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 northwestern 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. Whoa! Although 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, 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'em 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 historic 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. It 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 2.5 mile 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 enlightening ourselves 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. One exhibition area near the exit has 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 highlight 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). As we went through each exhibition room we came across displays featuring the flame-resistant jumpsuits and helmets the drivers wear, and how they have evolved over time. The suits are custom made to fit each driver for comfort and effectiveness. They use special flame-retardant materials 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 Nomex suits also help keep them cool (from the high heat of the engine friction). We 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*. There is a hall of fame area featuring information on past Indy 500 winners and other 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 a fascinating 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. In my defense, 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. 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 one of the cracked window panes in place. I shook my head and returned to bed, remembering the hotel's old TV commercials. Each one ended with the same pleasant country voiceover: "*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)

(To be continued soon…)