

## Hard Working Fathers In the New South

*Days 40 through 42-* Today meant more of I-40 to our daughter Alex's home in Little Rock, Arkansas, but an easy day of it, arriving at four o'clock. As soon as I-40 enters Arkansas, the low rolling southern foothills of the Ozarks come up making for a prettier drive after the southern Plains. Though they have their own kind of appeal of surpassing expansiveness, they're not called plains for nothing.

Just across the state line, I saw flashing lights in the rear view mirror. Thinking that the emergency vehicle needed to get around me, I pulled onto the shoulder where the flashing lights followed. Me? I had no idea what I'd done but did know that I had a rear turn light burned out. Fix-it ticket, I thought. No, my sin was that I'd not pulled into the left-hand lane when passing this stopped highway patrol car a half mile back and, as it turned out, that's against the law in Arkansas. My plea of ignorance and promise not to repeat the error got me off with just a verbal warning.

With that settled, the patrolman then shifted from safety officer to state ambassador, welcomed us to Arkansas, and listened as Vicki explained that today is a homecoming for her since she grew up here in Hot Springs. The three of us had a friendly conversation for ten minutes or so before the officer bid us good passage and went back to work. This is the South and this man is a uniformed, presumably well-paid, African-American, sworn public safety officer of his state. For many years, I had continued to think of the South as the brutally segregated autonomous region that I saw in my freshman, and only, year at Georgia Tech in 1960-61.

As my high school's top physics student, I loved the logical beauty of physics and decided to major in it in college. I was impoverished at the time and could not afford the travel costs to get to the nation's top-ranked physics department at Berkeley, or the heavy tuition at excellent physics departments at private schools such as Cal Tech, MIT or Princeton. The best physics department I could afford was Georgia Tech, so off I went on a long-haul Greyhound bus to Atlanta with an old trunk and two scholarships in the fall of 1960.

As recounted earlier here, in the 1850s our family had been shelterers of Underground Railroad freedom seekers at the family farm that Vicki and I own today, in the 1950s my father put his Air Force career on the line to defy a racist general, and a few years later my grandfather and uncle fought successfully to integrate the Methodist Church. Making the most of that obstinate family streak, they all won their race battles. As I headed off to college in the Deep South of 1960, my father warned me, "You're in for a shock down there, Yankee boy," but at eighteen I thought I already knew everything and wasn't listening.

Dad had understated it. There they were right before my virgin eyes, segregated everything: water fountains, bathrooms, busses, churches, schools, side windows for restaurants, and life as a whole. Worse even than segregation was the complete lack of some facilities and opportunities for African Americans in Atlanta: restaurants and lodging on trips, decent schools, any job at all in certain occupations, respect.

The janitor in Georgia Tech's Brown Hall where I lived that year was a lanky gentle inquisitive African American about thirty who I got to know well enough in my Yankee friendliness so that he began asking me about what I was studying in college. Robinson was interested in what I had to tell him in my freshman naïveté about what I was learning in my classes. As weeks passed, it was easy to see that, born a generation later, the bright Georgia Tech janitor would have been a Georgia Tech student or a college student somewhere.

One day Robinson, leaning on his broom, and I, leaning against my bunk bed, had a good conversation going in the dorm room when my roommate Boyce McQueen came back from class, stopped abruptly in the doorway, surveyed this friendly integrated conversation in what was his dorm room, too, spun on his heel, and left. Robinson sized up the situation immediately and, following the Southern code of fear, said goodbye and headed down the hall. When Boyce returned, he told me that he didn't want any more conversations with "niggras" in

his dorm room. I said I'd feel free to converse with anyone of my choosing at any time in *my* dorm room, and that is where the matter festered for a while.

After getting my impulse in check, I decided to try to work patiently on Boyce rather than mount a head-on confrontation of Michael tenacity, which I was prone to do, and the patient approach is what I took for the rest of the year. After all, Boyce was eighteen, too, and like most eighteen-year-olds was disposed to question whatever his parents' way of life was trying to urge on him, which in his case was staunch segregation.

Boyce was a good guy and a devout Baptist which was how I finally got to him. As college freshman roommates are supposed to do, we got into the philosophy of things as deeply as untrained eighteen-year-old minds are capable of doing. As the segregation/integration topic kept coming up, I give us both credit for patiently hearing out the other and never getting harsh in our respective arguments. (Congress, take a lesson.) One day I stumbled on the argument that a just god would not create one group of people to be looked down on by another group He (or perhaps She) had created. At that, Boyce's gentle piety went to work on him and by the end of the school year, he hadn't quite reached the point of openly agreeing with me on human equality but I think he had edged right up to the door sill. I give him credit. Better to somehow convince a segregationist than harangue one and set back progress for years.

Sometime during the year, I heard of an Atlanta restaurant owner who was said to be selling ax handles for the sole purpose of beating black people. I found this beyond belief, a wicked urban legend I thought, but got curious enough after hearing of it too many times that one winter Sunday after church I walked the three miles to Pickrick Restaurant to see for myself. Judging by the architecture, the Pickrick was probably only ten years old but already looked drab and dated.

And there they were just inside the front door, a rack of ax handles for sale for two dollars apiece—no blade, just the handle. Manning the cash register was the petite balding proprietor, one Lester Maddox, in a white, ticky-tacky, clingy synthetic-fiber shirt, the kind that looks like it comes from wherever one gets absolute bargain-price shirts. Already flooded with overwhelming evidence of what my father had tried to warn me about, Maddox and his ax handles were the last straw.

At the end of the semester, I hightailed it back north to home and transferred to the University of Maryland, which was still experiencing its own moral sluggishness on race but already had plenty of non-whites and decent race relations on campus. I lost track of Boyce McQueen but suspect that perhaps even before graduating from Georgia Tech he mellowed further and crossed the line into some degree of racial tolerance.

To Georgia Tech's credit, on its own initiative it integrated the student body the year I was there by admitting two African Americans. When I volunteered to the dean of students to room with either of them, he asked, "Where you from, boy?" That is an exact quote including the missing verb. To press a point to his condescension, rather than reply "Maryland," I puffed up and said, "the North!" What a withering look I got. Appropriately, Dull was his last name.

When Maddox closed the Pickrick in 1965 rather than integrate it after losing a court case following the Civil Rights Act, the expanding Georgia Tech campus bought the building and began using it as its student placement center. The irony of a segregationist bastion repurposed from one year to the next into a place where African American students could find jobs is delicious. Eventually Georgia Tech tore down the drab Pickrick building to create more green space on the campus. In a region with very few ranked universities, Georgia Tech has stood out as it has continuously bettered itself until today it shows up well in national rankings including its Department of Industrial Engineering, which ranks first in the nation.

On the strength of press publicity about the ax handles and Pickrick closure, Lester Maddox got himself elected governor of Georgia in 1966



and served one term until peanut farmer/nuclear engineer Jimmy Carter unseated him in 1970. With his out-of-step racial position, buffoonery and silly antics, Maddox did a lot to insure his own defeat. Shown here is Governor Lester Maddox at the National Conference of Governors in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1969. Yes, Lester, you had it backwards.

A short thirteen years after Robinson and I had had our pleasant talks, I'm sure he rejoiced in 1974 when Maynard Jackson was elected as Atlanta's first African American mayor. He served three terms. I hope that somehow you end up reading this, Robinson.

That searing pre-integration taste of the South remained my impression of the region long after things began to get better there, and was still my frame of mind in 1997 when Vicki and I shortly after we were married visited Arkansas so she could introduce the relatives and the new husband to each other. Until he was widowed, one of Vicki's brothers had been married to an African American, and the boyfriend of my new stepdaughter Alexandra was African American. Alex and Isaac met where they worked at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences where he succeeded the many Robinsons of the nation a generation later and became not the hospital's janitor but its heart surgeon. One night during that first visit, Vicki, Alex and I went out to dinner at a Little Rock restaurant where both staff and clientele were integrated. Vicki's brother Ryan and Alex both said that in 1997 interracial romances were no longer a problem in Arkansas as far as they were concerned. And at some point since my freshman foray into the South, the Arkansas Highway Patrol had come around, too.

What that visit taught me was that on the South I was overdue for a recalibration, which I put in place then and there. Though the nation still has further to go on racial equanimity, it is now fair that it give itself credit for how far it has come in a little more than two generations. In fact, no region has come further than the South.

The antidote to racism is close personal familiarity that the country's new ways are fostering. Take a bow, America, but don't rest on your laurels quite yet.



Today, we pulled into Alex's driveway at four with immediate delight in seeing each other. Not long after Vicki and I settled in and the three of us got a good conversation going, I was sidelined with an evening-long bout of upset stomach and no appetite for dinner. It must have been the lunch burger in Van Buren, Arkansas. I managed to eat a half sandwich at eleven and then went to bed.

As with her sister Shanti and brother Hanson, Alex's career has developed well, too. Graduating at thirty as a re-entry student with nearly every honor the University of Arkansas had to offer, she has worked for the University's medical center ever since, risen to head nurse for heart patients in intensive care, and recently was appointed as the first nurse paged when an MD isn't readily available to tend to an emergency in this large hospital. Alex is the fastidious kind who devotes whatever it takes to get a job done well, and one of those fortunate people who loves her work.

The next day we lunched at Flying Fish along the renamed President Clinton Way in downtown Little Rock. We've eaten at Flying Fish on each visit since Alex first took us there years back. ☆☆ today that could have been Flying Fish's usual ☆☆☆ if there had been oysters rather than oyster bits in my fried oyster po' boy. Flying Fish is a small east-Texas-based chain at eight locations serving very authentic down-home southern seafood and sides in a slightly dressed-up shack setting. Table service is replaced by ordering and counter pick-up. Despite today's oyster bits, I'll make a beeline for Flying Fish the next time I'm in Little Rock.

In his now famously improbable path, it was Little Rock, capital of the second-poorest state, that was Bill Clinton's launching pad to the White House. Vicki and Clinton went from grade school through high school together in Hot Springs, Clinton three years ahead of her. Clinton and Vicki's boyfriend at the time were class and band mates. Vicki remembers Clinton as the likeable, brainy, somewhat nerdy, saxophone-playing class president from the old house across

from the liquor store on the wrong side of town. One became a Rhodes Scholar and President, the other a Rhodes Scholar semi-finalist and civic leader.

Unexpected: though on vacation and ostensibly out of touch, a call came today from an acquaintance back home whose firm on the spot became a brand new client of my firm.

On our last night in Arkansas, the three of us picked up my brother-in-law Ryan and nephew Eli in Little Rock and drove the hour to Hot Springs for dinner at the home of my other brother-in-law Dan, his wife Alice and son Douglas. What is most likely to get the two brothers together is a visit from Vicki and me as our visits prompt reunions of their families.

Hot Springs, an unusual place to visit, gets its name from its forty-seven downtown mineral springs flowing at about 140 degrees that for thousands of years have soothed the area's Ouachita people (Ouachita as rendered in French: WASH-it-taw), early European explorers and Americans. In 1541, Spanish explorer Hernando Desoto was the first European to reach Hot Springs and enjoy bathing in its waters. Commercial bathhouses had already sprung up when the Andrew Jackson administration purchased the land the town sits on and began preserving what in 1832 became the first entity of the National Park Service, the oldest national park in the world as far as Arkansas is concerned. The heyday of Hot Springs was during the Roaring Twenties before Americans began flying to vacations, increasingly including foreign destinations. Hot Springs attracted Presidents and First Ladies, Hollywood stars, top entertainers, boxing champions and other athletes, and its share of criminals including Jesse James, Al Capone and Lucky Luciano. The first place Tony Bennett sang his signature song "I left My Heart in San Francisco" was in Hot Springs' Black Orchid Club. The crowd loved it so Bennett tried it out on his next audience at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco. The rest, as they say, is history. Hot Springs began fading with the Great Depression and only a handful of the old bathhouses remain open today. Tourism is mostly gone now, replaced by the kinds of businesses one would expect to find in most towns of 35,000 people.

During the evening, Vicki's younger brother Dan told me of how the sale of his employer, a regional restaurant chain, to a new owner has led to a slash-and-burn CEO being hired to trim costs by the chainsaw method. The company headquarters is in turmoil after successive layoffs, remaining employees' workweeks ballooning into evenings and weekends, pay cuts, and rock-bottom morale in what had been a pleasant place to work and profitable every year for its entire company existence going back to the 1940s.

This corporate milking strategy has become more prevalent over the last twenty years or so by investment banking firms and turnaround specialists, the *modus operandi* being to strip down a company to bare essentials, people be damned, jack up short-term profits and therefore firm value long enough to sell the anorexic company at an inflated premium, and let buyers then restock talent to get long-term company performance and morale back up to sustainable levels. Sometimes vulture capitalists as they are known will sell a company *in toto*, sometimes dismembered piece by piece like an estate sale, whichever looks like it will maximize sale revenue. Dan's employer's new owner is the one who called in the shark, and Dan is just trying to hang on through the eventual sale or whatever comes next.

Vicki's older brother Ryan, with a recent heart bypass and compression stockings for a bad case of varicose veins, is on his feet most of the day as a grocery store department manager in his late fifties hoping to make it to Medicare age and retirement before wearing out. He is the widowed parent of a developmentally delayed teenager who got that way as a crack baby. Our nephew Eli is a big jolly kid who laughs easily, worked years to overcome a speech impediment, and seems to be getting a clearer grip on developing his abilities through computer games that require one kind of strategy or another. In tandem with his own efforts, his father Ryan is Eli's salvation.

Vulture capitalists, sharks, crack pregnancies, bypasses for a guy who stays trim—all of life's bad luck for the unsuspecting. My "fair god" pitch to my college roommate Boyce still makes sense on racism but what about bad luck to good people? Faith? Doesn't work for me because bad luck is ever present. Grand design? Some design. So: God?

Now within a thousand miles of home on what is shaping up to become over an eight-thousand-mile odyssey, it has become ever clearer from people who have told us their stories that a corrosive reigning in of opportunity has taken center stage in the America that we have encountered. How this long unfelt deterioration has come about has been traced in *Running on Empty* through analyzing the generation-long middle-class slide, the rise of plutocrats, their rending of the American social contract that worked so well for a half century, poverty resulting as the new national economic norm, and the corruption of the political class by "campaign contributions" that enabled all of this. Looking more deeply at this juncture, another critical element becomes apparent: the close complicity of the United States Supreme Court itself. How improbable and troubling it is that the institution created by the Constitution as the final arbiter—the neutral safety valve—on American values would instead descend into political dogmatism and choose to become complicit in corrupting the nation.