounding Midwest states (and beyond) with numerous hotel

chains situated around the property. It is estimated that between 32-42 million people visit the mall annually. *Wow*.

The Mall of America first opened in 1992 and was built on the site of the former Metropolitan Stadium, where the Minnesota Vikings and Minnesota Twins used to play from 1961 to 1981. The mall is owned by the Triple Five Group, a Canadian conglomerate that operates numerous ventures and properties including the three largest retail malls in North America (this one, the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta, and the American Dream mall in New Jersey). Since the 2000s, the Mall of America has been expanded along its north side. The architectural layout is nearly symmetric, with an almost rectangular floorplan. Currently, there are about 520 stores arranged along the three levels of pedestrian walkways. The south and east sides also have an additional fourth level. That's a lot of walking, folks. Besides the food courts, the property has numerous restaurant venues to choose from (I believe the mall has around 60 or so restaurants and eateries, ranging from typical fast food counters to fine dining establishments).

A *very* popular feature of the mall are the various entertainment venues designed to attract families to the site. In the very center of the mall is the Nickelodeon Universe, an indoor theme park featuring a rollercoaster and a water plunge ride. Joe and I had Philly cheesesteak sandwiches for lunch at a food court overlooking the theme park, as we ate we watched people zip by on the rollercoaster. Later, as we made our way through the mall, we came across many attractions like the Sea Life Minnesota Aquarium, a large multi-plex theater, a glow-in-the-dark mini golf course range, a wall-climbing section, simulated rides, various mazes and even a haunted house! And that was only a small portion of what the site offers, I read online that the Mall of America has over 20 attractions including a comedy club. Having been there now I could see why the mall is on the top ten lists of things to do and see in the Twin Cities. There is something for every age group. After lunch we spent a couple of hours walking through several levels, stopping inside various stores to browse or check out some of the more outrageous entertainment venues. We thought about attending a comedy show at the Rick Bronson's House of Comedy within the mall, but when we checked the schedule…you guessed it…they don't open on Mondays. *Motherfu…*!

We left the mall (thoroughly exhausted, I might add) around 5:00pm and decided to go back to the Canterbury Racetrack and Casino we had visited the night before. We were able to win another $210 playing baccarat in about an hour, increasing our total winnings for the past three days to almost $600. Joe was starting to come down with a nasty congestion from all the cold weather and we opted to head back to the hotel, stopping to pick up some over-the-counter cold and flu medication at a local Walgreens. The following morning we would be embarking on the return journey home along the Great River Road. We had no idea what the next several days along the Mississippi River would bring, nor the sights we'd see, but we were pretty excited. Before going to bed, we discussed what we'd learned thus far on our journey. One thing we both agreed on was how nice everyone was: from Atlanta to Nashville to Indianapolis to Green Bay to Minneapolis. We had felt welcomed everywhere we went, experiencing either Southern hospitality or Midwestern politeness at every stop. But those were relatively big cities. From this point forward we would be traveling along mostly rural roads and backwoods, including parts of the Deep South, so we kept our fingers crossed and hoped for the best.

Day Nine

(Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa)

I was awake by 4:30am. Joe was already up, as well. Neither one of us could sleep any longer, I think it was because we were both excited about embarking on the Great River Road portion of our trip today. The weather, though, was pretty shitty. As the morning wore on, heavy, dark clouds and intermittent rain made the temperature (which had dipped to 44°F) seem even colder. I still had a hard time wrapping my head around the notion that it was nearly June and the temperature was this cold. Meanwhile, in Miami people were already cranking up their air-conditioners! The medication Joe had taken the night before seemed to help with his congestion. I consumed two cups of instant coffee to get me going and then did my

travel exercise routine before shaving and showering. After breakfast in the hotel restaurant we returned to our room, repacked our suitcases and mapped out the route we would be taking for the day. Our next destination was Dubuque, Iowa roughly 265 miles away where we would spend the night at the Hilton Garden Inn.

We checked out of the hotel just before 10:00am. There was a light but constant rain drizzle as we drove out of Minneapolis. According to my iPhone weather app, the rain was supposed to stop by the time we reached the riverside city of Prescott, Wisconsin located at the confluence of the St Croix and Mississippi Rivers. The two rivers delineate the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin. Moving further southward from Prescott along the Great River Road we would quickly distance ourselves from the industrialized and bigger cities of the north and begin meandering closer to the Mississippi along a two-lane, very rural roadway. It would take us almost seven hours to reach Dubuque.

We drove east out of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul area on I-94, turning south on exit 244 and connecting with the Great River Road via Highway 10. As I've already stated in this journal, the Great River Road is not a single highway or roadway, but rather a collection of different roads that follow both sides of the Mississippi all the way south to Louisiana. One needs to be aware of this – especially if using a GPS app like Waze or Google Map – in order to not end up on a faster highway that would by-pass the scenic beauty of the Great River Road. On this day, we began our journey on Highway 10 but it soon morphed into Route 35, which we followed for the most part until we arrived at Dubuque. On a daily basis we had to choose which side of the Mississippi River we wanted to travel down. From the Twin Cities, my guidebook suggested following the Great River Road along its eastern banks through Wisconsin. This particular section of the Great River Road offered up some of the best scenic views of the entire road system. So that's what we did, staying on the eastern side of the Mississippi until we crossed the river into Iowa late in the afternoon.

The Great River Road is 2,069 miles long (3,329.7 km), beginning at Lake Itasca, a small glacier lake in north-central Minnesota that serves as the headwater for the Mississippi River, and continues south following the famous waterway until it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. It passes through sections of the following states: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas,

Mississippi and Louisiana. Initially, we were going to follow the entire road system from its origin to its conclusion, but due to scheduling constraints (Joe had to be back at work on a specific date) we had to begin our trip from Minneapolis, which shortened the road journey by one day. Even still, we managed to cover approximately 1,662 miles of the Great River Road over the following six-day period.

The term "Great River Road" refers to not only the series of roadways that meander around the Mississippi, but also to a larger region within these states used for tourism and historical purposes. In addition to the national parks and wetland refuges along the road system, each state has designated certain areas on the Great River Road as points of historic significance. The Mississippi River played a major role in the development and expansion of the United States in its early history, providing an important transportation artery and communication link allowing for the movement of settlers and commerce and the subsequent spread of customs, ideas and culture. For example, much of the genres we accept as 'American music' – like rhythm and blues, jazz, soul, rock and roll, and country – actually developed and proliferated from one region of the United States to another up and down the Mississippi. In this regard, the Great River Road offers not just scenic views and famous riverfront cities, but also huge doses of American history and culture.

The road system was developed by the Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MRPC), a multi-state organization established in 1938 for the purpose of promoting, enhancing and preserving the region and roadways known as the Great River Road. It took 30 years to create the series of roads and byways that make up this historic road system. The MRPC works collaboratively with the ten states to foster tourism and economic growth along the Mississippi River. Prior to the trip, I ordered a detailed map and information about the Great River Road from the MRPC website. I would recommend to anyone wishing to experience this famous route to request the free map, which comes with additional information and places of interests. The individual states also provide free pamphlets to visitors of the Great River Road on their respective websites, all of which help in navigating the system and planning the specific stops you want to make along the way.

From our hotel, it took us just under an hour to reach Prescott, a small Wisconsin riverfront community (pop: 4,300) that sits on the edge of the Minneapolis-Saint

Paul metropolitan area. Most of its residents actually work in the Twin Cities. Of the numerous small towns and cities we encountered that day along the Great River Road, Prescott was one of the bigger ones. It was settled by an American trader and pioneer named Philander Prescott in 1839. He was later killed during the initial attack that would ignite the *Dakota War of 1862* in which several bands of Dakota peoples rose up against white settlers after facing starvation following a brutal winter, crop failures and the depletion of wild game due to over-hunting. The U.S. government was a little slow to respond to the attacks due to the ongoing Civil War. But once the U.S. military arrived on the scene the rebellion lasted only five weeks, and like so many uprisings by native Americans, it did not end well for the Dakota.

To reach Prescott we had to cross over the St. Croix River. Once we passed the city we drove further south along Highway 35, winding our way through a portion of a fertile glacial plain whose rolling hills are cultivated with corn, an important part of our nation's breadbasket. Like much of our Midwestern grain belt, the region was made fertile by pulverized soil left behind from massive ice sheets over a two million year period. On our drive through this section we managed to see some farmlands but mostly we were surrounded by trees and foliage. Even the mighty Mississippi River, just to our right, was hardly visible at this point.

But the further south we went on Highway 35, the landscape changed dramatically. We entered what is known as the Driftless Region, an area of limestone bluffs and rocky uplands that stretches south into Illinois. During this portion of our drive we also had a closer viewing of the Mississippi River than at any other time during our six-day trek down the Great River Road. And what I mean by that is the roadways meandering around the river do not always bring you in close proximity to the riverbanks, so you basically only see the Mississippi if you have to cross over it or when you're staying in one of the cities adjacent to it. But on this portion of the trip, we were right next to the river and stopped several times to take in the view and snap some photos. The waterway in this section was sometimes framed on both sides of the river by incredible bluffs or misty rocky peaks that for me were the most scenic of the entire drive.

We passed many small towns with populations numbering only into the hundreds. Each of these hamlets had a Main Street (and sometimes it was the *only* street in the town). The Great River Road took us through so many of them I lost count. We'd

drive down Main Street in places called Maiden Rock, Stockholm, Nelson and Alma. Most of the small communities situated near the river had a gas station and at least a roadhouse or pub where you could get something to eat, but a few were nothing more than a strip of residential homes found off the two-lane Highway 35. I don't think these towns were designed to attract tourists, they were basically centered around fishing or loading up barges, but a few did offer at least one tourist attraction like a crafts shop, a historical marker of some kind or a small museum, a few offered restaurants with great views of the river or the bluffs. To me, most of these little hamlets resembled rustic images of a forgotten time, like a 21st century version of pioneer settlements along the Mighty Mississippi.

About a mile past the town of Maiden Rock we stopped at a scenic overlook off the side of the road to get a nice view of the Mississippi River as it made a wide bend near the Rush River Delta. This delta protects a floodplain forest of lowland hardwood trees on the alluvial plain at the mouth of the Rush River where it empties into a section of the Mississippi known as Pepin Lake. From this point forward – over long stretches of the roadway – the Great River Road offered up some of its best scenic views. We passed forests on our left and drove over several protected marshlands as we hugged the Mississippi on our way to Iowa. It was a very pleasant and serene drive, one lane in each direction, through a natural landscape that never failed to surprise us.

We reached Pepin, a town of just over 700 inhabitants, around noon. It was named after French explorers. Pepin offers a museum about Laura Ingalls Wilder who was born in 1867 in nearby Lund, Wisconsin. She was an American writer, teacher and journalist best known for her popular children's book series *Little House on the Prairie* that chronicled her life growing up in a pioneer-settler family. The museum features a replica of the log cabin she was born in. About six or seven miles past Pepin, the Great River Road took us over the Chippewa River Bridge and through a section of the Nelson-Trevino Bottom States Natural Area, a protected habitat of Bottomland Hardwoods, open waters and marshlands. These floodplain forests are periodically inundated with water and are critically important to the areas' biodiversity, providing sanctuaries for local wildlife. Additionally, floodplain forests help filter clean water for many areas of the South.

Beyond this watery forest we came upon the small town of Nelson (pop: just under 600), located at the junction of the Mississippi River and Chippewa River valleys, and roughly ten minutes later we drove through Alma (pop: just over 700). Interestingly, the town of Alma was named after the *Battle of the Alma* that occurred in 1854 during the Crimean War, when British, French and Ottoman forces attacked the Russian military defending the Crimean Peninsula. It was a horrific day-long battle that claimed almost 10,000 casualties between the two sides. Why the good folks of Alma, Wisconsin would have given a rat's ass about a foreign battle on the opposite side of the world in the middle of the 1800s is beyond me. But then again, the town does feature the Castlerock Museum, a collection of arms and armor from many points of European history (from Ancient Greece to the early modern period), so maybe the people here, for whatever reason, are fascinated by European warfare. Either that…*or they have a lot of free time on their hands*.

The Lock and Dam No. 4, owned and operated by the United States Army Corps of Engineers-Mississippi Valley Division, is also found in Alma. We pulled over to watch a river barge going through the lock, which was built in 1935. During that day's drive we saw several barges on the river, all heading upstream. The Mississippi River is an important means of delivering goods and materials in the region. In addition to the barges, a system of railroad tracks used by various companies run adjacent to the river. Just below the lock and dam is the Great Alma Fishing Float, a popular fishing destination on the Mississippi River where enthusiasts can enjoy the experience of catching fresh-water fish from a floating platform that also offers overnight accommodations.

We continued driving south along the Great River Road (Highway 35), passing through several more rural and nondescript townships and villages along the river. Every so many miles we would discover another wildlife refuge area or a marshland state park. There were posted hiking trail signs in certain areas. About 45 minutes after Alma we reached the town of Trempealeau (pop: roughly 1,800). Archaeologists have excavated earthwork mounds near here that date back to the time of *Cahokia*, a large Native American city that flourished across the river from St Louis around 1,000 AD (or CE). Cahokia was the largest and most influential urban settlement of the Mississippian culture, a collection of Native American societies that once flourished in what is now the Midwestern, Eastern and Southeastern parts of the United States from approximately 800-1600 AD (CE).

When French and British fur traders first entered this area of the Mississippi Valley in the 1800s, it was the descendants of these Native Americans they encountered. Archaeologists theorize that the earthwork mounds in Trempealeau may have been a colony of Cahokia at one time.

Twenty minutes further south we reached what would be the two largest riverfront communities we would see that day on the Wisconsin side of the Mississippi: the cities of Onalaska (pop: around 19,000) and La Crosse (pop: around 53,000). Lying next to each other, the two cities are part of the La Crosse-Onalaska metropolitan area of La Crosse County. They didn't resemble the quaint riverside villages we had seen thus far on our drive along the Great River Road; at least, not from Highway 35. The two cities had the combined look of a suburb with a small city vibe. We passed many residential streets but also strip malls, some large companies and businesses, fast food joints, gas stations and lodging establishments. Parts of historic downtown La Crosse looked like a throwback to the 1950s.

Geographically, La Crosse is situated on a broad alluvial plain surrounded by rivers. The Black River empties into the Mississippi just to the north of the city, and the La Crosse River flows into the Mississippi just north of La Crosse's downtown area, which delineates the city's north and south ends. It is the most populous city on Wisconsin's western border and serves as the spearhead of an important economic hub in that region of the state; again, you'd be hard-pressed to discern that from just driving down the Great River Road. To check out the city one has to venture off Highway 35. The La Crosse area is home to the headquarters or regional offices of such companies as Trane, Kwik Stop, Mayo Clinic, City Brewing Company, Gundersen Health System and more. This is also a college town, with almost 20,000 students enrolled in the city's three major schools: the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Western Technical College and Viterbo University.

As we drove through the city along Highway 35 we made a detour to see La Crosse's most iconic landmark: *The World's Largest Six Pack*. The former G. Heileman Brewing Company of La Crosse (1858-1996) was widely known in the upper Midwest for its Old Style brand beer. The brewery became famous for painting its six massive fermentation tanks to look like a gigantic six-pack of Old Style beer. When the company was sold, the new owners white-washed the tanks, causing a small uproar in the city. Eventually, a local company called City Brewing took over

the operation and re-painted the tanks, restoring the city's most cherished (and record-holding) landmark. The giant 'cans of beer' are on the left hand side of 3rd Street heading south and can't be missed. Joe and I pulled over and took photos of each other in front of the tanks. I read online they can hold enough beer to fill seven million cans. *Whoa*! I wondered if there was a correlation between this enormous six-pack and the fact this is also a college town. *Hmmm*.

We got back on Highway 35 and continued south along the Great River Road, driving next to the railroad tracks that run alongside the Mississippi. To our left, the view of the tall gray and yellow bluffs of the Driftless Region was mostly obstructed by trees and thick foliage, but to our right the Mississippi River was clearly visible, widening and narrowing at different points over wetlands and marshes. As we drove through Vernon County just south of La Crosse we were afforded one of the most striking views of the Mississippi as the fog-tipped rocky hilltop terrain of Minnesota across the river formed a spectacular backdrop against the waterway.

Near the small village of Lynxville (pop: 132) we stopped at a lookout point along the river to view a section of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. This important wetland has been a haven for migratory birds, fish, wildlife and people way before it became a designated refuge in 1924. The entire thing stretches for 261 river miles (from Wabasha, Minnesota to Rock Island, Illinois) and protects more than 240,000 square acres of Mississippi River floodplain. Certain areas allow for hunting, fishing, and wildlife recreation, attracting millions of visitors annually. The lookout had posted signs with pictures of the various animals that thrive in the area and depend on it for their survival. This particular section was home to numerous species of ducks (both the dabbler and diving varieties) and other winged creatures. In fact, judging from all the information boards this place was a birdwatcher's wet dream.

Twenty minutes after passing Lynxville we reached the city of Prairie du Chien (pop: 5,500). Lying at the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers, Prairie du Chien is the seat of Crawford County, Wisconsin. It was one of the last fairly large communities we saw along the Great River Road prior to crossing the Mississippi into Iowa. I read online that this unassuming little city was first established as a settlement by French explorers in 1673 and is considered one of the oldest colonial settlements by Europeans in the Midwestern United States. Prairie

du Chien was known in its early history as a famous fur trading center along the Mississippi, but by the mid-1800s European demand had declined along with the area's livestock. Today, Prairie du Chien's economy is similar to other Midwestern cities of its size. Most of its residents work in retail, service and manufacturing jobs with Cabela's and 3M being two of the largest employers. Interestingly, the city has a small municipal airport on its southern end. Why? I have no idea.

As we entered Prairie du Chien on its northside, the Waze app my brother was using to navigate was telling him to make a detour onto a one-lane street called Limery Road. At first I was reluctant, telling Joe we had to stay on the Great River Road (or Highway 35), but we soon saw a sign stating that emergency crews were currently working on a section of Highway 35 up ahead. Apparently, the road had been damaged by a recent storm and was closed off in one area while it was being repaired. So, we had no choice but to follow Waze's suggestion and turned left onto Limery Road. This detour took us through a winding path of heavily wooded rural hillsides where we saw only an occasional secluded home before the scenery gave way to farmlands. At one point we made a right onto Highway 27 (also known as Citizen Soldier Highway) and this took us all the way back to Prairie du Chien. The detour cost us about 30 minutes but was very scenic. We reconnected with Highway 35 near the center of the city and continued driving south along the Great River Road, crossing the Wisconsin River on Prairie du Chien's southern end. By now, the roadway had meandered inland through mostly farmlands and we could no longer make eye contact with the Mississippi River.

Approximately 40 minutes from Prairie du Chien we reached the town of Potosi (pop: less than 900). A sign tells visitors that Potosi's Main Street is the longest one in the world, measuring three miles. But this is supposedly based on a *Ripley's Believe It or Not* claim from the 1950s so I'm not sure if this is really accurate. Either way, three miles is still pretty long. The Potosi Brewing Company – which operated from 1852 to 1972, closed down and then reopened in 2008 as a brew pub and beer museum – is one of the town's biggest attractions. In addition, Potosi hosts an annual Catfish Festival and Fireman's Fish Fry in August that is quite popular in the area.

From Potosi we continued south and after passing the Village of Dickeyville (pop: just over 1,000) we finally said goodbye to Highway 35 and turned onto Route 61 (also referred to as the Blues Highway). Within fifteen minutes we were crossing

the Mississippi River via Route 61, officially entering the State of Iowa. Our night's lodging was in the *Hilton Garden Inn Dubuque Downtown*. The name of the hotel was a bit of a misnomer, though. It is actually located on an island situated in the *middle* of the Mississippi River. We didn't actually cross the entire river until the following morning when we continued our journey. We got off on the island exit and made it to the hotel by 6:00pm.

The hotel – a very nice establishment with a spacious modern lobby decorated with traditional Western elements – was next to the Q Casino and Resort. I had booked a night in this place thinking we could do some gambling here. After checking in we headed over to the Houlihan's restaurant adjacent to the hotel. We were both very hungry, having eaten only light snacks since our big breakfast in Minneapolis. I had a steak dinner, I don't recall what Joe ordered. We got back to the hotel room shortly after 7:00pm, thoroughly exhausted. The two of us had been awake since 4:30am and had spent the entire day driving. On top of that, Joe was still feeling congested and achy. I made him a hot tea toddy with a double-shot of whiskey he purchased at the restaurant's bar. Between the cold medication he was taking and the hot toddy he drifted off to sleep by 8:00pm, a rarity for my night-owl brother. I debated going to the casino by myself but I started to get very sleepy too and soon joined him in Dreamsville.

Day Ten

(Iowa and Missouri)

We were both wide awake shortly after 4:00am, having slept roughly eight hours apiece. Joe felt much better. Between the cold medication and a good night's rest his congestion had cleared up considerably. As we continued on our journey heading south, with the temperature outside rising steadily, we began to feel like two Florida geezers again. We watched the news on cable TV for a while, and I made my usual cups of instant coffee and wrote in my journal. By 7:30am we headed downstairs

where the hotel had set up a nice breakfast buffet. After returning to our room I took a shower and repacked. We then sat down to plan out our travel route for the day.

Our next stop was a two-night stay in St. Louis, Missouri. We had two options for getting there, either continue along the eastern side of the Mississippi through Illinois or drive down the western side through Iowa. Since we had already seen parts of Illinois on our drive up to Green Bay we decided to check out Iowa, a state neither one of us had ever been before and, quite frankly, might never have the opportunity to see again. The only problem was that if we opted to follow the Great River Road *religiously,* as we had done the previous day, the drive (a total of 370 miles) would have taken us nine hours due to the local speed limits and the meandering nature of the Great River Road itself. And this didn't take into account any stops along the way. This was an oversight on my part; I had calculated most of the distances between scheduled stops using highway speed limits averaging 60-70 miles per hour. Most of the posted speed limits along the Great River Road were much lower than that. Joe was concerned about the possibility of arriving in St Louis, a city with a reportedly high crime rate, at night.

So we had to compromise for the sake of expediency (and safety). From Dubuque we would head southwest to Cedar Rapids, Iowa and then turn south on Route 218 which is part of Route 27, also known as the Avenue of the Saints, a 563-mile long highway that stretches from Frontenac, Missouri all the way up to Saint Paul, Minnesota. It was the fastest route according to the Waze app. We made only one scheduled stop (besides gas and bathroom breaks) in the city of Fort Madison, Iowa. We ended up by-passing Route 61 (the Blues Highway) and a few of the smaller river roads along the Mississippi River during the first half of the drive that day, but the Avenue of the Saints actually morphs into Route 61 after passing Fort Madison, so we were able to reconnect with the Great River Road as we entered Missouri. In retrospect, we should have taken the Illinois side of the roadway because the scenery along the Avenue of the Saints highway through Iowa was basically farmland for a good portion of the drive. And while witnessing so much continuous farmland may have been interesting at first to a couple of city boys like us, it also got tiring and monotonous *real* fast. But the route did save us more than two and a half hours and we managed to arrive in St Louis in the late afternoon instead of in the evening.

We left Dubuque by 9:00am, fully crossing the Mississippi River into Iowa (remember, our hotel was on an island situated in the middle of the river). We drove on US Highway 151 south for over an hour before reaching the city of Cedar Rapids where we turned south onto the Avenue of the Saints highway. Cedar Rapids lies on both banks of the Cedar River. The city's 137,000-plus inhabitants make it the second-most populous city in Iowa. It is also considered the economic hub of Eastern Iowa with multiple large industries headquartered or maintaining offices there, including a few Fortune 500 companies such as *Collins Aerospace*, *Aegon* and *CRST* trucking. But Cedar Rapids real claim to fame is its grain-processing sector, which accounts for the city's most important industry. And judging by all the farmland in the area, it's easy to see why. To put it another way: *If you can't find a bowl of corn flakes in Cedar Rapids, Iowa… then, brother, you ain't really looking*. Cedar Rapids is one of the largest corn-processing cities in the world!

The following is a little background information on Iowa, including a brief historical digest:

Iowa is a land-locked state in the upper Midwestern region of the country. It's total population is about 3.2 million (according to the 2020 census). The capital city is Des Moines, its most populous urban area, located in the south-central part of the state or about 128 miles west of Cedar Rapids. The state's name is derived from the Native American tribe known as the Iowa (or *loway*) who are among the indigenous peoples of this region. Prior to becoming a state, what is now present-day Iowa was part of the Iowa Territory, an organized incorporated territory within the United States that existed between 1838 until 1846. When the state was admitted into the Union it simply adopted its territorial name.

The first European settlers in Iowa were the French back in 1673. France later claimed the area and it remained a French Territory until the conclusion of the *French and Indian War* in 1763. This war, between Great Britain and France (and their respective Native American allies), was actually part of a larger global conflict raging in Europe between 1756 to 1763 known as the *Seven Years' War*, which pitted Great Britain and Prussia against France and Austria with other European powers joining the fray in support of one side or the other. At the conclusion of the French and Indian War, France ceded its Canadian possessions to the British and its claims to the territories east of the Mississippi River. In addition, France gave Spain (one

of their allies in the greater conflict) the French Luisiana, its territory west of the Mississippi River, as compensation for Spain's loss of Spanish Florida to the British. The outcome of the French and Indian War established Great Britain as the dominant European power in North America. Spain, for its part, practiced a loose control over its territorial region, allowing French and British fur traders to establish trading posts along the Mississippi and Des Moines Rivers. In 1801, Napolean Bonaparte officially took control of Louisiana from Spain in a treaty. Spain gave up its colony in North America in exchange for territories in Tuscany.

Two years later, in 1803, the United States government paid 15 million dollars to the French First Republic to acquire the Louisiana territory. This was known as the Louisiana Purchase. And what a tremendous land deal this turned out to be. The U.S., for just 18 dollars per square mile, *nominally* acquired 828,000 square miles (2,140,000 square km) of territory, which today makes up the bulk of the central part of our country. I used the word 'nominally' because France only controlled a small portion of this territory, the rest was mostly in the hands of Native Americans. Besides direct control of Louisiana and the Mississippi delta region (and its critical New Orleans port), what the Louisiana Purchase allowed the U.S. to do was to buy the preemptive right to obtain Native American lands through either conquest or treaty to the exclusion of all other European powers. This would pave the way for mass migration of American settlers westward, leading to the establishment of numerous states including Iowa.

Around 60 percent of Iowa's land is used for farming, another 30 percent is grasslands, mostly pastures and hay with some prairie and wetlands. The remaining 10 percent consists mostly of forests, urban areas and water. I read online that Iowa's lack of natural areas stems from the growth over the years of its agricultural and livestock industries. For example, only 5 percent of its prairie pothole wetlands remains, and less than 1 percent of its tallgrass prairie is still intact. And most of the state's original forests are gone, as well. At first glance one would think that an agricultural state would not have as many environmental issues as a heavily industrialized one, but Iowa's main economic drivers – crops and livestock – present unique problems for the state. Large, concentrated animal feeding operations (or CAFOs) produce millions of tons of manure annually which has led to contaminated water in rural areas and a decline in air quality. Likewise, pesticide and fertilizer runoffs from its agricultural industry also negatively impact Iowa's environment.

But as my brother and I drove down the eastern part of the state near the Mississippi, none of this was evident to us. Basically, we saw a lot of newly-planted fields of soybean and corn, the two major crops in the state.

As we drove south from Cedar Rapids we passed the Lake Macbride State Park on our left, named after Iowa conservationist Thomas Huston Macbride. This is the largest state park in Iowa and a *very* popular fishing site. The lake offers muskellunge, walleye, channel catfish and the rare spotted bass. After crossing over the Iowa River near the upper boundary of North Liberty, a small city that serves as a suburb for Iowa City further south, the areas surrounding Route 218/27 opened up to reveal mostly flat farmlands. For the next hour and fifteen minutes we passed nothing but agricultural fields, farms, silos and small rural communities. I took several photographs to remind me of the terrain, but later that night when I perused the pictures on my iPhone I couldn't tell one place from another, it all looked the same.

We got off Route 218/27 near the small city of West Point, Iowa (pop: 921) and followed County Road J40 southeast for 15 miles until we reached the riverfront city of Fort Madison. This was the first time since leaving Dubuque that we saw the Mississippi River again. The city has a population of about 10,200 and is located between small bluffs in the southeastern part of the state along one of the widest sections of the Mississippi River. I had scheduled a stop here to visit the historic Fort Madison, the first U.S. military fort established in the upper Mississippi Region back in 1808.

The original fort burned down in 1813. In 1965, excavations on the parking lot of the former Sheaffer Pen Company (where the fort used to stand) revealed the central blockhouse and the foundations of the officers' quarters. When the site was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 a concerted effort was undertaken to preserve the city's historical legacy. During the 1980s a replica of the fort was constructed with the help of volunteer prisoners from the nearby Iowa State Penitentiary, a maximum security prison for men. The fort museum is situated on the eastern end of the city next to the river, and while the buildings were closed on the day we arrived, most of the perimeter defensive walls of the fort were missing and one can freely walk around the site. Perhaps this was not 'museum season' in Iowa because Joe and I were the only visitors, we literally had the fort to ourselve*s*. We

walked the entire length of the various two-story garrison buildings and took selfies in front of the main wooden gate, which was not attached to any walls. I thought that was a little peculiar, like finding a doorway in the middle of an open field. Later on, when I saw photos of the fort posted online the perimeter walls were still intact, so they either decayed or were in the process of being reconstructed, I'm not sure. Directly in front of the main gate is the mighty Mississippi and I could see why the military would have chosen this site to build a fort, it would have been easy to supply and transport men and equipment along the waterway.

The city of Fort Madison was established around this military post, the first of three forts built by the United States after the Louisiana Purchase to control trade and pacify Native Americans in the Upper Mississippi River region. The necessity of a military garrison was spurred on by an ongoing treaty dispute between the U.S. government and various Native American tribes, especially the Sauk, a people indigenous to the region of the Northeastern Woodlands (an area covering parts of the Midwest and the Northeastern United States and Southeastern Canada). Black Hawk, the legendary chief of the Sauk, was particularly pissed off when the Americans constructed Fort Madison, which he viewed as an unnecessary encroachment in the area. From the moment the fort was built in 1808 it came under constant attack by the Sauk and other tribes, and U.S. soldiers were routinely harassed whenever they wandered outside the fort.

During the *War of 1812*, the Sauk and other tribal peoples aligned themselves with the British. The attacks on Fort Madison by Black Hawk – his first encounter with American troops – are considered to be the only real battles fought west of the Mississippi during this war. In 1813, Black Hawk laid siege to the fort and nearly overran it. The situation was so dire, the remaining troops inside abandoned the fort, setting it on fire before scurrying along trenches to the river and escaping in boats under the cover of night. So I guess as a deterrent the fort was not very successful, but its installation – the first in the region for the fledgling United States – gave rise to the city that took its name, laying the foundation for future settlements as more resources were later poured in to push Native Americans out of the area.

We ended our personal tour of the fort on the walkway in front of the main gate. To the east of us was the Fort Madison Toll Bridge, a double-decked swinging truss bridge built in 1927 that crosses the Mississippi River into Niota, Illinois. A double

track railway occupies the lower deck; above it is a two-lane roadway for vehicular traffic. The bridge is owned by BNSF Railway. We returned to the car and drove through a section of the downtown along Avenue H (from 6th Street to 9th Street), which is part of the Fort Madison Downtown Historic District. This area is also listed under the National Registry of Historical Places; it includes a portion of the original city and a collection of late-19th century storefronts that lend the city a tremendous amount of quaintness. We stopped on Avenue H to photograph the Fort Madison Santa Fe Depot, a 1910 Mission-style railway station that serves as a stop on Amtrak's *Southwest Chief* route, connecting travelers between Chicago and Los Angeles. To the north of the downtown district are tree-lined neighborhoods with large, very old homes, some with verandas that wrap around the front and sides of the properties. I'm guessing many of them were over 100 years old (and a few looked pretty dilapidated, as if they could collapse at any moment). We also stopped at a small central park to take a photo of a miniature replica of the Statue of Liberty that was donated by the Boys Scouts of America back in the early 1950s. From here we exited Fort Madison via Route 61, getting back on the Great River Road and crossing into the State of Missouri.

Route 61 took us near the Mississippi for a few miles before connecting again with Route 27 (Avenue of the Saints Highway) and we continued south for almost three hours before reaching St Louis. Near Wentzville, Missouri, Route 27/61 blended into Highway 64 and that took us southeast right into the St Louis downtown area. On exit 39B we got off the highway, driving past Busch Stadium (home of the St Louis Cardinals) and arrived at the Drury Plaza hotel on South 4th Street a few minutes later. The Drury Plaza proved to be our favorite hotel of the entire trip. For starters, it is located just across the street from the famous St Louis Gateway Arch. The hotel also offered its guests a few extra perks that none of the other hotels matched. In addition to a delicious free breakfast buffet, they provided a complimentary 'snack time' buffet from 5:30 to 7:00pm to coincide with their Happy Hour that included an impressive array of hot and cold foods that easily replaced the need to have dinner elsewhere. In fact, other than lunch the following day, we ate all our meals at the Drury Plaza…*and it didn't cost us a dime*. Woohoo! Each guest receives two complimentary drinks (*daily*) during happy hour. My brother and I thought the Drury Plaza was America's best kept secret. We loved this place!

We arrived at the hotel just before 5:00pm. After checking in and sorting out our luggage, we headed over to the Gateway Arch to take photos of this iconic monument as the sun passed overhead. We walked along 4th Street to the Luther Ely Smith Square, a wide open green space adjacent to the Gateway Arch National Park directly to the east that provided us with our first full view of this amazing arch. Seeing it for the first time inspires awe. It looks both majestic and strange, like some kind of massive alien structure that touched down in St Louis. We walked the length of the square and crossed into the Gateway Arch National Park which is just another large plaza where the monument is situated. In back of the arch is the Mississippi River. Joe and I took photos and selfies in different positions around the monument and then walked down to the Gateway Arch Trail near the river to take more pictures of it with the sun overhead. The following morning we would go to the top of the arch for some impressive views of the city.

We returned to the hotel around 6:30pm and headed over to a makeshift bar in the lobby where a bartender had set up shop next to the entrance of the buffet area. I ordered some kind of juice drink while Joe had a couple of cocktails (all complimentary). At first, we didn't know the buffet being offered was included as part of their Happy Hour, so I asked the guy sitting next to us who had a plate piled high with food and when he answered in the affirmative – chewing furiously, I might add – my brother and I wasted little time making a beeline to the buffet tables. God Bless the Drury family!

With our bellies full and our thirst quenched we went back to the room to freshen up and then hit the streets by 7:30pm. Ten blocks from the hotel, near the riverfront, was the Horseshoe St Louis, a casino-hotel operated by Caesars Entertainment. We had been very lucky so far on this trip in all our gambling endeavors, winning almost $600 on our three previous casino outings, so we decided to give the Horseshoe a try. Instead of taking an uber we opted to walk in order to burn off the calories from the buffet. The first eight blocks along 4th Street were fine, but as we approached the underpass of Highway 44, across from the casino, the area looked a little intimidating, with homeless people and pockets of suspicious-looking individuals. Some looked like thugs, to be honest. My brother and I engaged in conversation and avoided looking at them directly and quickly made our way to the casino entrance, where we found a security detail sufficient enough to repel a small invasion. A Four Seasons Hotel is adjacent to the casino.

Once inside this beautiful casino we relaxed and looked for the baccarat tables. We found only one that was open (the casino, as big as it was, seemed empty). The unease we felt walking to the Horseshoe didn't dissipate after we sat down at the table, we promptly lost $200 in a matter of twenty-minutes and Joe got so upset he told me, "Let's get out of here, I have a bad feeling about this place." I have to admit, I got a little angry because I am an inveterate systems player at baccarat and believe that short sequences of unlucky decisions at baccarat can be overcome with good money management. I thought we had enough of a bankroll (our previous winnings) to wait out a losing streak until our luck changed. There are 70-plus hands dealt in a shoe of cards and we still had about 45 hands to go. This could have given us a chance to at least break even. But Joe was having none of that. Once my brother gets a bad vibe about *anything* he quickly moves on. And in hindsight, I guess he was right.

As we left, I asked the security staff at the entrance if there was another casino nearby. They told us that across the Mississippi River, in what is East St Louis, Illinois, there was an establishment called the DraftKings at Casino Queens Hotel. It was only 6 minutes by car, they said. Not being from the area, we asked them if we could walk there. The security staff exchanged nervous glances and a few eye rolls before informing us it would take too long to cross the river by foot, since the only pedestrian pathway was further north…and, in case that failed to dissuade us, they cautioned us about East St Louis, telling us certain areas can be a little 'rough' to walk through. Okay, we got the message. Reluctantly, we headed back to our hotel. We reached our room by 9:00pm, too tired to venture out anymore. Besides, we had a big day of sightseeing tomorrow in St Louis and we needed to get an early start. We watched some TV before calling it a night.

Day Eleven

(Missouri)

We were up by 5:30am. I turned on the TV and the local news station was talking about the recovery efforts underway within the city after a tornado touched down in St. Louis six days earlier. We were in Indianapolis when this tornado outbreak occurred across the Midwest and Ohio Valley, spurning 61 tornados over a two-day period. During the storm a powerful EF3 tornado (with wind speeds between 130-165 mph) touched down in parts of St. Louis just to the northeast of Forest Park, a large, urban green space located in the middle of the city and often referred to as the "Heart of St Louis" that serves as an important civic center for the locals. Within Forest Park are various attractions, including the St. Louis Zoo, the St. Louis Science Center, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Missouri History Museum and the St Louis Municipal Opera Theatre (known as the MUNY). The tornado touched down only a dozen blocks or so north of this area in the neighborhoods of Greater Ville and Fountain Park, causing widespread destruction and killing five people.

Following the storm, while we were in Green Bay, I actually called the Drury Plaza hotel in St. Louis inquiring if everything was okay. We didn't know if we had to make other arrangements, or maybe even by-pass the city altogether, but the front staff assured me the tornado had only damaged that one section of the city far from the hotel. Even still, the incident made us change our sightseeing plans for the day. Originally, we were going to visit Forest Park, and specifically the St. Louis Art Museum, but decided against it because city emergency crews were still working close to the area and we weren't sure what the traffic situation would be like.

At 7:30am we went downstairs to enjoy our included breakfast buffet. By 9:30am we hit the streets. The weather outside was cool but comfortable and as the day wore on it became warmer. From this point forward we left the cold behind us. Over the coming days, as we continued into the South, the weather turned hotter (and wetter). In other words, just the right kind of sweltering mugginess two South Floridia geezers like us thrive in. We were cruising now on pure iguana mode…

St. Louis is technically categorized as an *independent city,* which means it is not in any county and is considered a primary administrative division within its own

state; I guess similar to a county but not in name. Incidentally, there are only 41 designated independent cities like this in the United States, all but three are in Virginia (due to their unique state constitution). The other two independent cities outside of Virgina are Baltimore, Maryland and Carson City, Nevada. The population of St Louis hovers just over 300,000 (according to the 2020 census) but its metropolitan area, which includes sections of Illinois just across the Mississippi River, balloons to 2.8 million making it the largest metropolitan area in Missouri (and, interestingly, the second largest in Illinois).

The city was founded in 1764 by French fur traders who named it after King Louis IX, a 13th century monarch who led two Christian crusades in the Holy Land and was later canonized a saint. St Louis would become the regional center of what was the French Illinois Country, or the Upper Louisiana, a vast region claimed by France in the 1600s that was part of New France (the French colonies in the New World). The United States government would later acquire all the remaining French territories under the Louisiana Purchase of 1804. During the 1800s, St Louis became a major port city, causing its population to explode, making it at the time the fourth-largest city in the U.S..

Today, St Louis continues to have an impactful economy. It has been designated a Gamma city by the Globalization and World Cities Network, a British think tank that studies the relationship between cities worldwide in the context of globalization. Gamma cities under this classification are cities that link smaller economic regions into the greater world economy. St Louis' 2025 GDP was roughly $231 billion, and while it's growth rate in this regard has slowed a little bit, it still packs an economic punch. The city's economy is well-diversified between manufacturing, service, transportation, trade and aviation industries. It is currently home to 16 different companies that are listed under the *Fortune 1000*.

But this beautiful city does have its decidedly *rough* edges. Its population peaked shortly after WWII, and as more and more white people moved to the suburbs, which was the case during the economic revitalization of America during the 1950s, the city's population began to decline and certain areas have been abandoned or neglected and given way to urban blight. Its racial and ethnic composition has also changed dramatically since the mid-20th century. Back in 1950, 82 percent of the population was white, today that number is down to only 42 percent. The black

population has grown to almost 43 percent and is highly concentrated in the northern sections of the city. There is a large number of Bosnians living in the metro area, as well. Following the Bosnian War of the 1990s, tens of thousands of Bosnian refugees (mostly Muslim Bosniaks) settled in the area and are now fully integrated into the community.

A scary distinction that sets St Louis apart from other American cities is its high rate of homicides. Since 2014, St Louis has routinely topped the list of American cities with the highest murder rates per 100,000. What is perplexing is that while its overall crime rate (an indexing of *all* types of violent crimes and property crimes) has actually been declining over the years, and continues to do so, it still retains one of the highest murder rates per capita in the United States. In 2025, a total of 141 homicides were reported in the city, which is actually a decrease from the previous year. I read online that the city continues to work towards reducing its violent crime rate through community partnership efforts, which help build trust between residents and police, making it easier to solve cases. Historically, relations between the black communities and the police have not always been good, leading to shootings of unarmed suspects, which in turn have led to protests and riots. My brother and I were well aware of St Louis' reputation in this regard. But we were staying in the downtown civic center district near the river and didn't experience or witness anything that would have caused us to be overly concerned. On the contrary, the area was nicely maintained, the architecture quite fascinating and the people were very friendly. We really enjoyed our stay in St Louis and wouldn't mind going back to explore it some more. But, in all fairness, I could say the same for almost every other city we stopped in.

We decided not to use the car that day and did all our sightseeing on foot. Our first stop was right next door at the Gateway Arch. We wanted to take the tram up to the top of the structure for some killer views of the city. As we had done the night before we walked north along 4th Street to Luther Ely Smith Square, named after the lawyer and civic booster who first pitched the idea of building this national park monument back in 1933. Across from the square on 4th Street stands the Old Courthouse building of St Louis, constructed in the middle of the 1800s. Some of the most pivotal cases in American history were heard inside its courtrooms. In 1847, African-American slaves Dred and Harriet Scott sued their former enslaver for their freedom inside this courthouse. This famous case would end up going all the way to

the Supreme Court in 1857 where Chief Justice Roger B. Taney read what is arguably the worst majority decision ever handed down by our highest court, stating that enslaved people were not citizens and could not sue for protection under Federal law. The implications of this ruling would be one of the arguments for the Civil War.

Another famous case originally heard inside this courthouse was the lawsuit filed by Virginia Minor in 1872 who was denied the right to register to vote in Missouri because she was a woman, this would lead to another controversial Supreme Court ruling in Minor vs Happersett in which the Court held that citizenship did not confer a right to vote and therefore state laws barring women from voting were constitutionally valid. Both these terrible judicial decisions would eventually be overturned but not before much bloodshed (in the case of the abolition of slavery) and continued legal battles and protest marches culminating in the 19th Amendment (for women's voting rights). In 1930, the city stopped using the courthouse for judicial purposes. It was slated to be demolished but public outcry was so great it was preserved as a historical site and museum and is now part of the Gateway Arch National Park complex.

We crossed Luther Ely Smith Square heading for the Gateway Arch entrance. As we approached the structure in the morning sunlight we again took several photographs of this truly iconic landmark. Ever since it was completed in 1965 it has become synonymous with St Louis in the same way the Statue of Liberty conjures up images of New York City. It is an unusual, but magnificent, architectural feat. The Gateway Arch (also referred to as "the Gateway to the West") was designed by the Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen with the help of German-American structural engineer Hannskarl Bandel in 1947. Their submission won the initial competition that determined what kind of monument was to be built at the site. The actual construction, though, did not take place until 1961 when excavation work finally began. It was completed on October 28, 1965. The Gateway Arch is the tallest monument in the United States, a steel catenary arch that rises 630 feet (192 meters) into the air and measures an equal 630 feet wide at its base. The legs of the arch begin at 54 feet (16.5 meters) wide and narrow to only 17 feet (5.2 meters) as it ascends to its highest point. A special tram system was created to take visitors to an observation deck at the very top of the structure.

The purpose of this monument was to commemorate three important things: the Louisiana Purchase, which paved the way for the westward exploration of our future country by American pioneers; to celebrate St Louis, the first American civil government west of the Mississippi River; and to highlight the debate over slavery raised by the *Dred Scott* case. Prominent St Louis attorney Luther Ely Smith led the committee that persuaded President Roosevelt to make the site of the monument a national park. During the early 1930s, the federal government was looking for a location to build a suitable memorial for Thomas Jefferson. At the time, there were only two national monuments dedicated to U.S. presidents (the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial). Smith persuaded Washington to honor President Jefferson by building a monument to what was his greatest achievement in office: the Louisiana Purchase of 1804. The selection of St Louis was only logical. It was here where the Three Flags Day ceremony (March 9-10, 1804) took place when Spain officially completed the turning over of the Louisiana colonial territory back to France, which then officially handed it over to the United States to finalize the Louisiana Purchase deal signed in 1803. This paved the way for the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1808-1806) that set out from St Louis to explore westward, reaching all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The park was originally called the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, and there is a statue of Thomas Jefferson within the Museum of Westward Expansion underneath the arch. In 2017, Missouri's two U.S. senators introduced a bill to change the name to the Gateway Arch National Park and after Congress approved the bill President Trump signed it into law a year later.

We entered the Gateway Arch underground visitors' center via a circular stairway that faces west towards the Old Courthouse. Tram tickets to the top of the arch cost around $15-19. In addition, the site offers multiple attractions like a documentary film entitled *Monument to a Dream* (35 minutes) shown inside their Tucker Theater which details the planning and construction of the Gateway Arch. And I think they offer some kind of virtual reality experience, as well. One can also purchase tickets here for the various St Louis Riverfront Cruises that leave from the dock area along the Mississippi River just in back of the arch. All of these attractions have their own cost but you can bundle and get a combo ticket to save a little money. The visitors' center also has a museum that was renovated in 2018 featuring exhibits on a variety of topics pertinent to the westward expansion of our country from the perspective of

St Louis and fun facts about the history and construction of the Gateway Arch. Joe and I just purchased the tram tickets. We only had one full day in the city and didn't want to spend half of it at one stop.

The tram rides are timed and limited to only so many visitors, this is due to the size of the arched observation deck, which is 65 feet long and seven feet wide and can only hold a maximum of 160 people at a time (or the equivalent of four full trams). But at any given moment there are only 80 people in the observation deck because the trams depart every ten minutes, which is exactly the time everyone is allowed to be up there before they must come back down, and this is done to accommodate the large number of daily visitors. There are sixteen windows on each side of the viewing area, each one measures 7 by 27 inches and offer views up to 30 miles away. As we waited to board our tram, a guide told us that there are three modes of transportation to the top of the structure: two sets of 1,076-step emergency stairs, one in each leg of the arch; a 12-passenger elevator (for VIPs, I'm assuming); and two trams, one in each leg.

Each tram is a chain of eight cylindrical, five-seat compartments that look more like space capsules. A person with claustrophobia will shit in their pants at first glance. And for the record, I had to clench my butt cheeks tight, folks. I'm not sure what kind of humans the engineers had in mind when they were measuring the space *five people* could take up – perhaps they envisioned aboriginal pygmies from Southeast Asia – but you'd be hard-pressed (in more ways than one) to squeeze five full-bodied 'American good ole boys' into one of these things. Luckily, our compartment capsule only had me and Joe and a friendly, albeit nervous-looking, Swedish woman. And even still it was a tight, anxiety-inducing (for me, anyway) fit. These capsules rotate like Ferris-wheel cars along a rail system as they go up and down the arch's legs. The door of each compartment is made of glass, but the only view heading up is the interior of the structure. The trip to the top takes four minutes and the ride down only three minutes. In other words, an *eternity* for someone who suffers from claustrophobia.

Once we reached the top we moved from window to window taking in the panoramic views of St Louis from every angle. To the east we could see the Mississippi River below and East St Louis, Illinois. On the western side we had clear views of the downtown civic center, the Old Courthouse and even a great view of

Busch Stadium. One very cool picture I took was the silhouette of the Gateway Arch along the grassy plaza adjacent to the Luther Ely Smith Square. Once our ten minutes of allotted viewing time was up, the elevator doors opened automatically and we re-boarded our capsule for the ride back down. Joe and I spent thirty minutes or so in the arch's museum where one can learn how this structure came to be and how it was constructed and the key people who made this possible. The museum also has dioramas and exhibitions pertaining to the westward expansion that began from St Louis, how pioneers traveled and survived in the wilderness. Another section shows the rise of St Louis from its inception into the 20th century. We had a great time here and it should go without saying that if you visit St Louis only once, then you definitely owe it to yourself to visit the Gateway Arch.

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We walked from the Gateway Arch back to 4th Street and then proceeded west along Market Street to Kiener Plaza, a public park located just behind the Old Courthouse building. I took a nice photograph of the courthouse's green dome framed between the Gateway Arch from the park. Kiener Plaza is part of the Gateway Mall. The mall is a series of public green spaces stretching from the riverfront plaza (site of the Gateway Arch) all the way to 20th Street in the Downtown West area of the city, running for about 16 full blocks. It is a popular pedestrian route of open squares and plazas that offers visitors and locals alike a scenic pathway through the downtown section of St Louis.

One street further west we reached the Citygarden Sculpture Park, a previously empty two-block grassy lot that was converted into a beautiful sculpture garden in 2009. Citygarden (yep, that's how you spell it) was funded and designed by the St Louis' Gateway Arch Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports public art. The city owns the land where the park is situated but the foundation owns the statues and covers the cost of maintenance except water and electricity. The sculpture park was part of a plan drawn up in the 1990s to revitalize the downtown area. Since first opening, the park has had quite an impact, attracting over a million visitors to the downtown section of St Louis and leading to renewed interest in renovating the

entire Gateway Mall. City planners wanted this green space to be both a place for public art and also a recreational site for locals. The park includes a 'spraying' 102-fountain area where children can play during those hot summer months and a 180-foot long pool with a six foot tall waterfall. Throughout the Citygarden are six rain gardens that are nicely maintained and an absolute joy to walk through with Ginkgo biloba trees and native plants. Along the park's southern half is a low, granite-topped wall which serves as a seating section for visitors. The northern section of the park has a smaller curved wall made from Missouri limestone, this includes the fountain and pool area.

Joe and I spent at least 30 minutes here admiring the artwork. I read online there are 29 sculptures on display within the park made by many renowned artists. The larger sculptures are presented on wide lawns while the smaller artworks are reserved for the more private areas within the park, making a stroll through the gardens a moment of unexpected and curious discovery. Like the sculpture park we visited in Minneapolis, the artwork made one stop, think and ponder its meaning. And, yeah, some of it made us scratch our heads and say, *"What the f….?"* But the one thing that really made this sculpture park stand out (as compared to the one in Minneapolis) was how well-maintained it was. It managed to provide a small, intimate green haven in the midst of an otherwise bustling downtown area.

Among my favorite artworks within the Citygarden was the large bronze head of the Greek god Eros, which is lying on its side, entitled *Eros Bendato* (Eros Bound). The piece was created by Polish artist and monumental sculptor Igor Mitoraj, who was inspired by ancient Greek and Roman culture and mythologies. The statue's eyes are bound and meant to convey that desires and ideas have been imprisoned. At least, this is what I read online. To me, it resembled a giant decapitated head. What made it particularly creepy was that the eyes are blackened (but somehow still seem to be watching you as you walk by). I'm shuddering as I type this, folks.

Another thing I liked about the sculptures in this park was the whimsical nature of many of the exhibits. I imagine this might be because the city planners were also trying to create a family-orientated recreational park. We saw over-sized white bronze statues of fat, adorable rabbits, a large Pinocchio with arms outstretched looking up at the sky, an elegant riderless horse with a star-shaped form (a geometric pattern known as a stellated dodecahedron) balanced on its back, a man's pink-

colored business suit (sans the man) standing atop a high pedestal, a metal scarecrow made to look like a Quaker farmer, a gigantic hair pick and so forth. And the best part? It was all free and outdoors. Kudos to the city of St Louis.

We continued walking westward. On the next block of the Gateway Mall just beyond the sculpture park stands the Civil Courts Building, a landmark structure completed in 1930 that houses the 22nd Judicial Circuit Court of Missouri. This was the building that replaced the Old Courthouse. The roof is made of cast aluminum and was designed to resemble the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. A series of 32 Ionic columns surround the roof. In 2024, the structure was renamed the Clyde S. Cahill Civil Courts Building in honor of the African-American jurist who was nominated by President Carter to the United States District Court and served until his death in 2004. The plaza in front of this beautiful building contains the Freedom Suits Memorial, a 14-foot tall bronze sculpture that commemorates the approximately 400 lawsuits filed in Missouri prior to the Emancipation Proclamation (1862) on behalf of slaves demanding their freedom.

From here we walked further west along the Gateway Mall, crossing Poelker Park and stopping to see the Merchant Marine Memorial (a large black anchor) in the plaza directly in front of the Soldiers Memorial Military Museum on Chestnut Street. We stopped by the entrance of this museum for a closer look. The building – which opened on Memorial Day 1938 – stands out due to its stripped down Classical style, a very plain structure with limited ornamentation. Only four monumental sculptures – representing *Loyalty, Vision, Courage* and *Sacrifice,* each figure standing next to a horse – adorn the North and South sides of the building (two on each side). The open-air breezeway that separates the two wings of the museum has a large black marble cenotaph with the engraved names of St Louis' war dead from World War I. The museum is operated by the Missouri Historical Society and is free to the public. It features exhibits and memorabilia from American Wars dating back to the First World War.

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Our next stop was the City Museum located within the Washington Avenue Loft District several blocks from the Gateway Mall. I had chosen this site based on my internet searches of the top ten places to see within the city. The visitors' comments all raved about the place; it was arguably the most *popular* museum in a city known for some pretty impressive museums. We had no idea, though, how much fun we would have inside this building. We spent the rest of the afternoon there happily oblivious to the time. The museum was designed with children in mind, but any adult wanting to engage their 'inner child' will have a blast here, too. It is unlike any museum I've ever visited before and, believe me, I have seen a ton of them worldwide. From the Gateway Mall we headed north for six blocks until we reached the site.

Upon seeing the front side of the City Museum from the street most newcomers will blink in disbelief and then realize something *very* unusual is happening inside. The museum bills itself as an 'ever-evolving, always thrilling and artist-built playground' where one can ride, climb, crawl through and slide down the exhibits and installations. And they're not kidding, folks. The museum is housed inside a ten-story former warehouse/office building previously occupied by the International Shoe company. When the shoe business went bankrupt the property was purchased in 1993 by St Louis-based artist Bob Cassilly and his then-wife, Gail Soliwoda, both of whom were sculptors. They opened the City Museum four years later hoping to spark a renovation boom in downtown St. Louis. Originally founded to share the owners' artistic expressions, the City Museum soon gained worldwide notoriety as a place that practically defines the term 'interactive experience'.

As Joe and I approached the building from the corner of N 16th Street and Lucas Avenue our jaws slackened as we took in the sight. One's first glimpse of the museum is an outdoor playground called MonstroCity, located in front of the building. Visitors are greeted by a large stone snake that wraps itself around the front gates, known as the serpent wall. MonstroCity features two Sabreliner 40 aircraft fuselages that are suspended high in the air, framed between a pair of castle turrets. And if seeing two planes hanging next to each other above a city street isn't enough to peak your curiosity, then how about all the kids crawling through them like ants. Connecting the two planes (and an unusually tall slide) are four-foot wide Slinky tunnels and open skywalks filled with gleefully screaming children. Underneath MonstroCity is an early 1800s frontier log cabin that was once the home of Daniel

Boone's son. It was moved to the City Museum in the 1990s. Now referred to as the Cabin Inn, visitors can go inside or enjoy the brick patio bar above it.

Like much of the rest of the museum, MonstroCity is a hodgepodge collection of architectural elements thrown in with no apparent purpose. For example, you'll see a series of stand-alone ionic columns *and* a 25-foot cupola, all of which were salvaged from abandoned or torn down buildings. In fact, we later learned that all the exhibits within the museum were constructed from reappropriated junk and from donated or otherwise discarded building materials. And MonstroCity wasn't even the first sign that something weird and wonderful was afoot here, because up on the roof a yellow school bus appeared to be teetering dangerously over the side of the building! Based on this outrageous first impression, my brother and I couldn't wait to see what was inside.

In 2019, eight years after the death of artist Bob Casilly, the City Museum was sold to Premier Parks, a water and amusement park company out of Oklahoma City. They have been actively promoting the site, making it one of St Louis' biggest attractions after the Gateway Arch with hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. The ticket lobby was packed with grade-and-middle schoolers. We did see many families, as well, but mostly it was young students and their teachers. Loud, boisterous and having fun. And it was infectious, too. Joe and I were giddier than two kids at a county fair. I don't recall the exact cost of an adult or senior ticket (I think it was around 30 bucks) but it was well worth it. You will be pleasantly surprised by every corner of this wonderful museum.

Since it first opened in 1997, the museum has regularly expanded, adding newer and even more bizarre exhibits and wings. The first four floors and the rooftop of this ten-story building constitute the museum section, the remaining floors are used as offices and apartments. But remember, the actual building – a former shoe warehouse – took up almost an entire city block, so even this limited building space is pretty *huge*. Another interesting feature within the museum is the apparent lack of signage. This is intentional. The founders wanted the museum experience to be one of exploration and discovery. Each wing or gallery offers something entirely different; learning about what materials were used or how it was put together is part of the fun and exploration. And because it's mostly all interactive, visitors are free to climb over much of the exhibits and installations. That's pretty wild. Although, I

must caution, some of these areas are made specifically for young people, so a full-grown (or overweight) adult might not fit in some of the tunnels, slides or cave-like exhibits you'll find on each floor. These slides and hidden passageways meander throughout the museum and kids would suddenly appear from a sliding tunnel sticking out of a wall or ceiling from some other part of the building. *It was insane*.

On the first floor, just beyond the ticket booths, we entered the original part of the City Museum that first opened back in 1997. Bob Cassilly created a life-sized sculpture of a bowhead whale that visitors can walk through to reach a large fish tank. This bizarre first gallery pretty much sets the tone for the rest of the museum. It's as if the artist was letting you know that – from this point forward – be prepared to encounter weird and wonderful things. Nothing in this museum is exactly as it seems…even when it *seems* to be, um, something. For example, on the first floor the ceiling is lined with shredded Kevlar material salvaged from aircrafts made to look like icicles. Running above this ceiling are a series of tunnels which spread to the upper floors. Kids and (skinny) adults can access the tunnels via a giant Slinky tube made from discarded refrigerator coils or through a 'tree house' that now reaches the third floor.

The first floor is covered in one of the largest continuously running mosaic floors in the United States, reaching up the walls and support beams. Another tunnel, cutely named "the Underground Whaleway" leads to the beginning of a cave system beneath the floor. Throughout sections of the museum there is a series of popular artificial caves (called the "Enchanted Caves") which form an elaborate system of hand-sculpted tunnels that have been extended all the way to the *tenth* floor through the center of the building. Children disappear inside these tunnels and can reappear in different sections or floors of the museum. You'd never be able to find Where's Waldo in here! Within these cave tunnels are slides called Shoe Shafts constructed from parts of the former International Shoe company. Basically, these shafts were used to transport shoes from different floors of the factory to the loading docks. Cassilly thought these shafts would make for neat slides. There are now several large spiraling slides within the museum which kids can ride down to the first floor: a three story slide and newly added fifth and tenth floor slides. Yeah, you read that right. You can slide ten stories down to the first floor. How's that for an interactive experience?

Joe and I took in the bowhead whale and other large fish sculptures on the first floor and then climbed a stairway to the mezzanine section that overlooks the fish tank below. We found a food court here and we decided to sit down for a brief respite and have some ice cream. The banister running along the mezzanine area was made from long, brightly painted fluorescent light tubes similar to the ones I have on my bathroom ceiling. Like I said, nothing inside this museum is *exactly* what it appears to be. Part of the fun is discovering how things were made and from what.

We left the food court and entered a section called the *Artquarium* on the second floor. At one time the museum had an animal exhibition and rehabilitation center called the World Aquarium that included varieties of aquatic life, exotic birds and larger reptiles, but it was removed in 2015. Today, this artsy and smaller animal exhibition section replaces the former aquarium and consists of a reptile area featuring different types of smaller lizards and another large fish tank where visitors (after washing) can place their hands inside the tank to have hundreds of tiny fish eat the dead skin cells along their fingers. *What a sensation that was*! Another aquarium had several Axolotl, a species of salamanders that look like fish with legs. Among the other unusual exhibits you'll find on the second floor is a Vault Room containing an actual bank vault from the First National Bank of St Louis dating back to the 1870s which contains two 3,000-pound vault doors with about 1,000 safety deposit boxes and a room of mirrors. How the heck they managed to acquire this vault, let alone place it on the upper floor of this museum, is beyond me. Like everything else, it looked fantastically out of place.

We climbed up to the third floor but I cannot tell you how. There are so many stairs, slides and tunnels one can take to navigate this place that you eventually lose track of how you arrived at any part of the museum. The third floor had quite a few attractions, especially for the kids. There was a circus school (with a circus ring and a seating section) called the Everyday Circus where performers do 'teaching shows' daily. Nearby was a pre-school playground known as Toddler Town that had Lego pieces the size of shoe boxes. Another interesting section was the Skateless Park, a collection of wooden skating ramps. Within this park is the largest pencil ever made, donated to the museum in 2009, weighing in at 21,500-pounds. It includes 4,000-pounds of graphite, a 250-pound eraser and measures 76 feet long. *Holy Scribbler*! Just beyond the Skateless Park was another children's playground that included a small castle, slides and dinosaur sculptures. Everything was made from collected or

discarded junk and metals. As we walked by it a boy mysteriously appeared from a slide leading down from the wall. We had no idea where he came from; he quickly picked himself up and vanished into another part of the labyrinth that is the City Museum.

On the third floor we also saw a miniature vintage train set (meandering through a scale model of a city) with a scary-looking centipede sculpture surrounding the front side of the display, which was a nice way of announcing the Bug Room next door, a natural history exhibit featuring a wide array of insects and taxidermy items. Nearby was a gallery with a neon sign above the passageway that read: *Museum of Mirth, Mystery and Mayhem*. How can you not go inside, right? On the way in we passed a vintage New York City underground subway car that was being painted by one of the museum's resident artists named Joe (like my brother). We had a moment to chat with him and he told us how the museum was constantly upgrading and adding exhibits. He mentioned some of the projects he was currently working on, like repainting the subway car and the renovations being done in the art gallery on the fourth floor. We proceeded into the Mirth, Mystery and Mayhem section and found a large net hovering a few feet below the ceiling. The sculpture of an enormous black spider was erected at the foot of one of the poles holding up the net, giving the impression that this was actually a giant spiderweb. But this didn't stop kids from crawling all over the net. Towards the back of this room was an actual tree trunk that rose from the floor below and continued into the floor above us; next to it was a spiraling Slinky tunnel that I imagine originated on the first floor. Throughout this gallery were numerous architectural columns taken from abandoned or demolished buildings, some of the columns had sculptures of large menacing-looking creatures clinging to them.

As one walks through the different floors of the museum it wasn't all just fantasy and outrageousness, they did have 'normal' statues, paintings and other items you'd see in a formal museum, all of it obtained through junkyards or donations. One section called Architectural Hall offers galleries that specialize in architectural items of a specific nature. For example, one room had walls, columns and building fragments on display that featured Egyptian decorations. Another room had fascinating samples of decorative ledges and cornices, archways and doorways all taken from long-ago demolished structures. Again, how they acquired all this stuff

and put it in this museum is beyond me, but every collection, every gallery and just about every exhibit will have you smiling or frowning with joy or curiosity.

On the fourth floor we found the largest jigsaw puzzle on the planet (according to the Guinness World Records people), a 28-foot long, 51,300-piece jigsaw monument containing 27 different panels of famous sites from around the world. The accompanying sign stated that only two pieces of this puzzle were missing and challenged visitors to see if they could spot the missing sections (which had been filled in somehow to not make them noticeable). My brother and I scoured over this puzzle for five minutes looking for those two missing pieces but couldn't find them. The artist Joe appeared and he pointed one of them out to us but said he still hadn't found the other missing piece. He asked us if we wanted to see the Art Gallery, which was currently closed for renovation work. We told him we'd be delighted, and he was nice enough to open the gallery for us. It was like having a private tour. The gallery was filled with abstract art objects, from sculptures to paintings. One display consisted of a glass floor that you can stand on, what was curious about it was the items holding up the glass floor: thousands and thousands of plastic toy soldiers! There were two sculptures I really enjoyed, one was called Sausage Man, with a sausage body and smaller sausage links for arms and legs. The other statue looked like a human-sized alien with a very large head, but on closer inspection it was made from an assortment of peculiar items like beads, flowers, and plants stuck to its clay-like body. Before moving on we thanked Joe for allowing us the opportunity to see the Art Gallery.

The fourth floor had another food court and a bar area in case visitors needed a stiff drink to calm their nerves from all the excitement. There is also an arts and crafts section called Art City where people of all ages can try their hand at creating artwork, and one can enter the artificial caves from this floor, as well. We finished our tour of the museum on the rooftop. From the fourth floor there is an elevator to the roof but it does require a small additional fee (I think it was six or seven dollars, but I'm not certain). The rooftop proved to be every bit as bizarre and fun as the rest of the museum. You'll find a small, old-fashioned Ferris Wheel in one corner that provides awesome views of downtown St Louis. And, yes, it works. The rides are free with the rooftop admission. But Joe and I were afraid to get on it. It looked like something from a 1940's movie set and since the building was already ten-stories tall, the additional height of the Ferris Wheel made us both a little panicky. That's

what happens to men as we age, folks, our sense of adventure shrinks along with our testosterone levels.

To compensate, we entered the yellow school bus that was *literally* half-hanging off the side of the building. The bench seats had been moved to the sides to allow visitors to walk through the center of the bus. We made our way (gingerly, I might add) to the front of the bus where the frightening feel of the vehicle's precarious position becomes even more pronounced as you look out over the front window to the mesmerizing drop below. Joe sat in the driver's seat and was able to open the bus door. Another feature of the rooftop is a very wide playground slide that rises dozens of feet into the air. Joe felt his inner child stirring and climbed to the top of the platform to give it a go. I stayed below to take his picture but as he was coming down he forgot to lean back (there are no rails to hold onto) and halfway down he began tilting and eventually landed sprawled out on his side. His shoulder would be sore for the next few days, but at the moment you couldn't wipe the smile off his face. We also climbed to the highest platform on the roof where a gigantic praying mantis sculpture stands atop a building dome salvaged from the St Louis Science Center located in Forest Park when it was undergoing renovations. From the rooftop we could see an army of children climbing up and down the side of the building through walkways and Slinky tunnels above MonstroCity. What an unusually fun experience this turned to be. It was one of our favorite stops on the whole trip, and I wholeheartedly recommend it.

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We left the City Museum and made our way back to the Drury Plaza hotel through the Washington Avenue Loft District. From the museum we walked south on N 15th Street for two blocks and then turned west on Washington Avenue, heading towards the Mississippi River. The Washington Avenue Loft District runs from 18th Street to 8th Street along Washington Avenue. Many of the multi-story buildings in this district were constructed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were built out of brick and stone in a variety of architectural styles common back then but many are considered revival or commercial styles which later became known as the

Chicago School of architecture. These tall buildings served as warehouses and factories for St Louis' thriving garment industry. Following WWII, and the decline of domestic garment production, these tall warehouses grew out of favor and become vacant or underused. American cities and manufacturers were moving away from multi-story factories (common at the turn of the last century) towards more economical single-story buildings. During the 1990s, after Missouri adopted a tax credit for the redevelopment of historic buildings, investors swarmed in and began converting these structures into loft-style condominiums and apartments. The neighborhood is quite nice and a pleasure to walk through. Many of these historic buildings are still decorated with terra cotta accents on their facades. Joe and I briefly stopped to eat sandwiches at a local eatery along Washington Avenue. The free 'happy hour' buffet at the hotel didn't start until around 6:30pm and we needed to eat something to tide us over till then.

We arrived at the hotel close to 5:00pm, thoroughly exhausted. We'd been on our feet for over seven hours, having logged nearly seven miles of walking that day according to the pedometer on my cellphone. *Holy Shoe Leather*! That is a lot of walking, especially for two sunbaked Florida geezers like us. My brother and I are both huge fans of stand-up comedy and we were looking forward to catching a show at a local comedy club during our trip. I was certain we could find a comedy club in St Louis but we were just too wiped out from the day's activities to venture out anymore. So instead, we donned our bathing suits and went upstairs to the hotel pool area where we soaked our aching limbs inside one of the two hot tubs. Afterwards we returned to our rooms, dressed and headed down to the lobby to partake of our free Happy Hour drinks and food buffet. (God Bless the Drury Family).

After dinner I was able to wash some of our clothes in the laundry room located near the pool facility. Joe and I then settled in to watch the Florida Panthers trounce the Carolina Hurricanes to take a 2-0 lead in the Eastern finals. Joe and his youngest daughter, Alex, have season tickets for the Panthers. I was never a big hockey fan, but Joe's insistence on watching his beloved team play throughout our journey made me a bona fide Panthers fanatic by the end of the trip. The team would go on to win the Stanley Cup championship the following month. After the game we both drifted off to sleep rather quickly.

Day Twelve

(Missouri, Arkansas and Tennessee)

We slept a little later than usual, probably due to how tired we were from the previous day's activities, hitting the breakfast buffet around 8:30am. Back in the room I shaved and showered. We repacked our luggage and loaded everything into the car by 10:00am. Today's itinerary was basically driving to Memphis where we would be spending the night. Once again, we decided to stay on the western side of the Mississippi River, following sections of the Great River Road through Missouri and parts of Arkansas. We were hoping for a more scenic drive than our trek through Iowa, which was primarily farm country.

Heading south out of the city on Route 61 we drove through several townships and communities that serve as the southern suburbs of St Louis. Route 61 seemed to be the main road through many of these riverside communities. The drive to Memphis was just over 300 miles and took us 6.5 hours with one scheduled stop along the way in Arkansas to see the boyhood home of singer Johnny Cash. Like St Louis, Memphis also had a reputation for higher-than-usual crime rates. In fact, President Trump sent hundreds of National Guard troops there in late 2025 as part of his Memphis Safe Task Force. This happened after our visit, but it underscores the issue of violent crime within certain areas of the city. In other words, we were leery of arriving in Memphis too late in the day…*just in case*.

We drove the first 130 miles of the Great River Road on Route 61 (the Blues Highway), a rural two-lane roadway that meanders alongside I-55, a major interstate highway. While our first day on the Great River Road out of Minneapolis offered us perhaps the most scenic and dramatic views along the Mississippi River thus far, today's drive out of St Louis was equally enjoyable for a different reason. Route 61 traverses a string of little towns and cities in Missouri near the Mississippi River separated by rural residential areas that were quite lovely. And there was practically no traffic. We rarely saw the river from this roadway, but the natural setting along Route 61 was so relaxing and the towns all seemed so laid back it amounted to a very pleasant country drive.

Roughly 40 miles south of St Louis we had already passed multiple little suburbs along Route 61; places like Arnold, Imperial, Barnhart, Crystal City and Festus. Eventually, the scenery became increasingly more rural the further south we went. About two miles east of a small community called Selma (just beyond Festus) was the Harlow Island National Wildlife Refuge, one of three parcels of Mississippi River bottomland managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the greater Middle Mississippi River National Wildlife Refuge. This refuge was created following a massive flooding event along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers known as the *Great Flood of 1993*. Heavy snowfall and persistent rain that year caused the rivers to rise and breach their dikes, inundating large parcels of land. The disaster was one of the costliest and devastating floods to ever hit the Midwest, claiming 50 lives and causing 12-16 billion dollars' worth of damages. The flooded areas along the river were later transferred over to the federal government, which has been slowly returning these parcels of flooded lands back to semi-natural bottomlands.

Further south, Route 61 took us through the riverside township of Ste. Genevieve with a population of about 5,000. This town was founded in the 1740s by French Canadian colonists and is considered not only the oldest permanent European settlement in Missouri but also one of the oldest colonial settlements west of the Mississippi. It was named after Saint Genevieve, the patron saint of Paris. As we continued south on Route 61 the scenery gave way to private farmlands and smaller residential communities. The next 'big' city we drove through was Perryville (pop: 8500), about 27 miles from Saint Genevieve. The road took us through a quiet residential section interspersed with some commercial districts on the eastern side of this city.

Beyond Perryville we drove through another stretch of private farms before reaching Uniontown ten miles away. We drove through Uniontown without really knowing it, as it is an unincorporated community with less than 70 people. It seemed like nothing more than a collection of rural homes. And such is the case with many of the places we saw along Missouri's Great River Road, a mix of rural, Midwestern communities that we thoroughly enjoyed passing through. My brother and I have always lived in big East Coast cities and seeing rural America like this was absolutely amazing to us. And each of these small enclaves had their own personal story to tell. For instance, Uniontown was part of seven towns or villages founded

by a group of Saxon-German immigrants in 1839. It was originally called Paitzdorf after the same village in Germany where the immigrants hailed from. During the Civil War it served as an encampment for Union soldiers who couldn't pronounce *Paitzdorf* and so they began calling the place Uniontown.

We continued south for another twenty miles through low hills farmland until we reached the city of Jackson just west of I-55. This was the first time we crossed I-55 that day but we would soon take it all the way to Memphis. Jackson was a fairly large city along Route 61, with a population of over 15,500. The city was founded in 1814, the area referred to as Birdstown. In 1819, it officially adopted the name *Jackson* in honor of Andrew Jackson who became a popular general during the War of 1812. Of the 32 cities and towns in America named after Andrew Jackson *this* was the first one. Route 61 took us directly through the center of the city. I was able to take a picture of their beautiful clock tower courthouse building constructed in 1908.

From Jackson, Route 61 led us back across I-55 to the even larger city of Cape Girardeau (pop: 40,000), which is considered the principal city of the Cape Girardeau-Jackson Metropolitan Area. This metro area combines several counties in Missouri with Alexander County across the Mississippi River in Illinois for a total population of nearly 100,000 people. Locals often call it the "Cape". The city was named after Jean Baptiste de Girardot, a French soldier and fur trader from the early 1700s. It became an official settlement in 1793 under the Spanish when they granted a French-Canadian fur trader the right to establish a permanent trading post on the site. Spain had acquired the Louisiana territories from the French following France's defeat in the Seven Year's War in 1764. In 1808 the town was fully incorporated and later became part of the newly created State of Missouri in 1821. The city's economy grew tremendously after the advent of the Steamboat in 1835, becoming a major port city along the Mississippi. Today, this metropolitan area still serves as the economic center for Southeastern Missouri.

We connected to I-55 just outside of Cape Girardeau and proceeded south the rest of the way on this highway until we reached Memphis, making two brief stops in Arkansas. After passing the Cape Girardeau Regional Airport, the scenery along I-55 began to look a lot like Iowa's, with huge tracts of open agricultural fields and low, hilly pastures. It would take us another hour and a half (roughly 100 miles) before we reached Arkansas and after a while this particular stretch of roadway

proved to be unspectacular compared to our drive on Route 61. The closest we came again to the Mississippi River was a bend near the city of New Madrid, Missouri.

After nearly four hours on the road we finally crossed into Arkansas near Blytheville, stopping at the Arkansas Welcome Center there to use the rest room. The center was pretty big, it had a large vending machine area and spacious bathroom facilities. Along the walls were exhibits or information boards about the state's flora and fauna (including a poster about Mud Bugs, the different varieties of Crayfish found in Arkansas). They also offered free maps of the state. When we entered the center, the middle-aged woman behind the visitors' reception desk greeted us like we were long-lost kin. She welcomed us cheerfully with an Arkansas accent so thick you couldn't scrape it with a Bowie knife! She personified something we experienced over and over during our trip: the overall courtesy and general niceness of the people of this region. My brother and I really enjoyed this about our trip. We live in a part of the country where immigrants make up a large segment of the population. South Florida is like a hub for Latin America and the Caribbean, and while people are usually nice, they tend to be more reserved in public than other areas of the country. This is due to several factors, the first is the language barrier as newer immigrants struggle with English in the beginning, and the second is most likely culture shock. American society tends to be very open, there are no shortages of opinions and attitudes here. Immigrants from countries that do not have the kind of liberties that we cherish might be overwhelmed at first.

From Blytheville, the distance to Memphis was only about 70 miles. Arkansas was the state we spent the least amount of time driving through. It is a beautiful state with many natural wonders but driving through the far eastern section of it along I-55 one would be hard-pressed to see this. From the Visitor's Center we spent the next hour driving through some of the flattest farmlands I had ever seen; miles and miles of agricultural fields that made me homesick for Iowa! When we reached Exit 41, near the 'town' of Marie (pop: 108 in the latest census) we turned right onto a rural state highway (AR-14) and drove a few miles through an incredibly isolated farming area. We saw almost no one else on the road, or, for that matter, any homes, farms or people, just seemingly endless planting fields stretching out from both sides of the roadway. Our purpose for coming here was to visit the boyhood home of Johnny Cash, which has been preserved as a museum.

I have to admit, I was not a big fan of Cash's music until I visited Russia in 2017. The tour I was on included a six day river cruise down the Volga River from St. Petersburg to Moscow and the ship's resident history instructor (who conducted Russian history lessons daily onboard) was a huge fan of Johnny Cash. Apparently, the former Soviet government had approved of the man's songs because they dealt with rural America and simple themes. This history professor told us that as a boy he'd grown up listening to Johnny Cash and that his favorite song was *I Walk The Line*. For the variety show organized by the ship's entertainment director, the professor convinced a group of us to sing this song as part of the show. He gave us photocopies of the lyrics and over a three-day period I memorized the words, singing it nightly in my cabin. When I got back home I began listening to more Johnny Cash songs, admiring his story-telling and realizing why he is considered an American music legend. When I learned we could visit the farmhouse where he grew up, I put the site on my list of places to see on this trip.

Seven miles from I-55 we turned left onto a two-lane road known as Highway 297 (according to Waze). And if this was a 'highway' then I'm the King of England. We drove through the middle of wide open green fields, we couldn't tell what exactly was being grown here. Less than a mile in we turned onto a dirt and gravel road with an irrigation canal running alongside of it. To be honest, it felt like private property and we were trespassing. A short distance later we pulled up to the front of the house museum. It was the only structure in the area, surrounded by nothing but farmland. The home was enclosed by a chain-link fence that was locked. To our chagrin, the museum closed at 3:00pm. I looked at my cellphone, it was 3:30pm. *Fucking drats*!

Joe and I got out of the car and walked around the perimeter of the fence to get at least a solid view of the house. A sign in front of the home declared this was an Arkansas State University Heritage Site and informed the public that tours began at the visitor's center in Dyess Colony, the name of this farming community. We scratched our heads, looking in every direction for a town. Nothing but farmland. Johnny Cash's family moved here in 1935 when he was only 3 years old. The small, single-story structure was built by the Federal government in 1934 as part of the New Deal policies of the Roosevelt administration. Known as a New Deal colony, this federal program constructed homes for poor rural families on plots of farmlands they could work and eventually own. The Cash family plot was 20-acres. According to the sign, Johnny Cash lived here until 1950. Many of his early songs referenced

growing up poor on a farm. Today, the house is listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places and is one of the few remaining government homes from that era.

We took a couple of selfies in front of the structure (to prove we had been there) and after photographing the porched, white clapboard house from different angles we returned to the car and drove back to I-55. It took us another 45 minutes (roughly 44 miles) to reach Memphis. Near the city of West Memphis, Arkansas, we switched onto highway I-40 and a few miles later crossed the double-arched Hernando de Soto Bridge over the Mississippi River into the downtown section of Memphis, Tennessee. As we approached the city from the bridge, we passed the Bass Pro Shops megastore housed inside an enormous pyramid-shaped arena on the bank of the river. We both laughed when we saw it because earlier, on 1-55, we had passed a trailer with a camel inside. Joe turned to me, frowning: *"First camels, now pyramids. What the heck?"*

Our hotel for the night was the *Best Western Plus Gen X Inn* located near the city's Medical District. Because Memphis had a reputation for crime, I thought it prudent to stay as close to the medical centers as possible…*you know*, *in case we had to run into an emergency room with bullet wounds, right*? Okay, I'm joking (sort of). We arrived at our hotel by 4:30pm. The property was surrounded by a wrought-iron fence and had a security gate for cars. I also saw multiple security cameras. *Hmmmmm.* But of our one-night stays, this hotel was one of the better ones. The room was exceptionally large and comfortable and they offered a complimentary breakfast buffet. The vending machine section near the lobby offered free hot beverages 24 hours a day, which was great for my coffee fix.

After settling into our room, we made plans for an early dinner. One of the culinary specialties of Memphis is barbecue cooking. In fact, Memphis is one of the few cities in the South that can claim its own wildly recognized barbecue style. In particular, pit-cooked slabs of ribs, something the city has been known for since the 1920s. The barbecue pits are usually fired not by split logs but charcoal briquettes, which imparts a juicy and mildly smoky flavor to the meat. The signature sauces here tend to be thick, tangy and reddish and can range from mild to tongue-scorchingly hot. And if you think the city is famous for just its ribs, then you would be mistaken. Memphians will barbecue *anything* – beef, chicken, pork, sausage, turkey. I read online they even smoke whole rolls of bologna for some very tasty

sandwiches. The usual side dishes are yellow mustard-laced coleslaw and sweet, savory beans. Joe and I had skipped lunch so we could eat our fill of ribs in one of these famed barbecue joints. We selected the *Central BBQ-Midtown*, the flagship eatery of a popular chain of four restaurants that operate within Memphis. The restaurant was also highly-touted by the hotel manager when we checked in.

We left the hotel around 5:30pm, heading east along Madison Avenue. On South Belvedere Avenue we made a right and drove through the Central Gardens district of Memphis. Whatever first impressions we had about Memphis were immediately dispelled driving through this historic neighborhood in the Midtown section of the city. This had to be arguably the nicest residential area of Memphis. We followed South Belvedere Avenue for more than six long blocks, the streets were lined with large, beautiful homes, many dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Central Gardens is actually listed under the National Register of Historic Places, this sprawling neighborhood (which is now divided into several subdivisions) was built primarily between 1850 and 1930 for wealthy middle-class residents, and judging from the looks of things today, that hasn't changed much. The neighborhood – composed of 83 blocks with over 1500 structures – definitely had to be one of the more affluent in the city. I remember turning to my brother as we drove though it and saying, "Well, I guess this is where all the doctors from the medical district live."

The architecture of the homes was an eclectic mix of styles popular during the early 1900s, the construction heyday of the district. The most prevalent architectural form found here is the American foursquare and bungalow, but the personal style of each home reflected the various tastes of middle-class Memphians back then, like Colonial Revival, American Craftsman, Mission, Neoclassical, Queen Anne, Mediterranean, Prairie School, Tudor Revival and Shingle style. We were blown away by some of these large homes and the quiet, well-maintained tree-lined streets of the neighborhood. I'm certain that with crime a serious issue in other parts of the city this area is probably well patrolled and monitored by the police. One could easily spend a day here just walking through the neighborhood admiring the architecture.

When we reached Central Avenue, directly in front of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, a Catholic church that serves as the seat of the Diocese of Memphis, we turned left and found the Central BBQ-Midtown restaurant about a dozen blocks further east. It was pretty busy, and for good reason. We each ordered

a half rack of beef ribs, onion rings, baked beans and coleslaw. It wasn't cheap, but I thought it was the best barbecued beef ribs I ever ate. Using only my fork, I was able to scrape the meat right off the bones with little effort. Joe, who is very particular about his food preferences, thought it was very good but I could tell he wasn't as moved as I was. Either way, we returned to the hotel with our pants feeling a little tighter. We had a busy schedule the following day, with several sightseeing stops early in the morning before our drive to Natchez, Mississippi in the afternoon. We opted not to go out anymore that evening, watching something on TV. After our heavy dinner, though, we both struggled to stay awake. It was an early night for us.

Day Thirteen

(Tennessee and Mississippi)

(To be continued soon…)