

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Traveling America (I)
Petersburg Civil War Battlefield, Pinehurst, Thomas Wolfe's Home, Biltmore Estate, Quanah the Warrior, Quarter Horse Country

Traveling America (I) Report One: Petersburg Civil War Battlefield

September 11-16, 2005

Hello. This week Your on the Street Reporter made his way with his semi-extended family (one wife (Reporterette: Holly), one puppy (Milli)) across a large swatch of America; from Virginia to New Mexico. Figure 1 shows our route. Several of the places along this red line are reported in other *Traveling America* and in *America's Cities* essays. The first part of this trip was a visit to Virginia's Northern Neck, reported in the series *Presidential Places*.



Figure 1. Route for Traveling America (I).

The trek from Virginia to New Mexico was an arduous one: Sitting in a smooth-riding four-door sedan, gliding almost effortlessly across four-lane interstates; punctuated with pauses at Dairy Queens, 7/11s, Toddle Houses, Best Westerns, and visits to National Parks. Periodically stopping at a service station to negotiate a loan for a tank of gas.

Occasionally, as I exited my air conditioned cocoon, I wondered how Cabeza De Vaca and other explorers hiked across a vast expanse of dry torrid America. I could barely walk from the convenience store gas pump to the cashier without feeling the sear of the sun.

The words *tough* and *resolved* came to mind, but I still could not fathom how they made their way over hundreds of miles of hostile terrain---or why they wanted to make this trek in the first place. Gold I've been told. No wonder they were in a funk when they discovered the Seven Cities of Cibola were constructed of mud, not metal.

Still Looking for Elvis

Previously, I sent you a report about my search for Elvis in Nashville and Memphis. During my travels, I continue to look for him or his artifacts. After leaving the historic homes of George Washington and Robert E. Lee (see *Presidential Places*), we made our way to Petersburg to visit a Civil War battlefield. As we passed through a small town near the Rappahannock River we saw an Elvis mannequin, as shown in Figure 2. In case you are not certain which figure is Elvis, I direct your attention to the photo on the left.



Figure 2. Elvis guarding a real estate office and a soldier guarding mannequins.

Elvis was performing on the porch of a real estate office. I wanted to ask someone at the office why they had Elvis on their porch---maybe to scare-off missionaries---but the office was closed. Just down the street squatted the soldier mannequin shown in the right photo. It was placed in front of a store selling other mannequins. I entered the store and beheld statues and mannequins of deer, dogs, Dodo birds, owls, even Big Bird; and other artificial critters.

- Reporter (I paraphrase; I did not have my notebook in hand), “Hello. I noticed the soldier outside. I gather it’s for sale. Why would a person buy a life size soldier mannequin?”
- Peddler of Mannequins, “Who knows why people buy any of this stuff?”
- *An odd reply from the very person who sold the “stuff.”*
- Reporter, “I’ve seen a lot of those deer and owls. I put owls on my roof to scare away woodpeckers. And one of our neighbors had a deer mannequin in his front yard.”
- Peddler, “The owls are my best sellers but they don’t work. I’ll bet you still have woodpeckers.”
- Reporter, “Yep. And some hunters put several holes in my neighbor’s deer; even knocked off the ears and antlers. The deer was pretty sad-looking, didn’t look very life-like. He eventually removed it.”
- Peddler, “I doubt they were hunters, probably some rednecks who had one too many.”
- Reporter, “Yeah. Back to that soldier. I’m fond of our military but I can’t say I would want a soldier statue on my front lawn.”
- Peddler, “Beats pink flamingos.”

This man was in the wrong job. I would have liked to have stayed longer, but my companions were waiting in the car a couple blocks away. I said goodbye and we continued our drive to Petersburg.

The Petersburg Battlefield

The movie *Cold Mountain* contains a Civil War scene based on the Petersburg battle, which is considered one of the longest sieges in the war. The landscape changed, as seen in Figure 3¹ and some historians say this war changed how wars were fought. One change was

¹ Courtesy of the National Park Service.

“digging in” and forcing the enemy to attack a well-protected site. No question, the soldiers were well dug-in for the Petersburg campaign.



Figure 3. Digging in.

This battle is associated with the famous Crater. In July of 1864, Union coal miners from Pennsylvania dug a tunnel 500 ft. long below the Confederate line and then blew up four tons of gunpowder. The blast created a hole 30 ft. deep and 170 ft. long, and killed 278 Confederate men.² Inexplicably, the attacking union soldiers ran down inside the Crater and became sitting ducks. The Confederate men fired down on the soldiers from above, resulting in 4,000 Union casualties.



Figure 4. The Dictator.

The park also includes original earthworks and trenches; as well as the Dictator, a 17,000-lb mortar the Yankees used to shell Petersburg, as shown in Figure 4.³

However, with the exception of the mortar, some cannon, and grassy embankments, I couldn't visualize the site as it might have appeared in the 1860s. I had seen photographs of the area taken at that time and shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Where was the Crater? The caves in the embankments? The trenches? The place resembled a picnic park, not a battlefield.

I conveyed these observations to my travel mates. Milli had no reply. She stared at me as I made my case, waiting for her next meal. Holly said the Petersburg site was not a museum. It was an archeological site.

² Sourced from Microsoft's Encarta Reference Library.

³ Courtesy of the National Park Service.

- Reporter, "OK, but I would still appreciate a more detailed depiction of the 1865 events."
- Reporterette, "I think the job of the National Park Service is to preserve sites, not turn them into Disneylands."

Good point. And preservation is the practice with all the National Park Service Civil War battlefields I have visited. I don't know why I was griping about the Petersburg battlefield. I usually complain about the *Disneying* of America in general. I should be grateful our national parks have not (yet) been *Disneyfied*.

We headed for North Carolina to spend time with friends, and to visit the childhood home of Thomas Wolfe and the famous Biltmore Estate. Before we leave this part of America, here are a few comments on the National Park Service. If you have an opportunity, send this organization a donation, or place lots of money in their contribution boxes at the sites. During my reporting, I have visited a number of these parks throughout our country and I am in awe of what this government body accomplishes. The National Park Service is the caretaker of many American treasures.

By the way, I found an old Civil War rifle bullet on my property in Front Royal, Virginia. I am told by the locals that it is genuine and probably left-over from some skirmishes between the Blues and Grays in the early part of the war.

I have started a National Park. You have my address. Give generously. It's tax-deductible on your IRS return, as well as mine.

Traveling America (I) Report Two: Pinehurst, North Carolina

September 11-16, 2005

Your on the Street Reporter here. We continue with the description of our travels around parts of southern America.

Pinehurst, North Carolina

Our friends live near the famous Pinehurst golf resort. I understand the green fee for playing the course where U.S. Opens are held can run to several hundred dollars---depending on the time of year. Usually, the fee is around \$420, plus a caddy tip. My philosophy about playing 18 holes of golf is simple: The more swings at the ball, perhaps even hitting it, the better deal I have for my expenditure. For example, I once played a course in Vail, Colorado. The green fee was \$300, including a cart rental, four tees, the score card and a pencil. (Why don't those pencils have erasers?)

Let's say a hot-shot golfer shoots a 75 on the course. He is paying \$4 for every swing. On the other hand, let's say a golfer shoots 110 on the course. He is paying \$2.72 per swing. Which is the better deal?

I am not much of a golfer, so I rationalize my incompetency. But I have the distinction of making a hole in one! If you want to know about this saga, send an email and I'll forward you a short story, which is a chapter in a book I am writing titled, "Holes in One for Dummies."

Our North Carolina friend, Joe, is a retired U.S. Navy Captain and he and I spent a lot of time recounting our heroic exploits aboard impregnable warships. Hilda--- the Officer on Deck of their marital ship---keeps Joe on an even keel. And can she cook! At the National Archives Café in Washington, D.C. I thought I had sampled as fine a Bar-B-Q as could be had. Hilda put it to shame. She agreed to let me share her recipe with you, which is provided at the end of this report.

We also dined at a Pinehurst restaurant called the 1895 Room, located at The Holly Inn. Joe, the sentimentalist, thought The Holly Inn was a fitting dining locale for Holly. If you are in the area, give the 1895 Room a try. Other than minor points of the waiter bringing Hilda the wrong meal and serving your Reporter a cold, hot soup, it was a fine place to eat.

Cavalier Dogs and Cavalier Neighbors

I mentioned in an earlier report that Holly and I have recently acquired a puppy, a tiny (four pounds) toy Poodle. She is high-spirited and social...and in the process of being trained. One morning I was walking Milli around Joe and Hilda's neighborhood and encountered two neighbors walking two large Poodles.

With the enthusiasm only a puppy could show, Milli bolted toward them, coming to a stop when she reached the end of her leash. After which, she stood up on her hind legs, pulling against the leash in an attempt to touch the other dogs---who towered above her.

- Reporter, waving to the four animals, "Good morning."
- Four animals: No response.
- Reporter, thinking the humans did not hear me, even though they---and their Poodles---- had tossed a glance our way, "Uh, good morning."

- Four animals: No response, as they kept walking.
- Reporter, who finally decides Milli's behavior might have put them off, "This is Milli. We're recent dog owners, and are working on training her to the leash."
- One of the males of the four animals replied, "Well, you've got a long way to go." *On garde, thrust, and parry!* Off they strolled off toward an adjacent street, neither smiling nor evoking a single friendly gesture.
- Worthy of a Clint Eastwood retort, I answered, "I'm working on it. Any hints for making her as hostile as you?" *Fleche! Touche!*

The man paused ever so slightly, but never looked up or acknowledged my retort. He was wise. If we got into a dog fight, my side had the advantage of spirit. With my aggression momentarily satiated, and Milli still puzzled by the aloofness of her cousins, I counseled her with "Don't worry, Milli, the poor devils---all four of them---were likely born in France." We continued our walk.

Wanted: Another Clint Eastwood Response

During the drive through North Carolina, we stopped at a Subway store for a carry-out. I made my way to the rear of the lunch time queue, and within a few minutes placed an order of,

- "Two sandwiches. Turkey and Italian."
- Subway Person, "Bread?"
- Reporter, "Whole wheat."
- "Cheese?"
- Reporter, "No. Just lettuce and tomato on both."
- The Subway person then placed turkey onto both breads, but I was looking around and did not notice the chef de cuisine's interpretation of an Italian sub. She wrapped up the sandwiches, passed them to the cashier and I paid the check. Then I remembered that Italian subs are tastier when hot, "Would you heat up the salami on Italian sub?"
- Subway person, "Eh? You have two whole wheat and turkey orders."
- "I don't think turkey meat should be in the Italian sandwich. Maybe salami or sausage?"
- "You asked for whole wheat bread?"
- "Yes."
- "I don't do Italian with whole wheat...guess I forgot."
- "The Italian sandwich uses a certain type of bread?"
- "Sur'nuf, at least 'rond here it does. Try it honey, you'll like it."

I started to ask for a refund for one of the turkey sandwiches for an actual Italian sub. But the line behind me was long, the queue's grouching occupants did not seem all that happy to be lined-up behind a French Poodle and an aging Yankee wearing tassles on his loafers. (Little did they know they know they were standing behind a man whose southwester drawl would put their Carolina twang to shame.

But I was outnumbered, smack-dap in a good ol' boy crowd. Plus the Subway turkey behind the counter was now busy mucking up the orders of the customers standing behind me. Not much sense in sticking around.

I let it ride. But in hindsight, I wish I had adapted a Clint Eastwood posture with a cool farewell. Not this time. We hit the road again, and the turkey Italian subs were tasty.⁴

⁴ Another Subway chef de cuisine (in Tuccumcari, New Mexico) informed me the Subway Italian could be served with a bread of the customer's choosing. He offered the possibility that the woman in North Carolina was not playing with a full deck of cards.

Here is Hilda's recipe for Bar-B-Q:

This recipe requires a Big Green Egg, or grill that is enclosed and has a thermometer so that the temperature can be controlled to below 300 degrees (around 275 degrees F).

THINGS YOU NEED TO HAVE ON HAND:

- * A PORK BUTT (SOMETIMES CALLED A BOSTON BUTT)
- * Some kind of Rub -- I mix Emerils South Western with a little Hickory Salt and some McCormacks Barbeque seasoning.
- * Wood Chips (hickory or whatever)
- * Charcoal briquets (for your cooker)
- * A disposable aluminum pan (big enough and deep enough for the roast)
- * Two paper grocery bags
- * Heavy duty aluminum foil
- * Barbecue Sauce of your choice (We like the vinegar based sauce. This is the kind used in Lexington NC. They call themselves the Barbeque Capital of the World)

THE MEAT

- 1) Unwrap the meat and cut off any big layers of fat. This may be done the day before.
- 2) Rub the trimmed roast all over with Emerils dry rub or whatever.
- 3) At least one hour before you plan to start cooking, remove the roast from the fridge and let sit.
- 4) Place the roast into the disposable aluminum pan for cooking.

THE GRILL

- 1) Soak hickory or mesquite wood chips for at least an hour.
- 2) Place the soaked chips in a square of aluminum foil, and poke 6 holes in the foil.
- 3) Fill the bottom of the grill with about 40 charcoals briquettes.
- 4) Light the coals and eventually push to one side of the grill. Temp should reach 275 degrees.
- 5) Put the soaked wood chip package on the hot coals for smoking.

COOKING THE ROAST

- 1) Place the roast, which is in the pan, in the grill on the opposite side from the coals.
- 2) If one uses a Big Green Egg, open the vent about 3/4 of the way. Turn the cover (Big Green Egg has a cover) so that the opening is on the same side of the meat, to pull the smoke in that direction.
- 3) After about three hours, you may want to place a piece of aluminum foil loosely over the roast so it doesn't get too brown. Cook for 5 to 6 hours. You may also need to add charcoal after 3 hours.

RESTING THE ROAST

- 1) The directions say to wrap the whole pan and roast in heavy duty aluminum foil and continue cooking in your inside oven for another hour or so at 325 degrees BUT we don't do that because the meat is obviously done and often ready to fall apart.
- 2) Set your inside oven at low (200 degrees.)
- 3) Take the roast out of the pan and slide it into the doubled paper bags

and fold the edges to enclose the roast.

4) Place in the warm oven and allow it to stay for an hour or more.
Make sure the paper bags are not touching the heating element.

EATING THE BARBECUE

- 1) After the roast has rested, remove it and place on a board and pull or, if you like, slice.
- 2) Add sauce to taste and/or allow people to add as much sauce as they want at the table.

Traveling America (I) Report Three: Southern Eating Habits

September 11-16, 2005

Hello again from Your on the Street Reporter. Let's continue examining the eating habits of our fellow Americans I observed during our travels around America.

A Communist Plot

A couple years ago, when I was living in the Shenandoah Valley, I would drive from our country home into the town of Front Royal for a daily newspaper. Thus, I made frequent appearances at the local 7/11 store. During these purchases, I became aware of the buying habits of the customers in front of me. I came up with the notion that there was a relationship between fat people and the kinds of food and drinks they purchased. Amazing. And to think some people attribute obesity to an unhappy childhood. Quite the opposite; the childhood was far too happy.

During this trip across parts of America, I was in convenience stores several times a day. While waiting at the checkout lines, I remembered my visits to the Front Royal 7/11, and I also recalled I had jotted down in my notebook some observations about those 7/11 customers. Here they are. (I have listed only three customers who were overweight and not anyone who was skinny, so my survey is like many others of its kind: biased toward predisposed conclusions.)

- Customer one: Female, approximately 5'6" at 170 lbs. Purchase: Non-diet Sprite, potato chips, cigarettes, lottery ticket, breath freshener.
- Customer two: Female, approximately 5'9" at 190 lbs. Purchase: Six small powdered donuts, non-diet Coke.
- Customer three: Male, approximately 5'10" at 230 lbs. Purchase: Two Baby Ruth candy bars, one malt liquor, cigarettes, lottery ticket.

During our trip, the customers at the convenience stores exhibited the same buying habits as the 7/11 diners. I don't recall seeing an overweight customer purchasing a cup of yogurt. Of course, your Reporter confined his purchases to gasoline, skim milk, and a fat-free banana. I wish. Who can resist a Krispy Kreme? I think donut makers are Communists in disguise, set out to gradually kill-off America's citizens with Chocolate Glazes.

Is Ronald McDonald also Communist?

I also wish I did not relish Big Macs, or for that matter, McDonald's French fries. I have altered my eating habits as I have grown older, but like a recovering alcoholic who day dreams about a shot of booze, I am sure I will never stem the urge for an oily, salty, hot McDonald's French fry.

My antidote to America's Fast Food Mania and its associated goodies---my way of avoiding the cholesterol-laden stops along our route to New Mexico---was to sing to myself I ditty I composed a few years ago:

*You deserve a stroke today.
So get out and get away,
to McDonald's.*

That jingle got me past McDonald's. But I needed to compose other verses if I were to bypass Arby's, Burger King, Denny's, IHOP, Kentucky Fried Chicken...and other Communist cafes.

Fried Food...Deep Fried Food

I have traveled to a number of countries and sampled their cuisine. In no country have I witnessed the preponderance of cafes and restaurants that serve fried food on the scale of America's restaurants. During this trek, we stopped at another eatery named Chester's. Located in a convenience store in North Carolina, this establishment's entire menu featured fried food; nothing else. The fare consisted of four offerings:

1. Fried chicken.
2. Fried potatoes.
3. Fried okra.
4. A strange looking fried cylindrical object.

Reporter to the cook, who was also the waitress and cashier:

- "I'll have an order of okra and two chicken tenders. My wife will have water, the dog a Coke. Just joking. Say what's the funny looking fried cylinder?"
- Cook, "It's corn on the cob."
- Reporter, "Get atta here! You deep fry corn on the cob?"
- Cook, "That's right honey. Are you tempted?"
- Reporter, "Why would anyone want to *fry* corn-on-the-cob, one of the wonders of the world?"
- Cook, "Honey, try it. You'll like it."
- Reporter, "OK." I did, and I did.

If there is anything in the food world that hasn't undergone deep frying, I wager it has not (yet) been imported into America.

Mom and Pop Cafes

Just a few years ago, non-franchise eateries---the small Mom and Pop cafes---were easy to find along America's highways. To a limited extent, they still exist, but not along the Interstates. We traveled some 2,000 miles and did not encounter a single non-franchised eatery until we detoured onto the less-traveled state or county roads---the blue highways on a map.

Even on these roads, McDonald's is killing-off the Mom and Pop eateries. At New Boston, Texas (near the border between Texas and Arkansas) we left the Interstates and didn't return to them for several hundred miles. During this part of the trip, I rarely saw a Mom and Pop cafe. More often, McDonald's and Dairy Queens were in each town along the way.⁵

⁵ An exception to this sameness (in my mind and taste) are Toddle House diners. They are a tie to the past and remind me of the small diners that once populated the east coast.

So what? At least a diner knows about the food before ordering it. Oh? How about ordering an Italian sub at a North Carolina Subway? OK, my experience in North Carolina was an exception, and I included it in this report because I thought it was funny.

So, what's my problem? Simple. I like diversity. I like uniqueness. I like traveling in different parts of the world and actually perceive that I am in different parts of the world. But you know my sentiments about this matter. I expressed them in my San Francisco report. So, I'll move on. Next, we go back to North Carolina to visit Thomas Wolfe's home and the Biltmore Estate.

Traveling America (I) Report Four: Thomas Wolfe's Home and the Biltmore Estate

September 11-16, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. I am still motoring around with Reporterette and Milli in North Carolina. In this report, we tour the homes of Thomas Wolfe and George Vanderbilt.

Thomas Wolfe's Home

We stopped for a while in Asheville, North Carolina, the location of author Thomas Wolfe's childhood home and also the Biltmore Estate. I wanted to visit Wolfe's home (Figure 3) because his descriptions of the dwelling and his times in that house had made a lasting impression on me.

In my twenties, I read Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, *Of Time and the River*, *The Web and the Rock*, and *You Can't Go Home Again*. They are not easy reading, because Wolfe is, to say the least, wordy. A museum next to his home displayed several quotes about his work. I jotted-down this thought in my notebook, *He wrote a lot of bad sentences, but he never wrote a dull one*. Those are my sentiments, too.

Here is a brief description of Wolfe's work:⁶

The central theme of the cycle is the search by an idealistic young man for enduring values. Despite the corruption he finds in the society around him, he retains a nostalgic, poetic faith in the essential goodness of the American people and the greatness of their land. Wolfe's writing is characterized by a fervent lyricism and expansiveness which has been compared to that of the American poet Walt Whitman. Wolfe wrote so unrestrainedly and at such great length that his works had to be cut drastically by his editor Maxwell Perkins. Although they continued to be read and studied, they were not really popular with young people of the post-World War II era.



Figure 3. Thomas Wolfe's childhood home.

Modern literary critics do not have much praise for Wolfe. Some are condescending. Some say he was the victim of "excessive rhetoric" and had no control of his compositions. In

⁶ Sourced from Microsoft Encarta Reference Library

my view this is criticism from the effete, academic intelligentsia. Wolfe's narrative is too plain for their tastes. Too undisciplined. Too passionate. Too many split infinitives. Too colloquial.

For what it's worth, be it *Voice over IP*, or *Your on the Street Reporter*, my approach to writing is to be colloquial, similar in this regard to Wolfe. I want the reader to read as if he/she were listening to a natural conversation. I purposely use common idiosyncrasies of speech found in our everyday dialogues. On occasion, I even resort to dangling prepositions and split infinitives. (My high school English teacher reads these reports: Sorry Ms. Campbell.)

Never would I pretend that I write on a level with Wolfe. But my tour of his home brought back old memories about my wish to write. Little did I know that I would eventually write several books. Certainly not novels, but they were published---a major goal of any writer. Times have changed. At this stage of my life, anything I write is icing on the cake. My audience for *Your on the Street Reporter* is as important to me as any I had as a writer of geek prose.

Here's to you Thomas Wolfe...and to split infinitives.

The Biltmore Estate

The Biltmore Estate was built by George Vanderbilt in 1890s as a home for his wife and child. Adhering to the dictum that nothing exceeds like excess, George constructed 250 rooms to accommodate a family of three. The Biltmore dwelling, shown in Figure 4, is reported to be America's largest home, even trumping The Donald's abodes.

Several years ago, I visited the Palace of Versailles, the fantastic former "hunting lodge" of several French kings and queens. If you plan a trip to France, I would make this place high on your list of sights to see. To gain a sense of its scale, at one time, 30,000 laborers were working on the grounds to make it the seat of the French monarchy.⁷ The Vanderbilts were more modest in their employment practices and employed only a few hundred workers.



Figure 4. The Biltmore Estate.

Biltmore reminds me of Versailles. Not so much in its grandeur, but in its design. While Biltmore is grand, Versailles is grandiose, ornate to the extreme and much larger. But the room layouts are similar: Massive hallways linking huge bedrooms; multiple kitchens; a gigantic dining room; fireplaces large enough to hold a complete side of beef.

Bathrooms and toilets. Biltmore has a lot of them; Versailles has none. I am told the residents and guests at Versailles kept chamber pots, not just in their bedrooms, but also behind curtains in the living and dining areas. The young readers of this report might be surprised to

⁷ Sourced from Microsoft's Encarta Reference Library.

learn that indoor toilets are a recent invention. My aunts and uncles had outhouses behind their Texas homes. In the 1960s, my brother Jim brought a ranch in northern New Mexico that had no john in the house.

The Versailles folks did not take baths very often. A sprinkle of perfume here and there...and, "Come here my love, let me take in your essences."

Money!

(From the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*: Jesus chastises Judas for Judas' rose colored approach to life. Jesus says, "There will be poor always...Look at the good things you've got.")

The Vanderbilts of the 19th century were very wealthy. And true to the American dream, they started from scratch. In 1810, at the tender age of 16, Cornelius Vanderbilt borrowed money to establish a ferry service between Staten Island and Manhattan. From there, he and his descendents became one of the richest families in America.

Some observations about the house. The Biltmore library is breathtaking. It is the size of a suburban residence; thousands of first editions line the walls from floor to ceiling. Guards are positioned around the room to make certain a scholarly robber does not steal literary treasures such as: (a) *Gainsborough's Works*, (b) *Specimens of Ancient Cultures*, or (c) *The Domestic Architecture of England During the Tudor Period*. I started to approach a guard to ask if the Estate had yet acquired a leather-bound edition of *Voice Over IP*, but I decided not to make his job any more difficult. After all, standing and staring at passers-by eight hours a day is not an easy task.

How could three people come close to reading all these books? Especially given that the third member of the family couldn't read for the first years of her life. Perhaps the room was for show. If so, it fulfilled its function.

In the basement of the house, we examined the servant's quarters, a large gymnasium, a swimming pool, a billiards room, a two-lane bowling alley, and scores of chambers devoted to the maintenance of the house. I walked by several small rooms furnished with two chairs, a table, and a bench. Spartan and tiny, I thought they may have been used by the less-favored, smaller-sized servants, but the tour guide informed me these rooms were set aside for guests to change into out of recreational clothing and their daily attire. (Guests were not expected to traipse around the house in tennis clothes.) Impressive...more changing rooms than Nordstrom's.

As I walked around the Biltmore Estate, I thought about Cornelius. I admired his entrepreneurship and wished I had been a fraction as successful in my companies as he was with his. I also thought about the French kings and queens who lived at Versailles. Their "life style," as we call it today---even by modern standards---was beyond anything I could imagine.

Some of the recently convicted CEOs also came to mind. Their million dollar "personal" parties; their shower curtains---more expensive than my entire bathroom. The saying once again came to mind, "Nothing exceeds like excess." I imagine they would have attempted to build a Versailles or a Biltmore if they had been given the opportunity to rob their companies and stockholders of a few more billion dollars. They would have *Vanderbiltd* their way of life.⁸

I also thought about a graph I had come across at a Web site last week. The image of the graph, shown in Figure 5, stuck with me while I visited Biltmore. The annotations on the right are mine and I recognize there are exceptions to my general statement. For example, not all the people who drowned in New Orleans were poor. Some were too stubborn to leave; others too

⁸Another noun-to-verb translation. Send in your own grammar manglement. I'll forward it to my high school English teacher, Ms. Campbell, as revenge for hours of diagramming sentences in her class.

sick. That's my point: they are exceptions to the data portrayed on this graph, but not the general idea the graph conveys. After all, the folks in Biafra who died of starvation were not rich. Nor were the incinerated people in Darfur at the upper end of this chart.

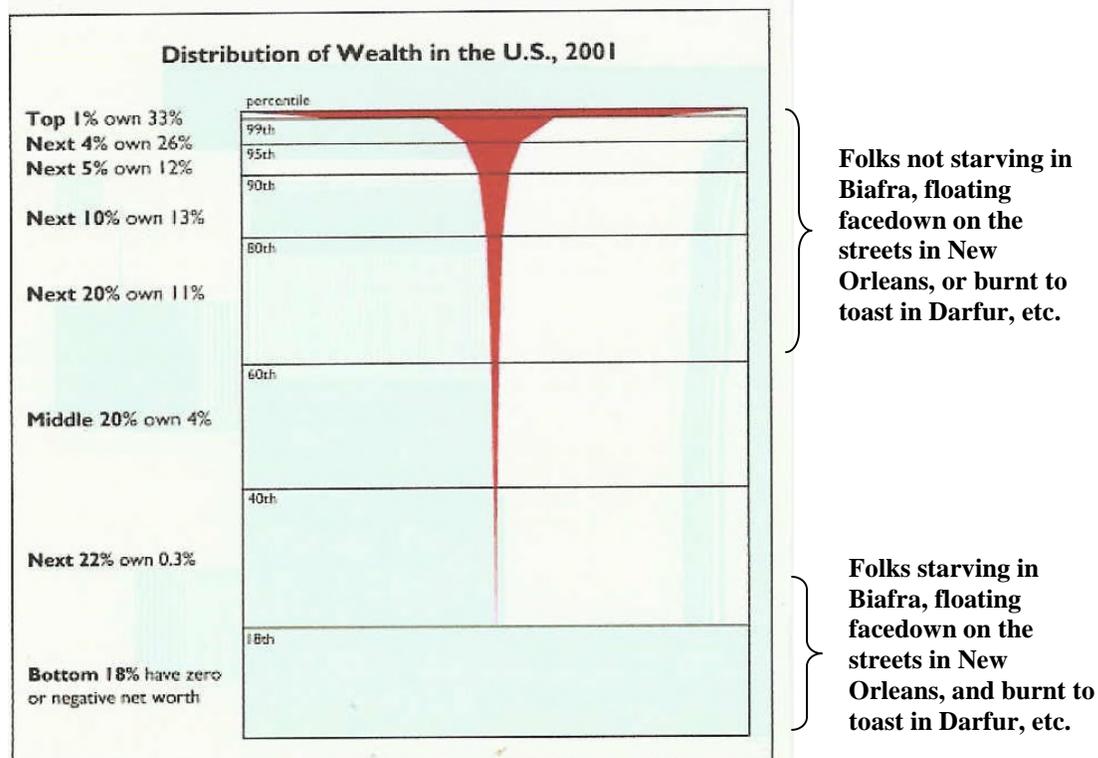


Figure 4. Wealth distribution in America.

From Jerome Economics Institute, 2004: "Changes in Household Wealth in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S." By Edward N. Wolff.

I have named this chart the "Red Needle of Life" because of its shape and its universality to the human condition in many of the world's countries. I do not think the chart makes a political statement, but I do think it presents facts about America and other parts of the globe. I am not offering opinions on the "merits" or the "facts" behind this chart. You can judge for yourself. Anyway, does this chart concern you? You say, "That depends on where I am positioned in the chart."

You didn't say that? I did.

Jokes aside, I'm bothered by shape of the red needle in Figure 5. Trouble is, knowing human nature; knowing the corruption and ineptitude of many nations' governments; understanding (Andrew Lloyd Webber's) Jesus' remonstrance to Judas, I am not convinced the bottom end of the red needle will move upward very much. In fact, the gap between the poor and the rich is becoming greater. I hope we all can agree that we need to narrow this gap and push the Red Needle of Life further up into that chart.

On that happy note, we will move on to Texas, where I will introduce you to one of my ancestral cousins, the great Comanche Chief, Quanah Parker.

Traveling America (I) **Report Five: Quanah, Texas and Quanah the Warrior**

September 11-16, 2005

Hello again from Your on the Street Reporter. This part of the trip has us in the great state of Texas, birthplaces of my Mom and Dad.

According to Texans, Texas is the center of the universe. Also according to Texans, anything that is worthwhile originated in Texas. Cowboys? Look to Texas. Horses? Never heard of Kentucky. And so forth. To add insult to it all, my early home in New Mexico, Lea County, is also known as Little Texas.

As you may know, New Mexicans have a hate/love relationship with Texans, while Texans mostly ignore New Mexicans. Whatever this relationship is, I want to clear up one point before we continue our travelogue: Texans did not invent baseball. As my Jewish friend Harvey told us in an earlier report, the Jews invented baseball. Proof? OK, how many professional baseball players have Texas names in comparison to those who have Jewish names?

There you are. Once again, truth and reasoning triumph over ignorance and superstition. And I have once again come up with an analogy completely irrelevant to the subject. Let's move on to explore parts of the Lone Star State.

Quanah, Texas and Quanah the Man

Taking side roads through Texas, looking vainly for Mom and Pop cafes, we passed through Quanah, Texas. This town is named after a famous Comanche warrior, Quanah Parker. See Figure 6.



Figure 6. Chief Quanah Parker, my distant cousin.

According to our Black family historian, Donald Black, Quanah Parker is a distant relative. Some of my relatives are from the Texas panhandle and some had the name of Parker.

Therefore, I can claim that Chief Quanah is my cousin.⁹ (Donald has researched our family tree and traces a lineage back to Chief Quanah.)

I am also proud to claim to be quintessentially ALL-AMERICAN. Why? Because I come from Cowboys and Indians. And I therefore demand the Bureau of Indian Affairs allow me to set up a gambling casino in my backyard. And I also declare that all European, African, and Asian interlopers can get off *my* land, including the Biltmore Estate---*especially* the Biltmore Estate.

On a more serious note, later in the Traveling America series, we will revisit this great man and learn more about why he became a legend in this part of the country.

In the next and last report to Traveling America (I), we stay in the Texas Panhandle and visit some Quarter Horse country.

⁹ In the interests of dispassionate accuracy, another Black family tree historian has taken issue with Donald's conclusions. Historians arguing. What else is new? I'm sticking with Donald's version because his take on the issue makes me semi-famous.

Traveling America (I) **Report Six: Quarter Horse Country**

September 11-16, 2005

Hello again from Your on the Street Reporter. This part of the trip has us again in the Texas Panhandle, in Quarter Horse country.

Loving Horses

As many of you know, I spent some of my childhood days on a ranch in New Mexico, and my father was a horse breeder. Some of you may recall this passage from my short story, "Cornered by a Stud":

Since my childhood I have been conditioned---like a Pavlovian laboratory subject--- to believe horses are inherently good (the animal kingdom's version of Rousseau's Noble Savage); horses are all-American; horses are heroic; horses are macho (even mares); horses personify America and the West. And the crowning claim: Horses are often ridden by cowboys. What person in this great country can speak against such icons, especially the fabled cowboy and the cowboy's horse?

Toward the end of our journey, we stopped in Amarillo, Texas, the site of the American Quarter Horse Heritage Center and Museum. Because of my past associations with Quarter Horses, I considered I was on a pilgrimage, if not for myself, then for my cowboy relatives. Indeed, we had planned to pass through Oklahoma City to visit the Cowboy Hall of Fame, but bad weather forced us to take a more southerly route to reach New Mexico.

More Fried Food

Before visiting with one of the Museum's inductees, we take another short diversion to the subject of food. One evening, we dined at the Hoffbrau Steak House in Amarillo. I was not surprised to see fried entrees on the menu, and I had forgotten to mention earlier in this report that a popular southwest dish is chicken fried steak. It consists of a poor grade of heavily-pounded meat (say, round steak) whose taste and texture is masked by a layer of fried flour batter and generous sprinklings of salt and pepper. Topped with white gravy, accompanied with French Fries, this food will send your bad cholesterol count into the stratosphere.

Hoffbrau had chicken fried steak on the menu, as well as chicken fried dhicken. I think this latter offering is a relatively new phenomenon to country cuisine. I don't recall seeing this item on menus when I was younger. I have wondered how chicken fried chicken got its name. Chicken fried chicken seems redundant. I have several readers who live in the southwest. Maybe you will enlighten me on this subject.¹⁰

¹⁰ I was told that chicken fried chicken is chicken meat from which all bones have been removed, then fried with a flour or corn meal batter. But my source is from California, and therefore suspect when it comes to fried food. Anyway, if true, I can understand a waitress in Clines Corners, New Mexico being confused when I ordered "chicken fried chicken legs."

The surprise of the evening was a menu item called chicken fried ribeye. Granted, ribeye is not a prime cut of beef, but it is a cut above round steak. Its low position on the steak chart would not necessarily consign it to Chicken Fried Purgatory. Nonetheless, there it was, yet another variation on America's obsession with fried food. And that was not all. The chicken fried ribeye was accompanied with Texas Toast, a one-inch piece of white bread saturated with saturated butter.

We finished our final dinner in the Texas panhandle with a frozen Banana Foster for desert.... *Honey, try it. You'll like it.*

Clint Eastwood strikes again! As I ingested this food, I thought of the four-star Prime Rib restaurant in Washington, D.C., the location of a story in an earlier report--and light years away in my cultural prism. The Prime Rib prides itself in serving some of the best beef that can be found in D.C. The waiters are also trained to cater to the whims and tastes of their customers. They pride themselves in catering to different requests. I thought of a Clint Eastwood retort to a Prime Rib waiter's common question:

- "Prime rib; a fine choice! How would you like your cut prepared sir?"
- Reporter, "I'd like my prime rib Chicken Fried."

Old Baldy: My Hometown's Hero

Amarillo, Texas is in Quarter Horse country and Texans take to horses like Hindus take to cows. One of the members of the Heritage Center hall of fame museum is Old Baldy, a former citizen of my hometown, Lovington, New Mexico. Is that fame or what!?! Here is a newspaper clipping (from the *Lovington Leader*, date not available) about Old Baldy---taken from my short story, "Cornered by a Stud." An obituary for a horse.

Baldy was the greatest. He was gentle and kind around the ranch, but not many ropers could rope off him. He had such a terrific stop that not many were able to do much more than ride him, much less to think about catching a calf... Volumes could be written about Baldy. He was born in Oklahoma and is well known there. One roper near Plains, Texas thought so much of Baldy that he went to Oklahoma to see Baldy's brother. (Reporter's note: What reverence!) When arena gates open on rodeos and ropings this year (1961), Old Baldy won't be there. As the mesquite grass turns green and soft winds of spring blow across the range, the familiar sight of Old Baldy will be missing.

To convey further the affection folks have for horses in this part of the country, take a look at Figure 7, taken from the front cover of a brochure advertising Amarillo sights.

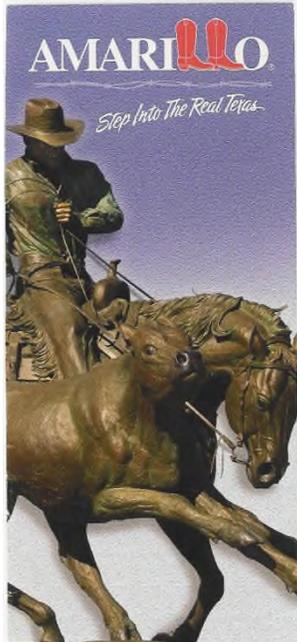


Figure 7. Reverence for the horse.

An entire museum devoted to one specific kind of horse. It is amazing how many museums in America are devoted to such a wide variety of subjects. I walked by a museum in Washington, D.C., whose reason of existence was thread. I suspect I will someday visit a museum dedicated to toy Poodles.

I am not being fair to Texans. Not all Lone Star citizens are fond of horses. Some are fond of farm equipment. Near Lubbock, Texas is a museum I visited a couple years ago (Figure 8). It is the Dickens County Museum.



Figure 8. Reverence for farm equipment.

Unfortunately, the museum was closed when I was in its vicinity. Consequently, I had to rely on photos taken from a distance through the fence.

A museum for farm equipment. For horses. For thread. I have read that somewhere out west, there is a museum for mushrooms. I've visited a museum for computers, without question

the most boring display---of gray plastic and blank screens---that can be imagined. You want excitement? Behold a 1971 circuit board. What's next? Send in your candidate.

After the somber discussions in this report about the poor and their starvations, drownings, and burnings, we conclude with a positive end note (ha). Here is a photo (in Figure 9) of a dancer associated with the Amarillo Lone Star Ballet. Taken from the perspective of a male of our species, the photo sure beats the pictures of Chief Quanah, horses, and farm equipment.



Figure 9. Lone Star pride.

We pulled into Santa Fe to stay a few weeks. Shortly, we travel to Mazatlan, Mexico where I hope to practice (a) conjugating Spanish verbs, and (b) drinking Tequila---not necessarily in that order. Later, we will head north to Idaho to spend the winter. Yep, we are reverse snow birding. Idaho is the home of my mother-in-law. I'll be cold, but she's cool. It will be a pleasure.

I have filed reports from the fine city of Santa Fe. If something else of interest comes up, I'll let you know.