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CAROLINA CHRONICLE

Nothin' could be fina

SOUTHERN COMFORT

It's easy to settle into the slower, more hospitable rhythms of the South, and relax to the sound of the southern drawl in its various inflections as spoken by students from the Carolinas, Georgia and Florida (though I had to stifle a giggle hearing a girl from Tennessee practicing her lines as the lion in "A Midsummer Night's Dream"). I ordered blackberry cobbler at the local "Backyard Burger," and learning that they were all out, I settled for cherry but said I'd be back some other time. The aged counterperson said, "I'll look forward to that." It completely blew me away.

When I mentioned the newspaper photo of Asheville debutantes, one of the interns told me she'd considered doing that, and her parents had been prepared to pay the \$2000 fee, which among other things would have given her eventual daughter the right to "come out," but finally decided against it and asked her parents to put the money aside to support graduate study in Great Britain. She reckoned the custom wouldn't last more than another generation. From what I've seen of the South, I wouldn't bet on it.

Breakfast has become my favourite meal at the school. I've never had such an easy time getting enough fruit in my diet. Every morning I enjoy orange juice, a banana, and the sweetest grapefruit I've tasted outside Florida, followed, depending on the morning, by scrambled eggs, chipped beef, sausages, bacon, corned beef hash,

French toast, muffins, bagels, turnovers, home fries, and other dishes I haven't tried yet including grits, biscuits and gravy, and other as yet unidentified comestibles.

My teaching responsibilities consist of one seventy-minute geometry class six days a week. (In the second session I'll have two.) With the reset of the day free and my classroom air-conditioned, I find myself spending a lot of time planning the next day's lesson, setting up exercises in four colours on the whiteboards, inventing activities, locating interactive games and problems on the Internet, and reflecting on the lesson just completed, in addition to the SAC Information Technology tasks I've undertaken for the summer.

I still can't get over the wonder of picking up a wireless network connection with my SAC-issued laptop computer and being able to access my SAC e-mail account 800 miles away with no visible attachment. I feel privileged to belong to the generation I do. Older folks may take a pass on technological innovations while the younger kids seem totally blasé (well duh). I continue to be amazed at the ever-increasing pace of change, and remember being impressed with how rapidly faxes went from being new to being old-hat. I'm still holding out against the more intrusive elements of the new technology. I'll permit cookies to be added to my Internet connections but I immediately disabled the recorded voice that announces "You've got mail!" And once you get a cell phone, people expect to be able to reach you on it all the time. That's what makes e-mail so congenial: you can send a message any time, night or day, and never worry about waking people up, interrupting their dinners, or interfering with their children's bed-time routine.

CAROLINA CRAZIES

The weekend I arrived, I was parked outside a drugstore when a woman got out of a car and started screaming at a teenager, presumably her son. He entered the drugstore and she kept screaming. He returned and she kept screaming. Eventually the manager of the store came out and the woman screamed at her. After quite a time, the woman and her son got back into the car, and as he

drove out of the parking lot, the women leaned out the window and screamed until they were out of sight.

A bit later the manager came out of the door, evidently having noticed my out-of-state license plate, to assure me that not all Carolinians were crazy. “So you don’t get many like her?” I asked. “Well actually, there are about fifteen like her,” the manager replied. “They come in with prescriptions, then take the tablets, grind them up, and get high on the active ingredients.” “Don’t the doctors keep control over the quantities they prescribe?” I asked. “They can always find a cooperative doctor,” she told me.

When I recounted this story at dinner, one intern told me that a doctor in her home town would fill any prescription you asked for at \$100 a pop.

“Wouldn’t he eventually be disbarred or defrocked, or whatever it is they do to doctors?” someone asked. (De-stethoscoped? I wondered.)

“It’s such a small town, the state authorities probably don’t even know he exists. But every morning there’s a huge line outside his office,” she replied, “right next to the bank machine.”

Another intern commented that Rolling Stone Magazine had named Asheville the weirdo capital of the South. I met my next crazy person a few days later while laying out a Math Trail in the city. As we were walking into a coffee shop, a man came out, saying to nobody in particular, “and I plan to see my doctor to have my penis surgically removed.”

WE’RE NOT IN KANSAS ANY MORE, TOTO

Some things about Asheville drive me crazy. Yes, that’s exactly the right phrase. I’ve never known another city in which it was so difficult to get around to such little benefit. The tiny downtown is surrounded by miles and miles of strip: upscale malls, downscale malls, half a dozen different chains of supermarkets, and more pawn shops than I’ve ever seen in the ex-urbs before.

Topology explains a good deal of the complication: terrain as hilly as San Francisco, criss-crossed by two rivers and three Interstate highways that will suck you in and spit you out halfway to Tennessee.

Unlike the university atmosphere of the Durham-Raleigh-Chapel Hill triangle, where I spent a glorious year in 1976, Asheville lies in the heart of the Bible belt, Ross Limbaugh country, where bumper stickers proclaiming “We Still Pray” outnumber those with the words “My President Is Charlton Heston” emblazoned over the logo for the National Rifle Association.

But the lonely and homesick can always find solace. Though a twenty-minute drive for the New York Times puts it out of reach, I can still read the movie reviews and stories for free and, for a small fee, download the daily crossword puzzle and print it out. The local A&W serves root beer floats in thick frosted steins and boasts a free jukebox where my request for The Mamas and the Papas mingles with other patrons’ choices of Nat King Cole and Fifties rock. Guess I’m making up for all the things I never got around to doing in high school.

MISSING THE MOUSE

“To think it all started with a mouse!” Walt Disney liked to say as he looked somewhat unbelievably at the empire his creative imagination had spawned. With theme parks now a commonplace, it’s easy to forget that the original theme park, on which Disney was expected to lose his shirt, came about more or less because its creator tired of riding around his backyard on a half-mile long miniature railroad (pictures available at <http://www.sci.fi/~animato/rail/waltollie.html>), and wanted to build a bigger play-toy. Looking at the prices of theme park food nowadays, it may be hard to believe that during his lifetime Disney insisted that restaurants in the Magic Kingdom be easily affordable by the average family. Those days have gone the way of the live burros that used to carry visitors into Disney’s version of The Painted Desert (in the Fifties, not so many people were driving to the real thing).

While contemporary parks are corporate affairs, like Paramount's "Canada's Wonderland" or "Carowinds," straddling the border of North and South Carolina, it all began with a man who loved model railroads and had the means to indulge his fantasies on a grand scale. So when you notice the incredible attention lavished on details of scenery in the Disney parks—and largely absent elsewhere—you can reflect that you are really just part of a model railroad display blown up to life-size.

ASHEVILLE TALENT SHOW

To wrap up the first three-week session of the Summer Academic Adventure program, the school held a talent show, to which I added the following bit of confusion:

Excuse me. I'm sorry to interrupt the show, but I've been asked to make an important announcement. I don't know whether you've been reading the local papers, but Wal-Mart has been trying to put a superstore on the floodplains of the Swannanoa River, a measure that many citizens of Asheville have opposed on environmental grounds. Two nights ago, the city council narrowly defeated the proposal. The Wal-Mart superstore will not be built on the Swannanoa.

This led the Wal-Mart people to go to their fallback position, involving around-the-clock negotiations with the board of trustees of The Asheville School. Some argued that allowing Wal-Mart to build a superstore on the campus of The Asheville School would destroy the unique charm of this quiet corner of North Carolina. Others argued that by accepting Wal-Mart's offer, the school would effectively double its endowment fund, allowing it to vastly expand its financial aid program for deserving students.

In the end, the board of trustees was deadlocked—unable to reach a decision—and so in this hiatus period between headmasters, it fell to Chuck Baldecchi to make the call, and he opted in favour of Wal-Mart. Now plans are moving ahead much more rapidly than anyone had anticipated—the Wal-Mart people are determined to have the store up and running for the fall—and it's going to require a few changes in the summer Academic Adventures program when

they tear down Anderson Hall early tomorrow morning and begin construction of the new superstore.

So I need to have you pay close attention. This evening, right after study, everyone living in Anderson Hall should pack up your belongings. For these last two nights, the boys will sleep in one of the large school buses and the girls will sleep in the two ice cream trucks. It will be a little uncomfortable, but you can think of it as a kind of overnight camping trip. We should have tents in place in time for the second session of the summer program.

Thanks for your cooperation. And now, on with the show!

INDEPENDENCE DAY

We celebrated the 4th a day early with a minor league baseball game followed by fireworks. A fair distance separates the AAA Asheville Tourists (I kid you not) from their major league affiliate, the Colorado Rockies. A record crowd of 4392 watched the Tourists battle the Redstixx from Columbus, Georgia in a game that saw five errors. The visitors scored two runs in the first inning and a couple more in succeeding innings so it didn't look good for the Asheville team, down 4-1 at the end of five. But a three-run homer evened things up and in the following inning the opponents' relief pitcher wasn't up to the job, walking in one run, allowing another to score on a wild pitch, and finally giving up a base hit that allowed two more runs to score. The Tourists' relief pitchers weren't a whole lot better, but the defense got its act together in the second half of the game, turning five double plays to save the 8-4 lead.

Lest one's interest flag, the announcer kept coming on with one gimmick after another. "Please turn to page 35 in your souvenir program [on sale for \$5 a pop] and if your picture of Smilin' Ed is autographed by Ed Smeregno, you'll get \$45 off on your next root canal at Gleaming Teeth Dental Services." "Now take a look at your tickets, folks. If you're the lucky holder of #18570, and you die within the next month, you'll get 10% off the cost of your funeral at Happy Haven Funeral Parlour, located at 1320 Biltmore Avenue right here in Asheville."

A half-hour fireworks display followed the game, with pyrotechnic wonders filling the sky, concussive booms echoing in the surrounding hills, and a recorded band playing ‘You’re a Grand Old Flag,’ “God Bless America,” “I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy,” Sousa marches, and the armed service anthems, bringing tears to the eyes of a transplanted American.

Another three-week session at The Asheville School begins Sunday, then I head north.

Have a fabulous Fourth!

Cheers, --Art