

## Mon., August 14, to Thu., August 17

### *Monday to Wednesday: The Family Zone*

Recall the Friend Zone I entered in Jackson for a week? Today I entered the Family Zone, about which I shall be even more circumspect, to the point of zipping through three days to protect their privacy. I took no notes; I took no pictures. I just enjoyed being with humans I love.

My niece Melissa Brown Ruffo and her husband Phil live in the same Rochester suburb, Webster, her father worked in for Xerox as she and Marty grew up. Before my move to Albuquerque, a brief revisit turned into several months of living with Marty and Melissa. Their mother, from whom I am now estranged, had a surgery, and I stayed to play Mr. Mom. Since my return to North Carolina, I've been back to Rochester for visits, and Marty has moved to N.C., so the three of us have remained close. Now Melissa has three grade-schoolers.

In the course of those Rochester visits, I have taken in all the history the region has to offer. Hence I'll not be taking you to the George Eastman Museum, photography buffs, or his home, fancy home lovers, or take you on a pilgrimage to the 150-year-old Genesee Brewing Company for a taste of its Cream Ale. Nor will we take in the Erie Canal, the site of an early convention of feminists, or the spot where the Mormon Church got its start. The next three days orbited around three children.

Soleil, the eldest, and her brother Paxton were doing a half-day small-boating camp in the afternoons, and kindergartner Lucille a half-day camp at her Montessori school. Phil, an anesthetist, had overnight on-calls, so I did not get to see as much of him. The trip thus offered a delightful combination of play time with the kids and more one-on-one time with Melissa than I've enjoyed since she was 12. We talked about family dramas, and her studies toward a master's in nutrition, and parenting issues, such as one child's anger problems. Such run in the family, shared by me, so I had some insights for her.

A fun meal was at an Indian buffet we got to mid-afternoon after dropping off children. We were told it was last-plate time, so we should just grab all we wanted at once. Someone else was there late, and we all agreed this was the best way to hit a buffet. Melissa and I filled up the table with a couple plates each and had a blast.

We enjoyed a walk in the woods, and with the kids a walk in the neighborhood, at the end of which I ended up carrying little Lucille. She did not end up feeling so little after fifteen

minutes of carrying her. When Phil returned, we got a lunch with him, and a family dinner out that ended with all of us visiting a park on Lake Ontario. We strolled out a walkway over a jetty and onto the rocks at the end. I had collected the last of the Great Lakes in Duluth; this trip allowed me to see all five. I leaned forward over a railing and meditated awhile.

The younger kids insisted on extended games of Tickle Monster, as they called me, showing unusual levels of joy in the sensation. Lucille loved to be chased; Paxton focused on games; Soleil and I watched a soccer match on replay, as I found myself in the shocking position of being able to explain nuances of the rules to someone. As I told her, the game was so new to people of my demographics in the United States, I only played it twice in PE in junior high school. There were no kids' leagues in N.C. in the 1970s, so far as I knew, and professional teams were decades away.

The Womens' World Cup was going on. Melissa, the kids, and I got up at 6 a.m. one day to watch a game while sprawled together across the couch. I remember going to Melissa's games. Sadly, I missed her time on the Pittsford Mustangs with her teammate, Abby Wambach, who went on to become one of the dominant players in the world. In the 2010s, I went to a business event where Wambach was hired to make a signing appearance. When I got my turn, I told her we had someone in common. She didn't recall Melissa, but did the team, signing a soccer ball to her and adding, "Go Mustangs!"

I mentioned the ball, and Soleil said, "I didn't know you had that."

"You kids *kicked* that ball," Melissa grouched. She explained they weren't supposed to find it. I didn't want to embarrass her further, so I didn't ask where it was then.

Soleil had started playing basketball, but the parent-coach of her team was a bit lacking on the fundamentals. I showed her how to shoot correctly, which is to say one-handed, and within minutes the little natural athlete hit four or five in a row. We played some one-on-one and she adopted my tips well.

Melissa came out and settled into a camp chair to watch, producing a wonderfully weird moment: I'd taught Melissa some skills in the driveway of their childhood home, and now I was repeating the process a generation removed as Melissa watched. I caught a glimpse of her and got the sense she was having the same moment. On a later visit to Charlotte, Marty told me Melissa had mentioned it on a call. It is the sweetest memory of the trip.

I never got to see the lake house. But I would give up every other day of this trip if I had to trade them to get these three.

## *Thursday: A Flood of Emotion*

Despite my aiming for an early start, the kids insisted on their mother waking them to hug me good-bye. Unlike her siblings, Lucille, all but naked in her tiny panties, refused to get up for her hug, so I grinned and bent down to engulf her. Already missing them, I had to shove myself out of the house, but soon enough I was headed... nowhere. Phil's car had blocked me in. I accused Melissa of conspiring to keep me there and noted I could drive my little car right around the house if needed.

Soon enough the blocker was cleared, and the Sage<sup>1</sup> and I retook the route of our return from the wedding celebration of Marty and wife Melissa some years earlier. (I make Marty say "Wife" or "Sister" in our conversations to clarify.) We made our way west briefly to I-390, and with that meandered southerly as far as Williamsport, Penn., home of the Little League World Series. The routine was softened by the new audio book I had started, having finished off Grant. It described an unexpected journey taken by Frederick Law Olmsted, the pioneering landscape architect who engineered Central Park in New York City. (The large rock outcrops are the only things natural about that park.) In the 1850s Olmsted took two trips through the South as far as Louisiana and wrote books on what he saw, including a clear-eyed view of slavery. The audio book by a landscape architecture professor retraced the route, amounting to a history-laden travelogue much like this one.

In Williamsport, instead of turning east on I-180 to head south as I have before, we turned west along the West Branch of the Susquehanna River on US 220, which drifted southwest. Stopping for gas at one point, the station turned out to be under renovation. One entered through the back door, usually reserved for employees and deliveries, and the storage room. After paying for a drink, I left it on the counter while putting away my change. The clerk called me back. "That's why I need it," I said. "I need the sugar high."

Bathrooms out of order, they had brought in porta-johns. As I stood by the car waking up, an excavator operator by his machine yelled to two teen boys he apparently knew, "I didn't wanna see you two go in the same one." Gay jokes in the countryside, great.

My route provided a bonus visit to State College. The name is quite on point, the town being home of Penn State University. Hopping off the highway into town, my path took me past the football stadium where one of the most storied programs in the game does its thing. An over-sized Nittany Lion logo on the side made that clear. An army of porta-

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1 In a Freudian slip, I started to write "the Glaive," in reference to the 1981 Datsun 280ZX I mentioned driving here on the Loop Trip and eventually back to Mizzou—the Blue Glaive. A glaive is a type of dagger. Look up a picture of that model, and you'll understand the name.

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potties was being laid out in preparation for the next day's season opener. I pulled into a section of school support buildings to take advantage of one and parked across a wide driveway from the freight warehouse, thinking that would allow quick exit. This proved a mistake, as I was trapped for a few minutes waiting for a couple of semis to maneuver around each other after I was done.

The timing issue continued when I turned toward the heart of campus and saw the signs reporting this was check-in weekend for returning students. This obviating my idea of walking campus, I instead took an achingly slow drive down what appeared to be the main street. The part I saw was strictly utilitarian in style, so perhaps I missed the good bits.

On the far side of town I picked up the highway again, now paired with I-99, and continued through the Pennsylvania tip of the Allegheny Mountains, here relatively low but calming waves of earth. In Altoona we turned more directly west, and finally after a roughly five-hour drive from Webster, turned off US 219. With a mile to go before reaching my goal, I was stopped in the outskirts of South Fork by road work. We were held in place an inordinately long time by a flagger, with a mildly concerning view of an older woman in an unbecoming lack of clothing sunning herself by a drive-through beer shop. As I debated cutting to the parallel street a block uphill, traffic finally moved.

After a left and a few miles along a valley, we wound up in a surprisingly large parking lot. We found a little shade for the Sage, and I started toward the visitor center, the view of which became blocked by a tour bus with the ominous name of Creation Tours on the side. Despite the warning, I was taken aback to see it disgorge a full load of Amish-attired people, perhaps Mennonites. This was in part because the audio book had just been talking about the Amish!

Fortunately they hesitated by the outdoor signs, so I was able to zip past and get started inside the building for Johnstown National Monument. That valley I mentioned used to hold an artificial lake, built in 1853 to maintain water levels for a canal. Before railroads, canals were the interstates of America, carrying freight and people faster and cheaper than they could travel overland. This one came too late in the transition, though. A few years later, a railroad made it obsolete.

In 1881, a group of the richest people in America bought Lake Connaugh (named for the dammed creek that fed it). I mean, very rich people. I mean, say today CEOs Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, and Elon Musk of Tesla/SpaceX lived in the same town, and bought a lake to build an exclusive getaway destination around it with a

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clubhouse and fancy cottages spread around the shoreline. That would be the equivalent to the Pittsburgh-based crowd that built the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club.

They sailed, rowed, fished, and steamed around in yachts without all those bothersome regular people to contend with. What they did not do was maintain the dam. In fact, they put a net across the spillway, the overflow chute for releasing excess rainwater, because they didn't want their bought-and-paid-for fish swimming away. Predictably, it also caught a lot of detritus as well, partially blocking the chute.

In late May 1889, heavy rains pummeled the area. The president of the club, who lived just downhill from the current visitor's center, realized the lake was rising too fast, and the obstructed spillway was carrying too little. He and 15 guys tried to dig an emergency spillway, and then to build up the earthen dam. Neither worked. The last day of the month, a Friday, would become the last day ever for a lot of people. The water began flowing over the dam, until it gave way around 3:15 p.m. According to an exhibit panel, a witness said "the entire lake began to move." A 300-foot section of the dam, one-third of it, flowed down the Connaugh Valley on a wall of water.



*What appears to be a bridge across the remains of the dam is actually in the distance, but nicely demarcates the gap left by the collapse*

The story is remarkably modern to someone who has coached managers in companies large and small over a couple decades. As originally built, the dam was well engineered to handle this scenario, faced with stone and including large iron pipes through its base that could be opened to allow excess flow. A series of subsequent managers cheaped out on maintenance, removing the pipes rather than fix them, letting the facing wear out or get taken away, and not fixing minor breaches correctly.

Over the millennia the creek had cut a fairly narrow V-shaped, wildly curvy valley that hosted a few small settlements and, 14 miles away, the thriving city of Johnstown. A total of 22,000 humans and countless animals lived along the path of the floodwaters. According to a placard at a museum we'll visit, ten percent of the human population died, 2,209 people, including "99 entire families." In ten minutes, downtown Johnstown was wiped flat by the amount of water Niagara Falls takes a half-hour to drop, a wave 37-feet high by that point that carried a locomotive nearly a mile. Because of the layout of the town, the wave climbed 100 feet up the valley on the far side.

The creek eventually feeds the Ohio River. Some of the bodies kept going, past where we last saw that river in Louisville and all the way to Cincinnati.

An impressive life-size diorama loomed over the lower level of the VC, viewable from the upper floor that served as a balcony. There was no angle that did it justice for a photo, but part of it re-created this picture of the aftermath. I read through the exhibits as the Amish/Mennonites milled around and down like an amoeba, talking very quietly, and studiously avoiding eye contact with my heathen self. I tried for it, anticipating the result. I came damn close to greeting a man on the stairs just to mess with him, but oddly chose to play nice.



Part of the story is probably as old as civilization, about rich people not giving a damn about those who are not. (I mean, Bezos built a yacht for half-a-billion dollars; think of how many children that could have fed, clothed, and vaccinated.) Though some presumably donated to the relief fund, for the most part the dam owners' response was to quietly close the club and return to their lives. None of the lawsuits against them succeeded. I thought on reading this, 'What? Rich white males were not convicted by a jury of white males?' Truly a shocker.

A short arc downhill in the car led to a parking area from which I walked to the east side of the dam, crossing the spillway on a pedestrian bridge. I went off-trail for a better look. Green with shrubbery now, the wide ditch remains, sloping downhill.



I stood for a time at trail's end by the gap, now divided by train tracks alongside the creek. I looked into the valley of verdure, still reflecting the shape of the lake, in my mind replacing it with the water and then watching that rush past me in a frightening flow. Like all places of tragedy given enough time, it was hard to reconstitute such horrors in this peaceful scene.





*Looking toward the lake site from the dam*

My return to town timed out perfectly, for the traffic in the wrong direction finished its pass down the one open lane just as I arrived. The flagger demonstratively sent me on my way before the other vehicles heading in that direction got there, and we exchanged thank-yous through my open window.



On the way in I had spotted a sign from the national monument pointing to the “Clubhouse,” without knowing what that meant. Now I did. Relatively modest even by the standards of the day, as you can see, the allure of the place was not its physical attributes

but its associations. Back in Lusk, Neb., I told you about Andrew Carnegie while visiting an original Carnegie Library. He was one of the rich dudes who built this joint. I looked in the locked building and then paced the porch a bit, thinking Carnegie stood here, and trying to imagine how rich people think.

Heading back toward the highway, I was inspired by a road sign to drive down the valley instead, following the course of the flood. I crossed the highway into South Fork proper, but of course the directional signs for Johnstown disappeared, and I ended up curling in the wrong direction. Eventually we ended up on US 239 again, four miles north of the turn we'd taken to the monument. We repeated our way south, this time going five miles past that earlier turnoff. US 56, the Johnstown Expressway, wound through the hills five more miles, the last part elevated, before dropping me into town.

Signs led me to the Johnstown Flood Museum. The parking lot was on the other side of the creek, now imprisoned in concrete for its bad behavior, including repeated natural floods in the years after the big man-made one. I parked the Sage facing the creek and walked the narrow bridge sidewalk back to the finest museum building guilt money can buy.

The museum is housed in a Carnegie Library, built two years after the flood Andrew Carnegie helped cause, to replace one it wiped out.

The cashier woman explained there were four floors of exhibits including a video, and introduced me to a male retiree volunteer to answer any questions, seemingly eager to give me the tour. "I'm more of read-the-exhibits-on-my-own guy, if that's okay," I said with some discomfort.

"You'll want to see the video," she insisted in a flat tone, as the male glared unsmilingly. She said it was 25 minutes long.

"I don't have that kind of time," I insisted. He glared some more.

The museum does an excellent job of personalizing the flood. The story of telegraph operator Hettie Ogle, written below a telegraph key, is worth a direct quotation:

Just before 3:00 p.m. on the day of the flood, Hettie Ogle received a message from South Fork that the dam "may possibly go." Mrs. Ogle stayed at her post, sent warnings to local offices, and wired Pittsburgh that this would be her last message, since the telegraph lines were going underwater. By this time, however, the dam had already broken. Mrs. Ogle's house was destroyed and her body was never recovered.

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Stereoscopes made a last appearance on the trip, in an effective display placed at various levels with picture cards from the flood's aftermath. Another exhibit pointed out that this was the first major disaster at which the American Red Cross came to the rescue, led by Clara Barton herself. Barton, the Patent Office's first female recording clerk in the 1850s, became a volunteer nurse during the Civil War. During post-war travels in Europe, she learned about the International Red Cross. After years of advocacy she formed the American version, becoming its president the same year the clubbers bought Lake Connaugh.

The top floor had an interesting feature for a library: A gymnasium, complete with an elevated running track!

After a prolonged search for the men's room, which turned out to be off the stairway on the other side of the gym from the the one I'd climbed, I made my way out with a thank you to the cashier. She had regained her courtesy and gave me a friendly good-bye. Back across the creek, I walked up to the modern bridge where an earlier one caught a massive debris pile in the flood. This shot looks back toward the museum, just left of the red-roofed building:



After a quick pass through the inviting downtown, I reclaimed the expressway back to the highway. Fifteen miles down that, I hung a left onto one far more famous.

Back at The Henry Ford, I mentioned Henry had a car that could get up to 72 mph by 1901, which he drove to victory himself in a race. A decade later, there were no highways on which he could drive at this modern highway speed. The few roads there were inhabited cities, and in most cases “road” just meant flattened earth, maybe covered with gravel. A cross-country drive was effectively impossible, even if you had a way to take enough gas with you. The man who led the creation of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909 and paved it with brick, Carl Fisher, took that idea to the next level. He proposed a gravel road from San Francisco to Times Square in New York, in as straight a line as possible. His business model was intriguing: Ask automakers and related companies to donate one percent of their earnings. The money would be used primarily to buy materials, with towns along the way providing the labor. One of his partners came up with the idea of naming the route the Lincoln Highway in hopes of getting some funding from Congress, which was debating building the Lincoln Memorial in D.C. at the time.

The usual politics arose over the plan to take as straight a route as possible; for example, Utah pushed for a downward turn toward Los Angeles instead, because that would keep more of the highway (and travelers’ money) in that state. The route was blazed in 1913, but a year later the initial money was gone with the highway only half done, and that still unpaved. Fisher shifted his vision to promoting concrete roads. A guide to the route from two years later estimated the drive would take at least three weeks, and you had to camp once you got west of Omaha, Neb.

Over the next decade a melange of discontinuous named highways sprung up. By 1925, the federal government had had enough, and it created the system of numbered highways we use today. If you’ve driven US Highway 1 along the East Coast, 101 on the Pacific Coast, or any of the intermediate numbers in between, you experienced the initial results. The Lincoln Highway was one of the first to go coast-to-coast, though split into several different route numbers. Most of it, including the section onto which I turned, is US 30.

An up-and-down run through forests and farms led me to the entrance to the Flight 93 National Memorial. When extremist idiots crashed planes into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, somehow thinking this would turn out well for actual Muslims around the globe, one group failed. Passengers on United Flight 93 from New York to San Francisco learned via cell phones about the attacks. Their plane had been hijacked as well, and despite promises from the criminals they would be okay if they cooperated, the passengers put two and two together. We know from people on the other ends of those phone calls that they decided to take action, one of them giving the call to arms, “Let’s roll!” Their courage forced the plane downward 18 minutes away from its

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presumed target, the U.S. Capitol. The National Park Service brochure from the memorial succinctly tells what happened next:

Just before 10 a.m. the plane is seen flying low and erratically over southwestern Pennsylvania. At 10:03 it crashes, upside-down, at 563 miles per hour into this Somerset County field. There were no survivors. All 33 passengers, seven crew members, and four hijackers are killed.

On a beautiful summer afternoon I found myself surrounded by motorcycles in the parking lot, many of them Harley Davidsons, prompting a phone shot texted to Guy in Spokane. Whether this was an organized gathering or just a stop for every motorcyclist in America who passes within 100 miles, I didn't know.

The visitor center, which I knew would be closed, is on a hill above the crash site. After passing the VC and a memorial wall, a walkway leads to an overlook. I like that it was thronged. Indisputable heroes died here. As I looked over the site a good distance off, I found myself struggling with emotions. They crept back as I wrote the last paragraph.



*The flight path was along the white-bordered rectangle right of center, and the crash site is just above it*

They came back when I inserted that shot the next day.

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A descriptively named Ring Road wound the Sage and I down to a parking lot at its end. From there a wide sidewalk leads, first along a fence protecting the field where much of the debris was found. Next comes a wall over which one gets a full view of the impact point. At its end another memorial wall contains the names of the victims. A line of darker stone paralleling it marks the exact flight path; I imagined the plane passing overhead, roof in full view. Many people claim they would've been one of the brave, attacking the hijackers. Anyone who knows me will tell you I would have. "That would've been me," I thought gravely, looking through the fence at the end of the walk pointing to a boulder that now marks the point of impact. I had a hard time making myself take pictures, and my later notes are sparse. But if I recall correctly, after the investigation was complete and the debris taken away, the coroner declared the spot a burial site, given that many of the remains were incinerated. The boulder, with the names of the dead engraved, was moved from elsewhere to mark the spot.

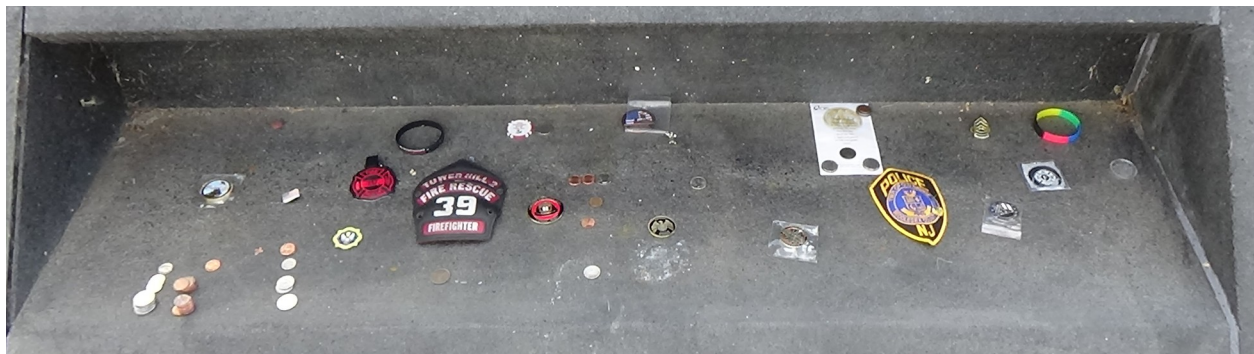


I found eerie the semicircular gap in the hemlock copse surrounding the boulder. The fireball from the plane burned it out of the woods. I kept stopping and staring as I headed back for the Sage. Of several shots I took, this one perhaps best captures the feeling:



Again emotions sting my eyes, as I sit in my living room and insert the picture.

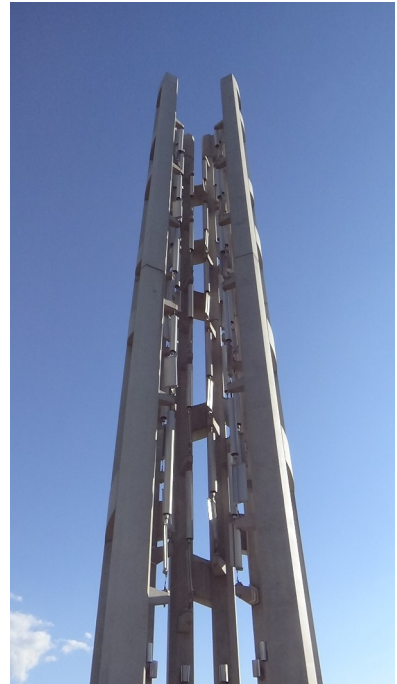
At a niche along the walkway wall, people had left various tokens: coins, firefighter and police patches, pins, a medallion, a wristband. Along with the expected poignancy came an additional pang of recognition. Remember the tokens at the Medicine Wheel, Bear Paw, and the roadside medicine rock? Across demographic lines, humans are more alike than not.



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Driving in, I had followed three guys on bikes. Our timing was similar enough at the overlook that they passed me around this spot. I exchanged grim nods with one of them.

They appeared again at my last stop, the Tower of Voices. I'd read of it, and hoped to hear of it. Standing off the road near the highway, 93 feet high, it is a graceful housing for 40 wind chimes representing the 40 innocents killed. From the description on a marker, it sounds beautiful, with cylindrical aluminum chimes in six notes over two octaves. Ignoring the nearby couple, I lay on my back on the ground getting pics of the tubes. Lack of wind stole my chance to hear them. I could have used a QR code to hear a recording, but that held no appeal. The blue sky made clear the real thing wasn't coming, so I gave up and went back to the car just as my three fellow travelers dismounted.



A sober mood prevailed as the Sage and I pulled out. We continued a short distance down the Lincoln Highway before turning southward again on US 160. This turned into a beautiful drive through the Alleghenies, rougher and shorter than the Appalachians in Virginia and my home state. The time flew by with the views until I picked up another historical road, about which more tomorrow, for a short stretch into Frostburg, Maryland.

I drove past my final accommodation of the trip, the Hotel Gunter, and swung around to find the parking lot behind it. A restaurant with a busy open porch was appealing until I heard a voice on a PA calling out trivia. I entered through the basement and made my way back into history. I found my way up to the lobby, waited a bit for a clerk to appear, got my old-style physical keys—building key included, because they lock the front door at 10 p.m.—and took the elevator to the third floor.

The Gunter opened in 1897, and its modernization has been modest. The carpet is faded, the rooms dated, and the brew pub in the basement still looks like the 1920s speakeasy it once was. The hallway windows were open to let through the mountain





breezes, lace curtains rolling, theoretically helped along by decrepit ceiling fans. I fell in love instantly.

The hotel guide in a three-ring binder told the story. In its early days the hotel had “100 rooms, a cafe and barbershop as well as a sample room for displaying traveling salesman's wares. Guests were attended by bellboys in brown uniforms with smoked pearl buttons and a chef from New York. Tennis courts were located behind the hotel along with a petting zoo...” It’s current name comes from the William Gunter and unnamed wife who bought the joint around 1900, and fixed up it with such luxuries as electricity and the mahogany bar, presumably the one still in the restaurant. Though the place declined and closed by mid-century, it was revived in the 1980s and 200 pigeons displaced. Now it serves both long-term residents and overnight visitors like myself.

My stuff dumped in the modest room, I took off with my camera and journal to find food. The menu in the room did not indicate that the Toasted Goat downstairs had a vegetarian entree. However, a short tour of the entire downtown was unproductive. I was intrigued to find the town founders Meshach and Catherine Frost buried just off the sidewalk in front of a church. Turns out that’s where the home was they had built around 1810, later expanded into a large inn.

Pizza restaurants stood across the street from each other, with a Dominos a short way down a side road, and a nearby corner 7-11 advertised the same foodstuff. I went in a bar whose sign indicated it had food, sat at a table, and was informed the kitchen was closed. So too was the restaurant the barkeep pointed me to downstairs, presumably due to my arrival after 8 p.m. I later learned to great disappointment that the brew pub at the hotel was, too, as well as an explanation for the rolled-up streets: When Frostburg State University is between sessions, so is the town.

Back at the hotel, after passing another closed place, I settled in at the Toasted Goat figuring I would put together a meal of sides. However, I hadn’t noticed a black bean burger, to which I added fries and spinach salad aided by a pinot grigio, all acceptable. I wrote my notes with occasional glances at the door hung on the wall as decoration, among other eccentricities. Refreshed and noted, I took advantage of the empty lobby to show you historical authenticity:



Up the sweeping stairs I went to a sleep well made.