

JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Friday, August 13, 2010 3:51PM

Starting Line: Fiery Run, Virginia

Posted By: James Reston

What do you do in the days after you deliver a book and the great emptiness yawns out in front of you. Ocracoke? Martha's Vineyard? That villa that my friend, the Count, offered me in Florence as a reward? For me it was obvious. Fire up Favel, my 1990 jeep---Favel is the name of Richard the Lionheart's horse--- get it a nice tune-up and a new clutch, and take off for Iowa City from Virginia, there to deliver the gift wistfully to my son in graduate school, because I want him to be just as cool as I thought I was way back there in the 1960s.



It's 98 degrees today. The jeep has no side windows, but it does have a bikini top. Tomorrow is supposed to be hotter, cloudy with a chance of hamburgers, as the children's book line goes. It's evening and I hear thunder. Is it an omen?

What will the agent say when he reads it? Good? Great? A Classic? Shades of Koestler and Dostoyevsky....more likely: this book needs work.

I need time and space. A slow trip to Iowa City. No Interstates. Never push Favel over 52 m.p.h.--- his comfortable speed. He begins to shake at 55. I'm in no hurry. I've got two Graham Green novels and Bury

My Heart at Wounded Knee. I'll be fine. I'm in no hurry.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Saturday, August 14, 2010 11:18AM

First day: Tazwell, Virginia

Posted By: James Reston

At dawn I check the odometer: 159,418, and then, as if I'm checking Favel's stirrups, mount up. Down the lane of our Blue Ridge cabin, a covey of seven young turkeys scamper into the woods. And as I turn into the road, I see three white egrets on my neighbor's pond. A first. A good omen?

The goal for the day is Grundy, deep in the coal country of Western Virginia, hard by the Kentucky border. I don't know how far it is. Another rule. Don't count the miles. Why Grundy? I have two personal ties to it. My good friend, the novelist Lee Smith, grew up there. I always envied the "narrative" of her life as they say, and I wondered where she got her spunk. And I have a labor organizing buddy, Bob, who organized hospital workers in Grundy years ago. "All the miners were against us," he told me recently. "It got violent real quick."

Down to Charlottesville, around Lynchburg on the Jerry Falwell Parkway---"Have a blessed day!"---to Roanoke, Favel canters along smoothly. But the big mountains loom ahead, on the rise to the plateau around Bluefield, West Virginia, and the jeep labors in third gear at 40 m.p.h. on the serious slopes. Periodically, I turn off onto the side to let pass the long line of cars I have been leading. I don't want to mess with the impatience of these hard scrabble mountain folk.

By six p.m. I decide not to push it. We both need a rest, and Grundy is still 60 miles away. So we pull off for the night in Tazwell, Virginia. I call Bob who informs me that he was also jailed in Tazwell County in a little town up the road called Richlands.

"Is there anybody you'd like me to look up, a sheriff or a judge?" I ask sweetly.

"Oh, no, they're all gone now," he replies. "At least, I hope they are."

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Sunday, August 15, 2010 10:09PM

Second Day: Madison, Indiana

Posted By: James Reston

Fog this morning after night rain. It seems cold, so I don sweats and my dungaree jacket. I know that with the prediction of 100 degrees today, it will shorts and a T shirt by 11, and no shirt by 1. I feed Favel oats in the form of two quarts of oil and worry that with the strain of the big mountains yesterday the old oil leak has sprung again.

Tazwell's elevation is 2500 feet, and soon enough we begin to descend into the legendary Clinch River Basin. Huge coal trucks begin to appear, and occasionally we parallel tracks with endless trains whose gondola cars brim with coal. (I wonder how much of it comes from "open-cut" strip mining in the mountain

tops above, that are hidden from view.) We descend and descend as if we're not only headed for the pits of coal but the pits of Hell. In Grundy I stop at Dotson's Drive In for a simple breakfast. It's harder and harder to find little family own restaurants in America any more. Franchises have taken over the country. Across the highway from Dotson's is a clinic with a flashing neon sign: Black Lung.

Finally, into Kentucky, the roadside landscape becomes vintage Appalachia. I pass another flashing sign for a FEMA claims center. Dozens of cars are parked in the field outside. They're still digging out from the massive flood of the Big Sandy River in this county on July 19. "It's like a war zone over there," someone tells me later.

In Pikeville I'm surprised. It used to be known, in whispers, as the capital of Appalachian poverty. But probably through the ministrations of a recent governor from here, it's been transformed into a vibrant, bustling place. It escaped the recent flood of the Big Sandy because in the 1970s they diverted the course of the river in what locals proudly say is the biggest earth moving project since the Panama Canal.

As I travel up the Bert Combs Mountain Parkway through the Cumberland Plateau toward Lexington, my mind wanders to the dramatic history of this region: the violent struggle to unionize the mines under John L. Lewis in the 1930s, the truck mine boom of the late 1940s, the rise of the welfare state in counties like Harlan, Knott, and Letcher just to the south of my route, the advent of strip mining, and finally, LBJ's War on Poverty, largely spurred by Harry Caudill's seminal book, Night Comes to the Cumberlandlands. It warms me to remember a Thanksgiving dinner I shared in the Caudill house in 1964.

It starts to get really hot. At Winchester, Ky I stop for ice cream, and then experience the low point of the trip so far. I'm forced to take the Interstate around Lexington to Frankfort. Between the shimmering heat and the wind shear from the 18 wheelers and the cackling young bloods who come roaring up to my back fender and honk, I fully expect us, at any minute, to levitate...or be levitated...into an adjoining field.

Finally the proximity of trees along a two lane highway deliver a measure of coolness. It's on past tiny towns with wonderful names like Eminence and Pleasureville, until at last I cross over the Ohio River to Madison, Indiana. It has been called the most beautiful river town in America, and I can believe it. 133 of its blocks are on the national historical register. And it has a terrific little bistro where the Cypriote chef, Nicos Izarnis puts before me an outstanding, refreshing, cold melon soup, and we talk about wars and small towns and the meaning of life until closing.



Reston in Madison, Indiana

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Monday, August 16, 2010 1:16PM

Third Day: Farmer City, Illinois

Posted By: James Reston

The morning ahead should be easy and fun. The afternoon will be the beast, because I'm determined to make it into Illinois, no matter how hot it is. But first, I have a V.I.P. tour of Columbus, Indiana laid on for the morning.

Columbus is probably unique in America. The home of Cummins Engine Company, the company has done something for its community that should be emulated all over America. It pays the architectural fees for world class architects to build original and beautiful buildings. For its stunning array of 50 eye-popping structures, it has been dubbed the "Athens of the Prairie."

In the company of a Cummins executive, we start at Eero Saarinen's North Christian Church. Of course, I know Saarinen's work from the terminal at Dulles Airport outside Washington, the TWA terminal at JFK

airport, and the gateway arch in St. Louis. His church in Columbus is a soaring piece of imagination that more resembles a space ship than a church and seems, at any moment, about to lift off for Heaven. From there we head downtown to the famous 5th Street to see the county library designed by I.M. Pei. For one who has spent quite a lot of time in libraries, this is the most welcoming, efficient, and lovely library I've ever seen outside of Washington. The plaza outside features a major work by Henry Moore called "the Large Arch" which is inspired by Stonehenge. We tour a collection of unique schools, a post-modern fire house, and the low-slung, ivy covered, slit windowed Cummins headquarters.

But it is the Bartholomew County jail that everyone wants to see, either to admire or denounce. There's something vaguely Turkish about the structure with its mosque-like dome and geometric windows. It invites the thought that it might be quite nice to stay there for a few nights. Replete with indoor and outdoor recreation facilities, its defenders speak of it as being in accordance with "modern, enlightened laws of criminal justice."

Before I hit the road, we linger in front of the new Indigo Hotel. Its signature is a resident dog in the lobby and gold fish you can rent at a nominal fee for your room, in case you get lonely. Who knew that Middle westerners could be so quirky?

It's Friday the 13th, and also, Favel's scratchy radio tells me, the 'Blame Someone Else Day.' So it seems entirely appropriate that in heading west I pass through Shirkesville, Indiana. Then as if a balance needs to be struck, the next town is Universal, Indiana, a collection of decidedly down market houses.

No word from New York yet.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Monday, August 16, 2010 5:52PM

Fourth Day: Keokuk, Iowa

Posted By: James Reston

The change in the landscape was immediate and dramatic late last evening as I passed over the Indiana border into Illinois. Suddenly I was into the land of agrobusiness. Vast fields of soy bean and corn stretched to the horizon. The sky was huge as well, with immense, orange cumulus clouds that reminded me not so much of rain as Hiroshima.

This morning as I ponder the map I decide to cut straight across the waist of Illinois rather than veer northwest through the cultural bell weather of Peoria and Galesburg where they want to relocate the high value detainees of Guantanamo Bay. I'm going straight for the Mississippi River; tomorrow I want to explore the river towns. The heat seems to be abating or could it be that my body is getting accustomed to it? On Highway 136, there's only one town on my map, Macomb, Illinois, that merits bold print, even if the font is 2 pt. size.

The miles tick along happily for Favel and me, the silence and the wind interrupted only occasionally by the rattle of a passing of a Harley Davidson. Over-sized tin cans for grain storage and enormous grain elevators dot the great fields. It comes as a surprise when I pass the ruin of a wooden barn, the relic of past practices.

Outside the village of McLean, Illinois, pop. 850. I happen upon a most confusing, staggered set of signs: "A Man Must Stand/ For What is Wrong/ Carl Holland (1919-2001)." Who was the disgruntled Mr. Holland, I wonder, and what possessed him or his survivors to display this odd message. I turn around and go back to look at it again. Did he forget a 'not'...for what is 'not wrong'? No, I saw it correctly the first time.

On this trip I've traveled over the high mountains of Virginia, down through the sharp, low valley of the Clinch River coal country, the Blue Grass of Kentucky, and the small towns of Indiana. I'm liberated from

state boundaries, and beginning to think differently about the regions of America. Now it is the flat fertile, black soil of the Mississippi River valley, the richest soil in the world, the soil from which I like to think, romantically to be sure, from which I spring, since my mother hailed from Sycamore, Illinois, north of here, in DeKalb County.

Just north of Havana, Illinois, a high point. I turn off at a sign for the Dickson Mounds Museum and discover the most moving, most enlightening exposition of pre-Columbian Indian culture I've ever witnessed. Perhaps I'm coming off the enormous disappointment that is the American Indian Museum on the National Mall in Washington. This jewel of a museum tells the story of the extinct Mississippian Indians, vividly and creatively, and features a multi-media presentation called "Reflections on Three Worlds" which is an unparalleled treatment of American Indian spiritual life. If only this could be transported to the national mall, I think, but I know that there are politics involved.

It puts me in just the right mood to come upon the Great River a few hours later as I pass over the bridge to Keokuk. Roll on, mighty river, roll on.

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JAMES RESTON'S BLOG

Wednesday, August 18, 2010 9:13AM

Finish line: Iowa City

Posted By: James Reston

After a few nights in sketchy Super 8 motels, I treated myself last night in Keokuk to the extravagance of an overnight stay in a grand, 19th century B&B, high on a bluff overlooking the magnificent river. With its Disneyesque turret, its great portico, formal garden, and solarium to enjoy "if it wasn't so frightfully hot," the mansion called Grand Anne was built in 1897 by the wealthy purveyor of home remedies and flavored extracts. I got the Rose's Room on the top floor.

I awoke to a crisp, cool, sparkling morning, for the heat has finally broken, and walked out to the bluff's edge to see the sun shimmering across the river and its large islands of flowering lily pads. On the opposite bank on the Illinois side is another mansion, a ridiculous over-the-top faux-Turkish pile that a class action lawyer has built as a shrine to himself and decorated with Chihuly glass sculptures. When I was told that the lawyer had built the shrine after acquiring a lovely wife 20 years younger, I nodded in recognition.

I head up the Illinois side to Nauvoo and was pleased to find, even on Sunday morning, that I could see again the film about the tragic and heroic stay of the Mormons here on their way to the Great Salt Lake. This is where Joseph Smith, their founder, had been assassinated and succeeded by Brigham Young. Whatever one's religion, the Mormon story is one of the great epics of American history. But the Nauvoo exposition does not treat the dark side. That I knew from my association with the author, Fawn Brodie, (who advised me during the Frost/Nixon Interviews in 1977). Besides her psycho biography of Richard Nixon, Fawn had written an unauthorized biography of Joseph Smith, and as a devout Mormon, was excommunicated from the Church for straying from the sanitized version of Mormon history.

From Nauvoo I crisscross the river between the Illinois and Iowa sides, mingling with the boat and motorcycle crowds, passing through Fort Madison (which was an important outpost in the battle to rest control of the upper Mississippi from the Sauk and other Western Illinois tribes) and Burlington. At last I pass over the great river for good at Muscatine Iowa, whose sunsets, Mark Twain proclaimed, were unequaled on either side of the ocean.

Iowa City was at last within reach. The town is much more than the end destination for me, since our precious, fragile handicapped daughter, Hillary, got her kidney transplant in 2005 at the University of Iowa Hospital. (I wrote about that in my book, [Fragile Innocence](#).) And now my son, Devin, deepens our connection. When I greeted him with a huge hug, I threw my hat in the air, as if I'd just won a rally race

across Africa. The old motto of Iowa, now regrettably abandoned, occurred to me once again.

"Iowa! You make me smile!"



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