



If the Thundercloud Passes Rain

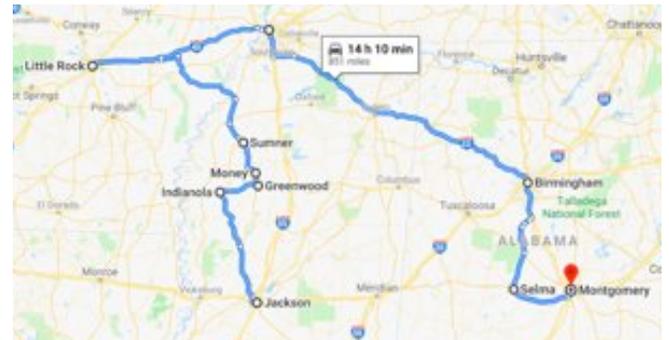
North Carolina, Mississippi, Arkansas, Tennessee, Alabama



Left to Right: (top) George, Jenn/I Eno River, Carolina Tiger Rescue, everybody at Bobbit's Hole, outdoor shower; (bottom) a tree grows on Farish/Jackson, Central HS/Little Rock, Lorraine Motel, MLK Statue & 16th Street Baptist Church/Birmingham, Selma

Introduction

My motivation for this trip stemmed from two places: the fact that I hadn't visited Jenn (my best friend from graduate school) since she relocated from Seattle to North Carolina 7 years ago, and the fact that – after visiting South Africa in 2018 – I felt that I needed to learn and experience more US Civil Rights history in the Deep South (my only prior experience there had been a professional conference in New Orleans 20 years ago). Indeed, I began searching for US Civil Rights tours immediately after visiting South Africa. Although there are a few venues, most adult-focused trips take place in the fall and spring (given summer heat), with most summer offerings geared towards teen/student/school groups. Eventually, I learned that The Nation (a progressive/liberal news magazine) was running its first late-June US Civil Rights tour – and I immediately signed on.



Left to Right: cardinal, Jenn on Battle Creek trail to UNC-CH, campus art installations (Bourgeois' spider, Dougherty's woven stickwork)

June 14-22, 2019 – North Carolina With Jenn, George, and Cara

I left my home around 3:30 p.m. Friday, unaware that the weekend right after the end of the school year is NUTS (apparently, I have never flown at this time... and will avoid doing so in future). The shuttle to the airport was an hour late (thanks to intense traffic and multiple accidents along I-5), and another hour late arriving at PDX (because we drove via SLOW highway 99). Arriving after 7 left little time to grab dinner and go to bed – given that my alarm wake-up was 4:30 a.m. (UGH). Arriving at the airport the next morning around 5 a.m., I found the crowds/lines INSANE. Fortunately, Delta had bumped me into first class – meaning I was through all lines and to my gate in about 15 minutes flat. Unfortunately, Delta runs no direct flights between PDX and Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill (RDC) – so I had to endure another crazy travel gauntlet via Minneapolis-St. Paul/Minnesota. Landing a little late in RDC, I eventually found Jenn and we made our way to her lovely home in the thick deciduous woods – a seeming theme in North Carolina. George prepared an amazing dinner of cast-iron prepared spatchcock (i.e. spine-removed) chicken, corn, and mashed potatoes/gravy – after which we did a 2.5-mile walk around the confusing circuit of roads... the heat palpable, the fireflies (which refused to photograph) amazing! For the

next few days, Jenn and I both worked half-days and enjoyed various local walks/activities the rest of the time. Given the high heat/humidity, I was up early most days doing a neighborhood hill-walk (thankfully, there are hills in North Carolina – like Chapel HILL – because I promised Allison I would stay in shape for a planned late-August Sierra traverse). Sunday, being father's day, was low-key. On Monday, Jenn and I walked about 4 miles/300 feet up/down forested Battle Creek to the UNC-Chapel Hill campus/downtown area, enjoying several art installations (another Bourgeois' spider appears at the Guggenheim-Bilbao) and some flatbread and local beer at a rooftop bar above the university district main street. For dinner, we enjoyed really great take-out Mexican and Jenn finally convinced me to use her outdoor shower – since I was always dripping with sweat and changing clothes 2-3 times a day; as someone who is not into being naked, I found the shower (which faces the woody greenbelt – houses nevertheless visible across the shallow draw) somewhat lacking in privacy. But showering with the fireflies at dusk in the cooling air did become more appealing over time.



Left to Right: Cox Mountain hike: George & plastic uke crossing Eno River, frog, Eno River, snakeskin (several seen), more frogs

On Tuesday, Jenn and George (strumming his plastic uke) climbed Cox Mountain from Eno River State Park (4 miles, 400 feet – all in woods). The hike took us across the Eno on an impressive swinging bridge, up Cox, and then down the other side and along a placid section of the Eno. Given that North Carolina is home to many snakes, I was always concerned about running into them while walking; today, we found several shed snake-skins and at least 2 kinds of toads. Most river/beds we walked along were very rocky, and evidence of flash-flooding/variable river heights was obvious. To me, the Eno seemed low and sluggish but Jenn/George thought it the perfect level for a paddle tomorrow/Wednesday morning. Thus, when we returned home, George spent an hour loading up the cars with their canoes/kayaks... only to have a MASSIVE rainstorm dump starting around 7 p.m. I actually was out doing a night hillwalk when the rain (and thunder/lightening) hit... it was drenching but still warm and humid. Overnight, the Eno went from 2 feet (safe) to 6 feet (highly unsafe) and we had to call off the canoe/kayak. George took me out on the nearby 2.5-mile Pumpkin Loop, part of the university's land-holdings that had been effectively commandeered by bikers, runners, and walkers. There, I encountered my first live snake – a 2-foot long green tree snake; alas, no pictures! Wednesday afternoon, we were joined by Cara (also from graduate school, now a high-ranking CDC scientist involved in polio eradication) who flew up from Atlanta. We enjoyed another amazing George-cooked meal of chicken enchiladas with rice (and Swiss chocolate Cara brought from her recent WHO/Geneva meeting).



Left to Right: (top) Bolin Creek (note low river with rocky banks and storm drains), Jenn/Cara/I, near the end of Bolin walk; (bottom) all Duke Botanical Gardens – Cara/Jenn, grounds, turtles, pretty lotus, fascinating water plants

The next day/Thursday was very hot; Jenn/Cara/I began with a 3-mile walk along the Bolin Creek bike/walk path – terminating at this great soup/salad/sandwich place (Root Cellar) that reminded me of the New Morning Bakery in Corvallis. As the name implies, most of the walk was alongside Bolin Creek – the river substantially down. Nevertheless, recent debris was evident high up the banks, and towering storm drains indicated the typical height of the river during big storm/rain events. As we were walking along one section, this HUGE sycamore tree crashed down, narrowly missing some kind of small apartment complex. Unfortunately, the main event of the day – a guided/outfitted evening kayak trip on the Saxapahaw River viewing fireflies – was entirely dashed by yet another massive rain/thunder/lightening storm that began around 2 with extreme winds and microbursts (which took down many branches/trees, including all power in the town of Saxapahaw – where our outfitters were). Despite foul weather all around, we headed to Saxapahaw

around 4:30 intending to eat dinner before putting-in at 6:30. Of course, dinner didn't happen because of the power situation) – and then the outfitters called the trip off around 5:30 because lightening (still visible in multiple directions) was forecast to continue through 8. We headed back to Chapel Hill for an excellent dinner at a Greek restaurant. Given that my camera was fully buried in a waterproof bag, there are no pictures from our evening trials in Saxapahaw.

On Friday, which was our coolest/most comfortable day, Jenn/Cara/I headed to Duke University's Botanical Gardens for a 2-mile walk. The most interesting sections were the native plant gardens (the big-leaf magnolias were magnificent), their food gardens, and their water plants (including lotus, lilies, and these chaos-theory floating things I didn't catch the name of). We then headed to lunch at this really great and very popular German-ish place called Guglhupf; had I not been watching my food intake in preparation for big food farther south, I would have eaten WAY more crazy stuff there, including any number of amazing desserts. As it was, I enjoyed a big salad with fantastic lettuce, and bread. Because we were doing another evening activity tonight, we returned home around 2 to take care of work projects for a few hours. Then it was off to dinner (where I discovered that hush puppies are delicious when slathered with honey-butter!), followed by a guided tour of the Carolina Tiger Rescue center – with about 20 other people. Of course, having now done an African safari, I am likely scarred for life when it comes to seeing animals in cages or at zoos. Indeed, seeing big beautiful cats behind chain-linked fences or being hand-fed meat on a stick sometimes felt like a misrepresentation of how things should be... but the women guides (our leader was a 16-year public school science teacher and very enthusiastic volunteer) were outstanding and, sadly, spoke in great detail about the circumstances that brought all these cats to the rescue center (most involved dumb people trying to profit in some way). By comparison with past lives, the chain-linked fences and feedings seemed a vast improvement for the cats. Unfortunately, several rescued cats were acquired when other rescue centers went under because of poor management or living conditions. In total, we saw 6 tigers, 1 leopard, 1 three-legged caracal, 1 bobcat, and 4 lions. Several rescued cats never accept the public and are thankfully allowed to live out their days in private – which is good. There are no photographs of the lions because we saw them last when the light was the lowest (that said, we heard them roaring a lot throughout the tour).



Left to Right: (top) tigers, caracals (this one lost a leg after being dropped off), and bobcat; (bottom) "Big Chickens" photograph exhibit, West Point Mill with waterwheel and sun-basking brown watersnake (non-venomous but painful biter!)

On our final day, we got a late start – eventually returning to the Eno. Our first stop was the West Point Mill area. We visited the open barn, which had a photography exhibit; the main family house was closed for renovations. But the working waterwheel-driven grist/grinding mill was open. Having visited a lot of windmills in the Netherlands, the West Point Mill felt very much like a windmill... the only difference between that the spinning mechanism was the waterwheel in the adjacent Eno river segment. This particular mill was grinding corn and I bought some very gritty yellow corn, which is delicious (a la creamy grits with sausage). After West Point, we continued to the trailhead for Bobbit's Hole, a popular swimming hole about 1.5 miles in. Swimsuits in hand, we hiked through the woods to a muddy, rocky area with lots of people basking or playing. Cara/I were baskers, while Jenn's family were swimmers. The day ended with some thunder and a Vietnamese dinner out.

June 23-25, 2019 – Trying Hard to Overcome the Bleakness of Mississippi

Around 6 a.m. on June 23, George kindly took me to the airport and I flew to Jackson by way of a short layover in Atlanta (thankfully familiar because I flew through it en route to Johannesburg). The small, official Jackson Airport is called Medgar Evers, one of the assassinated Civil Rights leaders we would be learning about shortly. Given steep cab-fares into downtown Jackson (about 5 miles away), I was hoping to find someone else from my tour and share a ride. No dice. In the end, my cab fare was \$42 – excluding tip. The cab driver (who was black – as is well over 80% of Jackson) asked where I was from, whether this was my first trip to the South, and what I was doing. Upon hearing I was on a Civil Rights Tour, he then asked – with a mix of skepticism and concern - who was running this (my Montgomery car-driver at the trip end expressed the same concerns). I was sort of expecting this and had what I hoped was a reassuring reply – but it's hard to say. The Jackson cab-driver was talkative, explaining his personal experience with local Civil Rights history and telling me stories he felt the tour organizers were going to leave out (e.g. that the jailers of Delta Freedom Riders removed cell window screens, allowing insects to eat people alive). Once we left the freeway, Jackson seemed very concrete and desolate/run-down. Our hotel was the new Westin; although some on-line reviews suggest it is in a dangerous part of town, I don't

have an opinion on this. It was economically depressed and a few blocks from downtown proper. Arriving around 10:30 (because – apparently Jackson is on central time), my room wasn't ready/available. That there was a huge line of departing guests was promising – so I enjoyed breakfast (a delicious yogurt with pumpkin seed granola and carrot ginger puree) and they let me do a workout in the fitness center. By the time I was done, it was about 12:30 and they let me have my room. Of all the hotels we used, the Westin was – overall and by far – the best: quiet, new, good eating on-site, great fitness center on-site, and friendly staff.



Left to Right: Westin Hotel, Jackson City Hall, bank of lawyer offices, MCRM exterior, murdered COFO volunteers

After a shower and a power-nap, I headed back to the hotel restaurant for an egg-white/veggie omelet and then met up with our group at 2, the time we were to walk to the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum (MCRM), a facility that opened in 2017 – notably dedicated, in part, by Trump. Our client-group of 14 included liberal/progressive people from California, Oregon, Indiana, New York, and Vermont; we were represented by educators (7, the most), librarians, lawyers, political activists, and writers. Additional staff included our organized tour manager, our expert/facilitator (documentarian Andre Robert Lee), and our capable bus-driver. Having done a lot of mixed group hiking trips with complex schedules and interesting group dynamics, I was deeply impressed by the organization of this company (Distant Horizons, who subcontracted for The Nation). As recommended by Andre, we strolled slowly (the temp's in the upper 80's, the humidity in the 70's) 15 minutes to the museum... the streets and sidewalks virtually empty. Although we'd been given reading material before this trip (some of which I had done), the MCRM was overwhelming for all... mostly because of the volume of reading/words and multi-sensory ways the museum attempted to convey information. From a Civil Rights standpoint, Mississippi was emphasized for 3 state-specific events – in order: (1) the horrific torture and murder of Emmett Till in 1955; (2) the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers, the state field secretary for the Mississippi NAACP and a WWII veteran; and (3) the police-facilitated capture and murder of three COFO (Council of Federated Organizations) volunteers (Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner) in 1964 (one of our group members was personal friends with Goodman's brother, who advocates via his ongoing foundation). COFO aimed to improve voting rights/access and education in Mississippi, including deploying hundreds of volunteers (many white northerners). Additionally, many things like the Freedom Rides (which began in 1961) involved Mississippi; Freedom Rides spanned many states - the idea being to send black riders on interstate Greyhound buses south to expose a 1947 Supreme Court decision that was being ignored. The Freedom Rides featured prominently in many states on this trip, the best exhibit being a firebombed bus from Alabama, housed at the National Civil Rights Museum/Lorraine Motel in Memphis (the best museum, IMO, on this trip). That said, MCRM had better coverage of Emmett Till (including a powerful short movie narrated by Oprah), and more comprehensive COFO coverage. Heading back to the hotel, we had an hour to clean up – followed by an hour of wine/appetizers with formal introduction/debrief lead by Andre, and a HUGE dinner at the hotel (in my case – roast chicken and kale-dominated veggies).



Left to Right: (top) Medgar Evers, home, Nat-Park placard, Minnie White Watson; (bottom) one of several bullet holes in the home, the kitchen (where the final bullet eventually ricocheted), the refurbished living room, the kids' bedroom (note – mattresses on the floor)

The next morning, I was up early doing 40 minutes of treadmill and bike (my goal each day of this trip – and then to repeat before dinner) – before enjoying a breakfast buffet. At 8:45, we met our bus/driver and headed to the Medgar Evers Home Museum (MEHM) about 20 minutes away (half on a speedy highway, half driving through what felt like economically-depressed neighborhoods). Even

though MEHM became a National Monument in 2016, it was – when we visited - still being managed by Tougaloo University. Our tour group scheduled MEHM curator Minnie White Watson, who met/knew/knows the Evers, to open the home and speak to us. Starting shortly (we were told), the house will be fully run by the park service and it was suggested that you probably will no longer be able to walk through/photograph the home, or hear Minnie’s first-hand account. Whether the new arrangement means the house will be open regular hours and staffed by a ranger (which it is not at present) is unclear. Interestingly, the house was restored and refurbished with period furniture by Rob Reiner when he directed “Ghosts of Mississippi” in 1996 – about Evers’ assassination. It was sad how aware Evers seemed of the level of danger he was in (i.e. mattresses were on the floor to keep everything low, the entrance was designed to come in from the side, providing more protection in the carport... although that is where he was shot). Although it is said you can still see bloodstains in the carport/driveway, I was not sure... but the bullet holes in the house were sad and powerful remnants of terrible hate. I am ashamed to say that, prior to this experience, I knew nothing of Evers. For some reason, though, when I see his picture – he reminds me of my dad... something about his ears, cheekbones and expression.

Near the Medgar Evers home (like 5 minutes) is Malaco Records/Studio – our next visit. Although I will not pretend to be familiar with or particularly into gospel or blues music, I will say that the balance of visiting a place like Evers’ home/assassination site almost necessitated a lighter and more positive follow-up. And so I did appreciate the fact effort was made to provide these kinds of stops too. Co-founder and total silver fox Wolf Stephenson gave us the full tour; Malaco notably owns the rights to “Old Time Rock ‘n Roll” – and recorded “Ring My Bell.” The donut break was also delicious! From Malaco, we headed down to Farish Street, once the thriving (but segregated) center of black business and culture in Jackson. Sadly, most of Farish looks a little ghost-town, boarded up these days – the result of various flights (black and white) during desegregation. We were dropped off by the F. Jones Corner club, met by the club-owner (white), and given a walking tour a few blocks down to the Big Apple Inn. Although the club looked like a dive-bar shack to my eyes (the caveat being that I am not one to do clubs, bars, or live music), the owner said the place had a few hundred diverse people there just last night, with peak activity 11 to 4 a.m. (we would return here for a very early private dinner/performance – presumably tailored to our older, less-diverse crowd). Anyway - Big Apple Inn is foodie-famous. Owner Geno Lee, a fourth-generation Mexican-American owner who is very passionate and knowledgeable, spoke to us while samples of his signature smoked sausage (tasty) and pigs-ear (weird) sandwiches were distributed and partially consumed. Had we not known that we were heading a few more blocks to Johnny T’s Bistro & Blues for full-on lunch, perhaps people would have been more adventuresome. Indeed, our official lunch was a plentiful buffet of salad, shrimp & grits, mixed vegetables, spicy wings, and peach cobbler/ice cream. Our speaker was a 77-YO Virginia to Mississippi transplant (white) who, at the time, I thought was the owner. In researching things again for this write-up, I found she is not the owner – and must have been some local city/tourism representative. Handing out Visit Jackson giftbags (the centerpiece a mini-flashlight), she recounted the massive march (over 4000 people) down Farish in response to Evers’ assassination (if you look at one of the photos above, you will see the funeral home where his body lay)... police standing ready to beat the crowds – until a young girl began singing “This Little Light of Mine.” Based again on researching things for this write-up, it seems that this series of events occurred many times – so it’s hard to know if the Evers march was the start of the trend.



Left to Right: (top) Malaco, Farish Street, Big Apple Inn; (bottom) pigs-ear sandwich & Geno, COFO HQ/speaker, god & lawyers

After lunch, we drove 10 minutes to the former COFO headquarters (now the COFO Civil Rights Education Center) for a 90-minute presentation and highly interactive discussion group with Dr. Robert Luckett, a white Associate Professor of History at Jackson State University. He delivered his presentation in the actual room where COFO leadership organized and rallied many efforts, events, and responses. Unfortunately, this is where my digesting stomach and information-overload broke down my engagement level. Although I recall a lot of COFO history (emphasizing the voter rights/education work and murders) and I also recall the name Bob Moses banded about, I am left today feeling like I never quite connected all the dots. That Bob Moses is alive today (and running an algebra/math equity program) did achieve long-term memory status... but begs the comment: I wish I learned more about him and how he fit into, say, the work of MLK or Medgar Evers. After the COFO activity, we made a quick stop by the Mississippi Food Network. This was probably my least favorite activity of the whole tour – half because nearly all of the food was highly processed (the speaker, who was white and did not appear to be lacking food access, downplayed our questions/concerns about fresh produce by saying everyone deserved junk food), and half because they used prison-labor as a no-cost way to run the distribution center (which the COFO

professor had just discussed in negative terms). In general, we were appalled with the food desert we saw in Mississippi – and other places across the south. We saw no grocery stores in Mississippi (or some parts of Alabama)... only Dollar Store after Dollar Store, which now peddle processed crap-food. Only billboards of lawyers (usually personal injury) outnumbered Dollar Stores. But I digress. Following a fast photo-stop at the Freedom Ride-famous Greyhound Bus station (now an architectural firm) downtown, we returned to the hotel by 4:30, leaving 90 minutes for another work-out – before a debrief/discussion, and our dinner/blues performance back at the F. Jones Corner (amusingly, they put up a “Welcome Nation” message on their reader-board). Although I was concerned that the dinner/performance would run late (and we had to pack up for an early start tomorrow), the evening was super-efficient. Four group members did skip tonight’s activities and I sensed it was a combination of being tired and/or less interested in this aspect of the trip. For most, dinner consisted of gumbo, fried catfish and grits, salad, and banana pudding. I asked for no catfish and just extra salad... and it was GREAT. Given the food desert/Dollar Store commentary, I am still baffled where places like this procured so much amazing produce (such good lettuce!). We were serenaded by local blues guitarist Bluesman McKinney, who was very entertaining and I enjoyed. I wish I could tell you more but, like I said, delta blues is not my bailiwick. That we were back to the hotel by 9:30 was also great because I could clean up, pack my bags, and go to bed at a reasonable hour.



Left to Right: Mississippi Food Network, Greyhound Bus station, F. Jones Corner (sorry - Bluesman McKinney was all out of focus)

The next day, we had been heavily warned that it would be long – not arriving at our Little Rock hotel until around 10. After an early workout and quick breakfast, we hit the road around 8... driving essentially north all day up the very hot and humid Mississippi Delta. Thankfully, our bus was always air-conditioned and we had – praise jebus – a full toilet on board. Our first stop of the day (after 90 minutes) was at the 2008-opened B.B. King Museum/gravesite in very small and rural Indianola. As with most stops today, there were very few other tourists – adding to my/our sense of bleakness/desolation that often pervaded Mississippi. Although I enjoyed walking through the museum and I did learn a lot about B.B. King – increasing my sense of respect for his work and place in the community and music history – I didn’t need more than an hour there (we were given over 90 minutes)... and it would have been nicer to shorten the day (IMO). Some group-mates felt aspects of the museum over-hyped King too much as an icon, instead of providing a more realistic, down-to-earth portrait. Some general Civil Rights stories/history was woven into parts of the museum – although the period from 1968 onward was the most interesting to me (e.g. his concert at the SF Fillmore, his first European tour). I also appreciated that he worked with a female saxophonist early on (see “Mama Nuts” below) and that he visited Sesame Street. I did learn after the fact that he was married several times (no children from those), that over 15 people have claimed paternity from extra-marital affairs... and he has generously supported nearly all of them.



Left to Right: (top) one of MANY Dollar Stores... B.B. King Museum, Mama Nuts (for Ellen), Sesame Street, gravesite; (bottom) Greenwood lunch a la Mary, my first plate of everything, Mary, contemporary museum painting – Mississippi Delta scene

From Indianola, we drove 30 minutes to Greenwood’s Museum of the Mississippi Delta. I cannot say I really toured the museum (which had mostly art) because our lunch with Mary/Sylvester Hoover and family was THE highlight of the day (and a top activity on the trip). Historically white, Greenwood was a cotton town; the adjacent/across-the-tracks Baptist Town neighborhood was for blacks, including Morgan Freeman and Robert Johnson. The Hoovers lived in Baptist Town; Mary ran a soul food restaurant and was the food

advisor/preparer for The Help (parts of which were filmed in Baptist Town). Mary prepared a full spread for our lunch today and it was, hands-down, one of the best meals I have eaten EVER: BBQ ribs, braised chicken, collard greens, black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, corn bread, and butter rolls for dessert (these had a little sweet cinnamon inside and were swimming in some kind of buttery pudding). I ate everything and went back for what few seconds there were. Mary's daughter, who worked at the local Boys and Girls Club, brought ~10 black youths to dine with us – point-blank speaking to our group: these kids rarely get to interact with people like you and it's important for their professional development to become socialized... I appreciate your help. While some of the kids were gregarious, looked you in the eyes, and had a lot to say, many were the opposite. As a faculty member from very white Oregon, I am lucky to see 1/40 black students in class – and many remind me so much of the non-gregarious kids we interacted with today. It is such a familiar challenge to me. I also enjoyed talking with Mary herself... notably wearing scrubs and this big rooster brooch. It was what I envision meeting Oprah would be like – she was that amazing. After lunch, we were supposed to do a driving tour of Greenwood and then head to Baptist Town... but a bunch of our group saw this (IMO-deceptive) sign suggesting there was a farmers' market across the highway and likely hoped to have a more inclusive cultural encounter (particularly after yesterday's visit to the food bank, and the fact that we had yet to see where people bought produce... in retrospect – we should have asked Mary). I believe the actual wording of the sign was "farmers' style market" – and it was an add-on to the fact that the facility was, in fact, a nursery. But it was a chance to get out of the bus, walk around, see some overpriced produce, and try to figure out what all the weird canning items were.



Left to Right: Greenwood cotton, nursery watermelons, produce, fascinating canned bologna & gizzards - vs. Baptist Town

Once we got back on track, we did a quicker driving tour of downtown Greenwood (Sylvester manning the microphone) and then crossed the tracks into Baptist Town – parking the bus by the Hoover's local grocery/laundry. We then did a short walking tour around the block, visiting the Hoover's "Back in the Day" Museum – which reminded me of going into my grandmother's old garage (the creaking floor, the smell of the dirt right below, the hazy/dusty light, the old furniture everywhere). Many nearby houses were old sharecropping houses, most extremely simple and falling apart; the actual one used for filming The Help was around the corner. There was also a newer community center with lots of kids playing. Driving around, Sylvester quoted something like – a block row of 8 dilapidated sharecropping houses/land cost as little as \$25K. In researching this area for this write-up, I stumbled across a 2014-ish equity housing project (called the Baptist Town Cottage Project) aimed at refurbishing these homes for low-cost – and generally revitalizing the area. It would have been informative and fun to see some of these houses.



Left to Right: Baptist Town Back in the Day Museum, The Help sharecropper house, Little Zion Church - sad fan, Johnson's grave

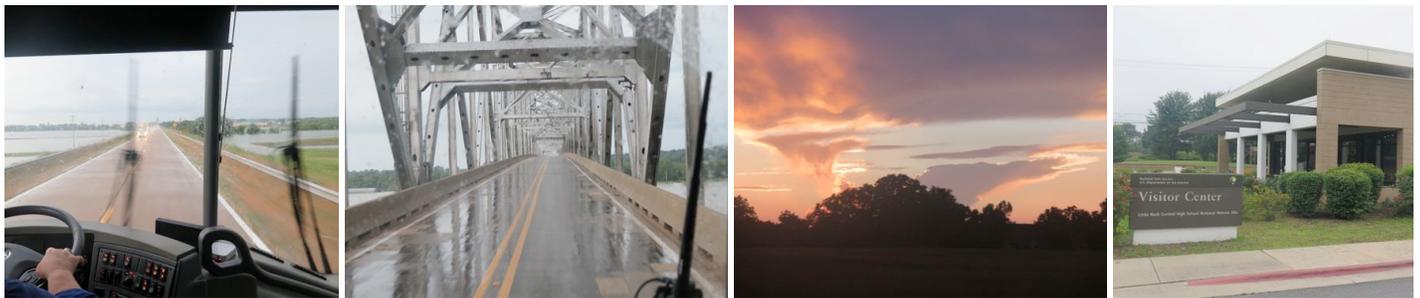
We then left Baptist Town and began driving towards Money, the town closest to where the events surrounding Emmett Till occurred. En route, we saw the Tallahatchie River for the first time – famous (to me) for 2 things: Gentry's "Ode to Billy Joe," a song my mom owned in record form, and as the site where Till's body was pulled. At some point, we pulled off to this nondescript church which, I believe, is being refurbished by the Hoovers – in part because it is the gravesite for Robert Johnson (who Sylvester strongly believes is more important than B.B. King). Nothing could be more opposite a gravesite, however. The church interior was looking up (except for the sad "check into cash" hand-fans – see photograph above) but the grounds were poor – and Johnson's gravesite was littered with bottles (I'm sure the people who left them did so out of some form of respect – but it was just trashy to us). I could have easily and meaningfully done this trip without this stop. About 15 minutes away, we pulled off to the side of the road – across the street from a vine-covered structure surrounded by orange construction barriers and no trespassing signs: Bryant's Grocery, the place where Emmett Till (14, visiting with his family from Chicago) was accused of whistling/flirting with the white owner's wife while buying candy in 1955. Her husband and his half-brother abducted Emmett in the night, tortured and killed him – and, as stated, threw him into the Tallahatchie River (attached to a cotton gin fan with barb wire around the neck). Instead of grieving quietly, Till's mother brought her son's body back to Chicago and shared open-casket images with the world – a choice considered by many to have sparked the full force of the Civil Rights Movement. Even so, the Bryants were promptly acquitted (surprise, surprise – by an all white male jury) – but eventually sold their confession to a national magazine (Bryant's wife has since recanted that Emmett did anything). There were a few houses tucked back in the trees – but otherwise you might totally miss what this place was all about. We were told that Civil Rights historians/activists have asked to purchase this site but the owners have responded with a price of \$40 million (testimony to how badly they want the place to crumble into nothingness). We continued down the road to the town/county seat of Sumner, the place where

the Till murder trial/acquittal took place. There, we met with a staff member/discussion facilitator (Benjamin) from the Emmett Till Interpretive Center; he met with us in the actual courtroom where the trial occurred, facilitating a group discussion about the trial... as well as the apology/reconciliation efforts the community/county has attempted with the Till family – albeit 50 years later. Although I was interested in seeing these sites, this area honestly creeped me out and you could feel this heavy disquietude everywhere. Also, the actual interpretive center was (IMO) sort of sad... and felt like this backwater afterthought which, like the grocery, was being consumed by vines. Adding to the creepiness factor, Benjamin said the center had to remove the riverside Civil Rights marker/sign where Emmett's body was pulled because people keep shooting it up (I learned only later about the Ole Miss fraternity brother incident from just this spring). Indeed, said sign – riddled with bullet-holes - was displayed prominently as you walked into the center. The streets of the town were eerily quiet; only a couple boys on bikes (white, drinking sodas) flew by, staring intently at our group as they passed.



Left to Right: (top) Emmett Till, Civil Rights marker/sign, Bryant's from across the street and down the side-street; (bottom) Sumner/Tallahatchie Courthouse, trial courtroom, interpretive center with bullet-ridden riverside sign

Around 5:30, we left the center and walked to the empty Summer Grille; two black women were setting up a school-cafeteria-esque line-up. Although I did enjoy my tray of food, it was SO heavy after all the eating today: fried green tomatoes (never had them before – can't say I was that excited), green beans, mashed potatoes (delicious), breaded meatloaf, and chocolate cake (small but delicious). Dinner wrapped up around 6:30 – hopefully meaning an early/9:30-ish arrival time in Little Rock. We hit a lot of hard rain pretty promptly – with huge storm clouds and lightening/thunder visible in the distance. More and more evidence of flooding was visible – particularly as we neared the big Mississippi River crossing. At some point (probably around 7), we crossed the mighty Mississippi (and the state line into Arkansas) on a big metal bridge. Being farther south than Oregon, the sun started going down around 8:30 – dramatically reflecting off lots of standing water and bouncing off the rapidly clearing storm clouds. After it was fully dark, the next hours of driving saw some a fair bit of slow traffic and construction as we got closer to Little Rock – and the drive took and felt longer than it should have. I want to say we arrived a little before 10. Our hotel (The Burgundy) felt like it was in a strip mall. I cannot say I got to enjoy the room much – although it was some kind of suite with a big living room, separate bedroom, etc.



Left to Right: flooding near the Mississippi River, crossing, sunset clearing after storms, Central HS Visitor Center

June 26, 2019 – A Short But Impactful Visit to Arkansas

The next morning, I was up early – having found on-line descriptions that clearly indicated the hotel had a small fitness center on-site. Well – that was not correct... and they were now using some independent fitness center, the distance of which defeated the purpose of exercising given that I had no car. Since I showed up at the front desk in full exercise attire, I headed out the front door and walked briskly around the hilly perimeter of the strip mall for a solid 30 minutes. It was probably 6:45 at the time and surprisingly pleasant. We had all been asked in advance to schedule/pre-order breakfast; my requested time was at 7:45 (our departure 8:30). Despite all that effort, the hotel restaurant was 15 minutes late with service – which put pressure on everyone to finish more quickly. Consequently, I wolfed my teeny-tiny silver dollar pancakes and fruit salad – and headed back to my room to haul luggage. Our first and main activity today was a scheduled meeting at the National Park-run Central HS Visitor Center, about 15 minutes away. Of all the activities we did on this trip, the visit to Central High and our discussion/interaction with Elizabeth Eckford was the most impactful and meaningful to me

as an educator. Although the Central HS/Little Rock Nine event was not the first example of school desegregation, it was one of the most dramatic and publicized at the time. First, we met with a park ranger (Hispanic) at the Visitor Center for a brief introduction on-site. We then crossed the street, passing this famous gas station (preserved because it offered one of the only public phones in the area – from which the news media worked the story), and moving to the still-in-operation high school (which serves about 3000 students) – no photographs allowed inside. We went into the auditorium and the ranger continued his introduction and answered a lot of questions. The first thing that impacts you is how big and fancy the school is; it is, to me, like seeing Stadium HS in Tacoma. It was white-only before 1957; it would have been interesting to see/contrast the black-serving HS where most of the Little Rock Nine had been going. The thing that most surprised me (which also came up in the ranger QA) was that – as suspected – almost 200 black students expressed an interest in moving to Central. But the white administration freaked out at that idea, systematically imposing a number of academic and behavioral benchmarks to whittle that number down to about 20. The names and addresses of many of the final students were then printed in local papers, resulting in threats – which meant half dropped out. Eckford, for better or worse, applied late and her information was never shared. The nine students who showed up day one were traumatized and harassed – everything from being spit upon, shouted at, to having the crowd demand that one of them be sacrificed (i.e. given to the crowd to be hung/killed). Eventually, President Johnson called in the Army for protection. Although the Little Rock Nine did complete a year at Central, many – like Eckford – were harassed and traumatized the whole time... to the point that she (and some others) left the program. Prior to this experience, Eckford was extremely smart but shy and everyone assumed she would go to college. She freely spoke to us about how severely these experiences negatively affected her whole life. One of the things that most surprised the our group is that she basically held in all her feelings until the 1990's; her family didn't talk about things at school, she never sought counseling. It wasn't until she began these speaking engagements that she felt some of the trauma lift. Prior to meeting with her, we were warned that she responded negatively to loud noises, sudden movements, people crowding... all classic PTST. Even Eckford asked us not to clap – but wave our hands in the air at the end. As Allison noted: you are extremely fortunate to have gotten to meet this woman and hear her first-hand account of this experience. Yes – but I think every American should hear people like this speak.



Left to Right: Visitor Center ranger tour, Elizabeth Eckford in 1957, preserved gas station, Central HS entrance, Eckford now

We proceeded to the Clinton Presidential Library (less than 20 minutes away) for a short, guided tour with a museum docent, followed by an excellent lunch at the library café. As a major supporter of both Bill and Hillary Clinton, I had high hopes for this museum... but unfortunately they were not really met. That said, I've never been to a presidential library – so I'm not sure what they are supposed to be like. For the huge size of the building, I found the exhibits inside strangely limited – and many of the fancy-at-the-time electronic or video displays already felt tired and out of date. I also thought the coverage of the affair/impeachment period was shockingly limited and not reflective of what went on at that time (having been old enough to remember most of that, and its impact). But mostly, I was offended at the lack of information about Hillary. Even our docent apologized and admitted that the museum was several years behind adding information about her. If I knew nothing other than what that museum presented, I would think Hillary did hardly anything other than be the good wife first lady. But, like I said, the lunch was exceptional – and the gift shop was amusing. By 2, we were on the road and heading to Memphis – 2 hours away. Bus time was occupied with various things – sometimes quiet time, sometimes videos (e.g. a 1970-era television-broadcast documentary about MLK).



Left to Right: Clinton Presidential Library – with Oregon Washed Ashore exhibit, flooded Arkansas River, library interior, oh – Clinton!

June 27-28, 2019 – Still Thinking About Memphis, Tennessee

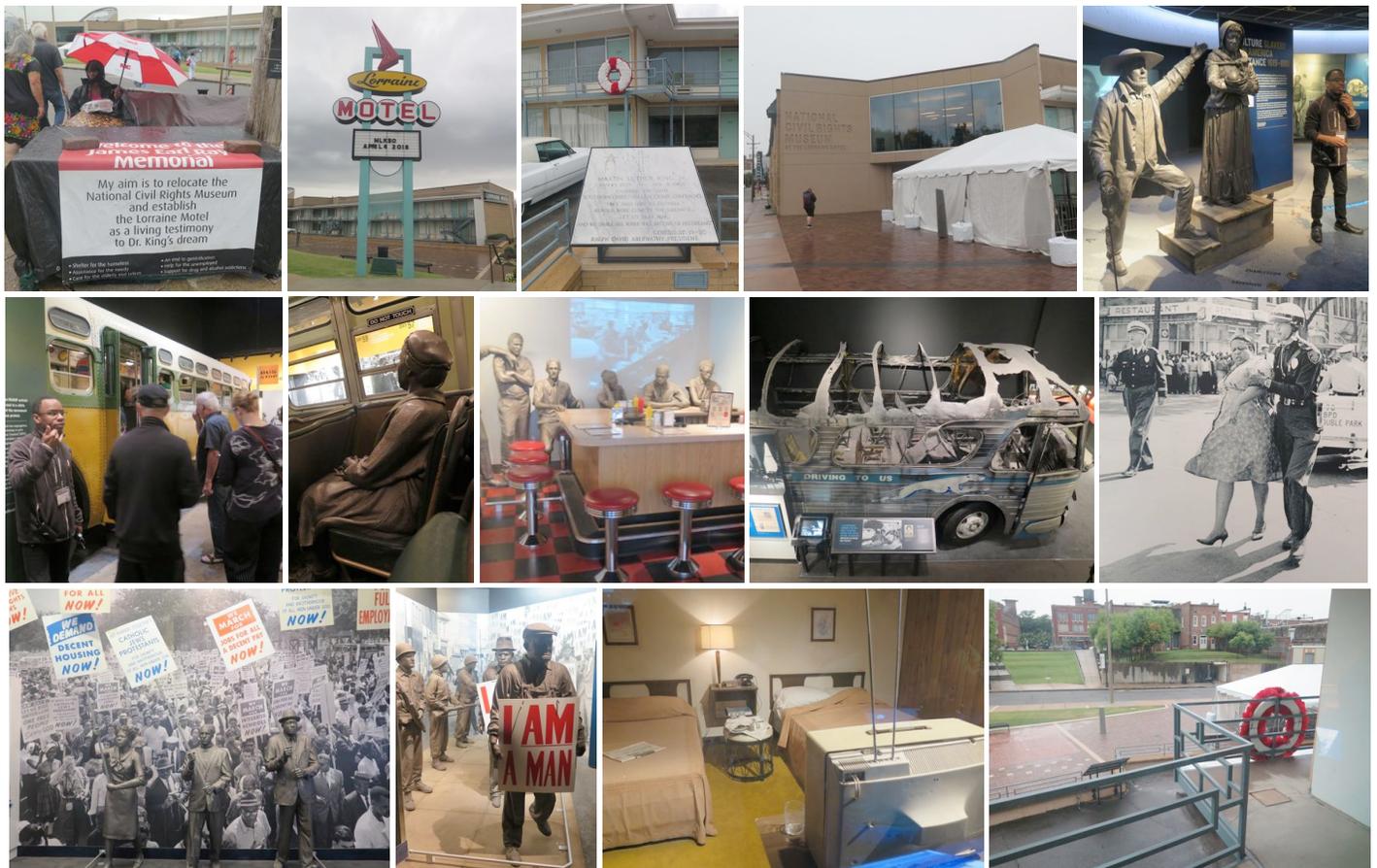
Arriving in Memphis around 4 gave me time to investigate and then accept the idea that the hotel used a pretty gritty, man-focused gym/fitness center across the street... which also did not seem to have AC (only a bunch of fans). In general, Memphis struck me as very gritty and I felt a little less secure walking even a little downtown. But I put on my gym clothes, went across the street, and did my thing for 45 minutes with a few weight-lifters. At 6, our debrief session amusingly opened with a recent "Drunk History" episode (like this year) about the Little Rock Nine; it was somewhat amusing. For dinner, we all walked a few blocks to this downstairs BBQ place that was just packed (Rendezvous). I enjoyed a big plate of ribs... but they were too light on sides; thankfully, vegetarian group members with too-big Greek salads sent over several plates for me to enjoy. Of course, the big thing that occupied attention during our

2 nights in Memphis were the democratic debates. Although there was talk of organizing a group watching session in one of the conference rooms, we decided in the end to experience those on our own.



Left to Right: crossing the Mississippi into Memphis – downtown, bridge, trolley network downtown (sorry – no trolley pictures)

The next morning was stormy and wet – similar to the day MLK was assassinated. I was up early and worked out in the gritty man-gym. I am not sure why we did not eat at the hotel (they clearly had restaurants and room-service)... but we walked basically a block and a half to this very popular sit-down (The Blue Plate); I enjoyed a perfect bowl of granola with yogurt and LOTS of fresh fruit. Our first stop was the Lorraine Motel, which is solemnly preserved – frozen in time... the National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM) effectively built around it. Our bus driver dropped us off a block above the motel, meaning we walked down this shallow hill before the motel sign and motel scene came into view. As I remarked on email to my family/friends later that evening, there are 4 notable times traveling when I have surprised myself with a spontaneous cry: flying across Nepal and first seeing the Himalaya, walking into this courtyard in Katmandu and seeing the Bodhnath stupa/temple, and hitting the first big whitewater on the Grand Canyon. And now I have to add: seeing the Lorraine Motel – both walking down that hill, and then when you walk through the corridor between the actual hotel rooms and see the balcony where MLK was assassinated (this is at the end of the museum path). Prior to this trip, I cannot say I read or watched a lot about MLK; probably (and I'm being middle-aged white lady honest), my biggest exposure to MLK was via Bono/U2 songs like MLK and Pride/In the Name of Love (both off "Unforgettable Fire" – IMO, their best album). But I had always been far more interested in Mandela (who Bono/U2 also notably embraced), but his tactics seemed fundamentally different from MLK.



Left to Right: (top) protester, Lorraine Motel, memorial plaque, museum entrance, slavery display; (middle) Montgomery bus/Rosa Parks statue, Greensboro sit-in, firebombed Freedom Ride bus, protests in Birmingham; (bottom) March on Washington, Memphis garbage-workers strikers, hotel room, balcony... Legacy Building across the street

In any event, I composed myself as we continued down to the museum. At the bottom of the hill on the corner sits Jacqueline Smith – a protester (over 30 years now) and the last occupant of the Lorraine before it was sold for museum development... shockingly, in 1991 (seriously?). A large tray of leftover brownies from dinner was left with her (as is the apparent custom by this group). Today was the

first day we really felt the crowds on this trip – which is why we were first in line for the opening at 9. Our group met our docent, a really great history major (black). As stated, the NCRM was the best museum on this trip. It had the right balance of reading stuff and visual stuff – and it had some of the best displays... some life-size art/statues, some “real” objects like a firebombed Freedom Ride bus or a Montgomery bus from the Rosa Parks strike. The museum proceeds forward in time to MLK’s final visit to Memphis, supporting the garbage-workers’ strike. Our docent then prepared us for the final exhibit – where you transition from the 1991 added-building and enter a corridor constructed between the two rooms shared by MLK’s party in the upstairs of the Lorraine. Everyone is asked to be respectful and quiet as you walk through the space – basically: between the rooms, with glass walls allowing you to see both intact... and a full window at the end that views the balcony where he was killed. The docent explained that everything was preserved – except, he noted, you would see a square on the balcony where the FBI removed tissue/concrete. The docent also explained that it was our choice to visit the tertiary museum across the street (the so-called Legacy Building) in the boardinghouse where the assassin stayed/shot from. In the end, one of the other women and I did tour that building during our free hour – but I chose not to take any pictures. As with the Lorraine, great effort was made to build the museum around the assassin’s room, the bathroom/window from where he shot, the belongings (including the rifle) that were taken. By comparison with the Lorraine, that museum was very empty.

Given that it was now approaching lunchtime, we boarded the bus (at least 6 were lined up a block below the museum near ours) and headed 10 minutes to The Four Way Soul Food Restaurant, which our leaders adamantly stated was better than Gus’ Fried Chicken (the place they used to go – and which does have big reputation... but has become a regional chain). I cannot speak to this debate but The Four Way made AMAZING fried chicken. This area of Memphis, called Soulsville, seemed more economically depressed. We were the only white people in the restaurant, receiving many memorable stares. Unlike many of our group, I cleaned my plates – and I mean cleaned them! I could have actually eaten a few more sides because I wanted to sample more food. As it was – I had chicken, beans, sweet potatoes... and one of the vegetarians gave me some of their potato salad. Dessert was a too-small helping of chicken cobbler. I suspect half the stares we got, though, were because SO MANY people in our group left heaps of food uneaten. Shameful!



Left to Right: mural, The Four Way Soul Food – fried chicken meal before and after (mmmmmm – gotta show that again!)

A few blocks away, our next stop was the refurbished Stax Records – now a museum (Stax Museum of American Soul) and community/education center. I had never heard of Stax before – but George told me all about them during my North Carolina stay, having visited them on one of his cross-country roadtrips. We were greeted by the executive director, a white hipster from Wisconsin (which I found amusing), and then watched a longish movie about the company. Where Malaco was more gospel, Stax was more soul and funk (IMO). Famous artists I could identify included Otis Redding, the Shaft theme song/singer (Isaac Hayes), and Mavis Staples. Although they had TONS of stuff, I think you really had to know their playlist to appreciate it... and I wasn’t familiar enough. That said, their gift shop/T-shirt selection was AMAZING... just for the logo, the colors, and the artistry of their T-shirts.



Left to Right: Stax Museum – preserved black church, studio, educational project information

For our last stop – the Slave Haven Underground Railroad House (a real house on the railroad), we drove west – crossing Memphis (supposedly passing Graceland... which I somehow missed, which was sad because my grandmother LOVED, LOVED, LOVED Elvis). Unfortunately, photography was not allowed (earning my first camera-reprimand on this trip). This stop, while interesting, seemed to fall too far out of the 20th century Civil Rights focus of our trip. There were also some weird rooms that housed random collections of stuff from Africa (e.g. a whole room about musical instruments related to the banjo), which seemed to further confuse the point of this visit. I also found the speaker long-winded at times... probably because the old house was super-cramped, and they did the tour out of order because a HUGE school group was competing with us. The best part/big crescendo of the visit was descending this sketchy set of stairs into the low, dirt-floor basement where the escaping slaves stayed – until it was safe to make their way a few blocks to the Mississippi, and boat transport north (usually to Canada). The escaping slaves entered the basement through a narrow opening along the side of the house, and then stayed in the dank basement usually a few days. Returning to the hotel by 5, I enjoyed another workout before trying to decide what to do for dinner (on our own tonight). Because I’d seen a Starbucks en route to the BBQ place last night, I made my way over there – hoping for a nice simple salad or sandwich. There was NOTHING fresh – TERRIBLE. Thankfully, the hotel had a casual restaurant and a delicious pear salad with great greens... and I may have indulged these delicious honey-butter

rolls with lavender (I had to take a couple back to my room for later because they wouldn't sell me less than 4/serving). Alas, the second night of debates got me agitated and I slept poorly... which SUCKED a lot given a 5:30 a.m. wake-up.

June 29-30, 2019 – Surprisingly Vibrant Alabama... and Returning Home

Our first day in Alabama was not what I'd hoped it would be because I was running on little sleep, we were up too early, and there was WAY too much driving. Plus, I got no morning workout, which clears my lungs and wakes me up. After meeting at 6:15, we walked a block and a half to a different restaurant that opened early for us, offering a limited menu (from which we placed orders yesterday). For me – granola and yogurt. From 7 until around 11, we were on the road to Birmingham. Although it was supposed to be quiet time (given the early hour), I was dismayed because a group member decided to talk loudly to Andre (who sat kitty-corner behind me) for over an hour about politics... probably because everyone was worked up after the second debate. This did not help my sleep or attitude. I did manage some sleep here and there – despite the fact that after the political discussion was over a loud video was put up. Thank you earplugs. Once we hit Alabama, the terrain was dominated by rolling hills and occasional rocky outcrops – reminding me greatly of southern Oregon. That Birmingham has a long iron/mining history surprised me – but not after seeing the terrain and geology. Ellen (my sister now in the Netherlands) has a best friend who has lived in Birmingham for over 20 years – after growing up in Tacoma. About 5 years ago, Ellen visited her and did several activities related to Civil Rights, something that was on my mind both while setting up this trip and during our too-short visit to Birmingham. Indeed, after reading a lot more about Birmingham after this trip, I would have wanted to have a full day/night here - enjoying other sites and more of what seems to be a vibrant renaissance southern food scene. As it was, our only activities in Birmingham were focused on the 16th Street Baptist Church bombings and a cursory stroll through adjacent Kelly Ingram Park. During our final 30 minutes of driving, Andre had us listen to a fascinating podcast by Malcolm Gladwell about the famous park statue depicting a police/dog charging a young black boy... the gist being: in reality (based on actual photographs and interviews with all parties), the officer was pulling the dog away, and the black boy was a young adult trying to fully avoid the protesters. I always appreciated that Andre always presented complex, nuanced stories – leaving us to think (hopefully deeply) and discuss.



Left to Right: (top) 16th Street Baptist Church – exterior, inside, McKinstry, donated Dutch art after bombing; (bottom) McKinstry by walled off bathroom area, church from park, Kelly Ingram statues - for girls, water cannons, “foot soldier” piece (Gladwell subject)

Anyway – we unloaded at the 16th Street Baptist Church and went inside. There were very few tourists in the church – although there were many at the park, and it seemed as though there were also many at the official museum (Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which we didn't visit) by the park. At this writing, the basement of the church is being renovated into a National Park-run site. Here, we met and interacted with Rev. Carolyn McKinstry – who, when she was 14 years old, was in the church on the day of the bombing. The massive church seats a few thousand; the images of the four girls killed here were projected high on the front wall (2 additional boys also died, related to the aftermath). McKinstry spoke about both the specific events at the church – but also the larger contextual history in “Bombingham” (as it was known). What made Alabama unique, it seemed from everything I took in, was the specific use of bombs and explosives as terrorist devices... along with mass police brutality and military-grade water cannons – and other weapons. During our travels across Alabama, most historical activism seemed directed at voting rights/access – because southern whites holding power were focused on denying voting access to blacks. Of all the things we learned on this trip, I think the voting access/denial efforts are the most concerning thing to me in today's heated political conversations... because examples of it are still going on (whether in terms of gerrymandering, loaded census question attempts, or racist statements being banded about against non-whites... or whites who disagree). What also made the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing unique was that it was the first loss of life amidst the rampant new bombing efforts. After a long QA discussion, McKinstry took us down into the basement, passing the walled off bathroom area where the girls were killed (the bomb had been placed in an exterior stairwell area adjacent to the bathrooms). We saw the in-progress efforts to remodel the National Park-destined visitor center area. From there, we crossed the street to the busy Kelly Ingram Park, a convergence point for many demonstrations/clashes, and strolled through the many sculptures.

We drove across town to this rather run-down restaurant specializing in Delta tamales and fusion Creole/Cajon-Mexican (shockingly – they appear to be well-rated) – joined by Rev McKinstry. This was my least favorite group dining experience; the restaurant itself was dark, dirty-feeling, and unpleasant. Someone in the group (likely the big talker from this morning) proposed that we reconfigure what were 4 separate tables into one long table (in theory – to share McKinstry) but, in doing so, we effectively lost 3 seats/dining spaces where the tables met... meaning some of us were shoved off to the side with no eating space (e.g. me). And you couldn't hear anything anyway. The meal was too small (in my case, three very small bean-filled tamales covered in some kind of corn relish... and a blueberry cobbler that made The Four Way's peach cobbler look enormous); that said, the food was tasty and healthier than some venues we'd patronized. Later at the debrief, Andre told us that some of the staff and patrons were audibly making unfriendly, racist remarks about our big white liberal Civil Rights group (he apparently did politely confront them and ask that they reconsider their conversation level and content). Yup – that last story fully embodied my feeling about this establishment.



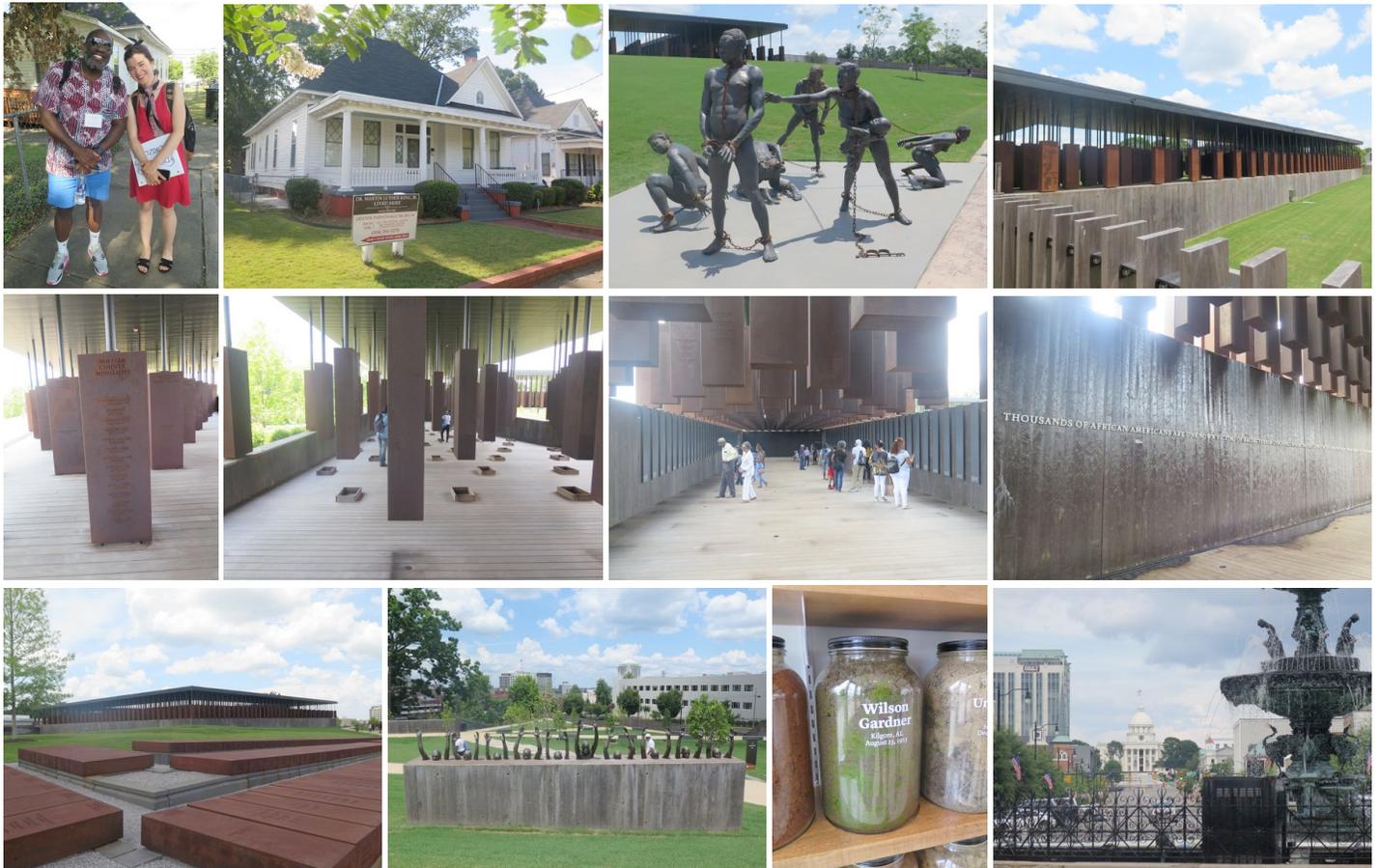
Left to Right: Minnie, walking the bridge – road, Alabama River and crepe myrtle, questionable woods theatre, march-trail sign

We then drove about 90 minutes to Selma – mostly via two-lane, backroad-feeling highways (lots of Dollar Stores!). As we hit Selma's main downtown blockage, Andre remarked that it seemed busier (in the sense of more revitalization) than usual. But to my eyes, Selma was a small step above Mississippi... somewhere between Sumner and Greenwood. There were lots of boarded up businesses and not a lot of people about. We unloaded at the National Park-run Selma Interpretive Center – across the street from the famous Edmund Pettus Bridge – notably named for a man with KKK-connections. In reviewing materials from this trip, I noticed we were to stop by the Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church (the starting point for march/attempts, and the site of speeches by both MLK and Malcolm X)... but that did not happen (after googling images of it, I have zero recollection even seeing it). Upstairs, we met with Minnie Pearl Avery, a prominent Civil Rights activist who – around age 16 - joined the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and marched as a Civil Rights foot soldier (although she was arrested before the violent Bloody Sunday march). Although I enjoyed and respected Minnie, she had a wandering presentation and freewheeling conversation style... and I did not come into this interactive meeting with enough understanding of the events surrounding Selma. On the flight home, I actually watched Selma and was, like, yes... that would have been helpful to know before hearing Minnie speak. My too-basic take-away summary: driven by the systemic denial of voting rights/access, Civil Rights leaders (MLK prominently) proposed a march between Selma and Montgomery (Alabama's capital, 54 miles away) in January 1965. On March 7 (without MLK present), a march – including the likes John Lewis - began but violently ended just across the bridge/river (Bloody Sunday – broadcast heavily on the news). After intense negotiations with President Johnson, the actual march took place at the end of March over ~4 days... with people sleeping along the way. In addition to terrific violence against blacks, indiscriminate killing of white activists (like Rev/Minister James Reeb and driver/supporter Viola Liuzzo) took place along the way – despite federal/military protection. Later that year, Johnson signed The Voting Rights Act... but ongoing efforts (particularly ramped up now) are chipping away at voting rights/access. After talking with Minnie less than an hour, most of us then walked over the famous bridge/Alabama River – along with a couple dozen other tourists - most taking selfies. Andre asked me on the other side what I thought of the experience... and I honestly said it that I was surprised how scenic the bridge and river were – to the point that it was hard to conceive of the violence and significance of this place in history. That said, as you come over the land on the other side, you look down into some thick woods and there are these wooden platforms/seating areas that seem like some kind of outdoor theatre. I asked Andre what that was about and he said he'd never been given solid information – except that there were some who said that public lynching's happened there. Very disturbing if true. On the other side of the river, things seemed even more economically depressed. Also, a black man running some kind of unofficial park ran up to people in our group asking for money. Across the highway were several very run-down buildings claiming to offer Civil Rights history experiences. These things felt wrong at all levels – and did not elevate what this place should feel like.

We continued just over an hour to Montgomery, following the march route. Montgomery was a busy, richer-feeling city that was, surprisingly, teeming with big hotels and so many tourists. Our massive/high-rise hotel (the Marriott-run Renaissance) overlooked the river/waterfront but was my least favorite on the whole trip. We arrived there around 6:30 – another “dinner on your own night” on the docket. The lobby was crazy with people (it was always crazy, IMO), the front desk staff were indifferent and made multiple errors communicating information about directions and cab reservations, the four elevators were always impossibly crowded, the hotel layout was too big and confusing, and my room was very loud far too late (LOTS of families/kids screaming and yelling, a live-music bar playing loud music into the night below). Tomorrow, I would learn that the breakfast service was a shitshow of problems as well. The fitness center, located on the top floor of the parking garage (a separate high-rise), was quiet and good. I enjoyed a workout and swim there that night – before ordering a delicious chicken salad sandwich dinner using room service (unfortunately, they did not communicate that they only took cash... which added to my displeasure with this establishment).

The next morning, I enjoyed an early workout – followed by the shitshow breakfast area. There must have been a line of 20 people at 7:45 when I arrived. The staff were 100% overwhelmed – messy tables everywhere. Thankfully, one of my group mates hauled me to their outdoor table and I was able to use the buffet immediately. It took forever, however, to get drinks and silverware/napkins. Perhaps not surprisingly, another one of our group mates got serious food poisoning (probably crabcakes) after coming here for dinner last night. At 8:30, we loaded onto the bus for almost our last time – driving first to the Dexter Parsonage Museum, MLK's home in

Montgomery where he and his family lived when he was around age 26. No photography was allowed inside; we had a private docent (black, female) who lead a good tour. The home reminded me of an upscale version of Medgar Evers' place. Despite local support, MLK and the home were regularly threatened and firebombed. Even so, it was here and in this context that MLK pledged a personal commitment to non-violence. Listening to a recording of him retelling this event during a local sermon, I was struck by standing in the visibly firebombed Soweto home of Mandela last year – knowing he followed a somewhat different philosophical path, and knowing he managed to live out his days until the end. I will forever be perplexed and fascinated by these different – and yet similar – men.



Left to Right: (top) Andre and Savannah, MLK's Montgomery parson home, EJI Memorial and slavery statue; (middle) EJI Memorial walk-through; (bottom) "gravesite" section of EJI Memorial, more statuary, close-up of soil sample with algae growth, Montgomery

The rest of the day – and all final touring activities – were focused on facilities run by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), established by Civil Rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson in 2018. EJI is arguably responsible for much of Montgomery's very evident revitalization. EJI facilities include the so-called Lynching Memorial, which was featured on 60 Minutes (and, in part, inspired me to want to do this trip – although some trip literature suggested we would get to meet Stevenson... which we didn't), and the Legacy Museum in downtown Montgomery – notably in a former slave warehouse. Our first stop was the Legacy Museum, which was jam-packed to the point it did distract from the experience. There were half a dozen tour buses unloading when we arrived, filled with 80% black tourists and/or school-groups. Inside, the space and exhibits felt so cramped and tight that it was hard to think – much less read and appreciate the often-wordy descriptions. After about an hour, I had to take a break in the gift shop and then make my way on foot to lunch a little early (lunch was at a local chain called the Mellow Mushroom and featured huge avocado-tomato hoagies). Afterwards, we rode the bus for the last time – up to the Memorial - designed by the woman who did the Vietnam Nam War Memorial. The Memorial is about 10 blocks away up the hill; EJI runs free shuttles up there as well (which they gave us the option of taking back... I walked). The Memorial was much less crazy; we were given an hour to self-guide the grounds – before returning for a presentation. Having seen the 60 Minutes episode, I mostly knew what to expect. The Memorial is built at the top of a shallow hill and designed such that you enter at the top and walk down inside, sort of spiraling downward. These human-sized rusted iron rectangular memorials (each represents a different county with a list of lynching victims) begin at eye level; as you descend, they rise above you – and look like hanging victims at the end. At the bottom, there is a waterfall wall for reflection – and then you exit and revisit the same rectangular memorials, this time set up on the ground like gravesites, as you return to the entrance. There are several statues around the ground, some dedicated to slavery, others to Civil Rights leaders. After touring the outdoor Memorial, we regrouped at the adjacent Visitor Center and listened to an open presentation by two law interns (one black male, one Indian-American female) who worked for EJI (this was the time, we were told, Stevenson sometimes visited in person), followed by a brief meeting with one of the staff – who notably received a commuted sentence from EJI. In terms of both EGI facilities, the most interesting thing to me – as a microbiologist - was that part of the memorial involves collecting huge jars of soil from the sites where lynchings occurred to then displaying them in full light. This is a basically a Winogradsky column (you can google that easily) that is designed to grow a self-sustaining soil microcosm, mostly of algae, cyanobacteria (both green) and anoxygenic bacteria (which can be purple, olive green, brown...). Indeed, you could see evidence of virtually all kinds of bacteria growing in the soil samples. After the presentation, I asked one of the lawyers about this... and they admitted that EJI did not think this was going to happen on such a short time-scale (they said they figured something may grow but it

would take years). I remarked that Windogradsky columns typically bloom in a few weeks after exposure to light. They said they are starting to re-collect samples but welcome advice or comments on better managing this. So - they asked if I could write them after I get back. Given how busy my summer has been, I haven't followed through yet...

As stated, we had the choice to take a shuttle back to the downtown/hotel area or walk. One of the other educators and I walked back together. It was BEYOND hot (95° F) and humid (over 80%) – although massive thunder/lightening showers arrived by 6/dinner. As with Birmingham, I felt there was a lot of stuff in Montgomery that we missed/skipped – for example, we passed the then-closed Rosa Parks Museum... and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Returning to the hotel around 5, I enjoyed another good workout, a final group debrief (Andre notably revealed that this was his first Civil Rights Tour where no one assumed he was the bus-driver), and an extravagant/over-the-top final dinner at the Center Restaurant. While delicious, I would take Mary's or The Four Way instead any day. The next morning, there was another breakfast snafu (ran out of tea and wouldn't sub in a hot chocolate because they said that cost more). The hotel-arranged cab arrived on time (same questions as the Jackson cab-driver). My return flights were good – but, as noted to friends/family at the time: it took 11 hours to get home if you add up ALL the travel time... and that's, like, a trip to Europe.

Insofar as reflections go, I loved this trip – despite the fact that it cost and required the same time commitment as a flight to Europe to accomplish. I think the things we represent things that every American should experience. As indicated, highlights for me included Mary Hoover, Elizabeth Eckford, and the NCRM/Lorraine Hotel. I felt I would have enjoyed Birmingham/Selma more had the wake-up and drive-time been shorter – or if a full-day/overnight had been devoted to Birmingham. I felt a little flat about Montgomery because it was so crowded – but I loved that it was crowded... because so many places we went were desolate and economically depressed. I thought the organization and execution of this trip was fantastic. I would love to do more trips with The Nation – but this is the only trip they run that doesn't conflict with my teaching schedule. Thank you Jenn/George/Sorjia/Silas and Cara for your company and hospitality in North Carolina. My only regret about this trip is that I ate so much that I gained back some of my "lumpy Norwegian physique" and lost some fitness for Tohoku/Japan (report posted) and the Sierras (hopefully will be posted soon!).

