

NEW YORK FIELD TRIP

I have made a few field trips to New York, some more memorable than others—it seemed like the most foreign place in the world, although I am reminded that New Yorkers have relatively green footprints.

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Lew married the heiress and they had a six-story townhouse at an expensive address but there was frozen dog shit and garbage on the street. Twenty-five feet wide and for that money you could get a whole ranch spreading across valleys and mountains. The heiress divorced the doctor and when he died she got the townhouse back. The rich never let go. But it was his when I stayed there for a few days. Four floors were just bedroom suites, each sporting a big marble bathroom of a different color. The suite I had was the royal pretender's and the bathroom was all cold black, the shower, bathtub, floor, walls, and toilet. He was a pretender to some small east European throne, and was away to dry out. Some time later I met him and said hello. "You speak to his majesty only when asked." His majesty? That wimp?

I had an appointment at a publisher's and intended to go by taxi but was persuaded to take the subway, much cheaper my host said. I got lost. Underground you can't tell uptown from downtown, let alone north from south. After a few futile transfers I surfaced somewhere and looked for a taxi. A guy in a large Oldsmobile offered to take me wherever I wanted to go and get whatever I wanted. From her bus bench a nice old lady said, "White boy, you don't want to be here." Back in the subway I went somewhere else, surfaced, and the taxi to my appointment was expensive.

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After Park Avenue I stayed with friends in a suburb of Aryan lawns and shrubs pruned into bondage. One morning we set out for the warehouse of the Heye

Foundation's Museum of the American Indian, where Edward H. Davis' collection of Seri Indian material resided. My host and guide eventually found the place along the I-95 expressway corridor in the Bronx. Gray, windowless, and multistoried nesting among weedy empty lots, warehouses and rusted factories. Concertina wire as prevalent as the scratchy Eurasian weeds. *Ailanthus* trees were the only thing familiar, those pithy-stemmed slender trees with long lacy leaves and stinky foliage. You see them outside the window along train tracks. Called the tree of heaven in its native China and the garbage tree here. It's the tree in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

I pressed the black bulls-eye button and waited a sensible time and pressed the bell again with more determination. Eventually the door creaked open a tad, not letting in too much fresh air. A guy in a big black beard greeted us with a grunt. After producing the required papers from the New York office he let us in without acknowledging we were expected. Not sure if he had ever been outdoors. As lights flickered on I was stunned by the greatest assemblage of Native American art and artifacts. More than a million objects acquired by portly banker and early oil heir George Gustav Heye. Whole painted canoes, towering grimacing totem poles, stories painted on tepees and animal skins, weapons, beadwork, basketry, pottery, and more. The endless arts of Native America extracted from vanquished civilizations, cataloged, sorted, and preserved in limbo.

We went up to the floor where the Seri Indian material slumbered in deep wooden shelves and drawers looking like the day it arrived. I was expecting to see the one-man balsa Edward H. Davis bought in 1922, but did not find it. We used Davis' photo of the balsa with Ramón Blanco in our book on Seri Indian ethnobotany. One of the last functioning balsas—those sleek reed vessels. The Seris told us that Ramón Blanco was still using his balsa when Davis bought it and I could go see it “at the university in New York.” Davis wrote that he

made a trade with Blanco for his balsa, promising him sufficient lumber, nails and tools, to make a boat large enough to carry five men....when a

Seri man goes in his one-man balsa, he straddles the middle part on his knees resting on seaweed. The craft is light and a good sea craft, but low in the water and the man is wet all the time. He uses a double-bladed paddle, and his harpoon rests against pegs set in the *carrizos* [reed grass stems that make up the balsa]. A rock which serves to quiet the turtle, two pointed stakes and a heavy fish line complete the equipment. He has to paddle across to the other side of the Infiernillo Channel in that cramped position, say eight or ten miles, very early in the morning, then watch his chance to harpoon. If successful he brings up the turtle, knocks him on the head with the rock, pulls him on the end of the craft by skillful manipulation, cuts slots in the front flippers, puts stakes through and into the carrizo, pinning him firmly in place, then paddles back.

Seri balsas, or reed boats, were made from reed grass (*carrizo*) stems. Men went to remote waterholes in the interior of Tiburon Island—the largest island in the Gulf of California—to select and cut the canes in season and carry them to the shore. Each man carried two large bundles suspended from the ends of a mesquite-wood carrying yoke. Leaves stripped away from the bamboo-like stems, the ends intertwined in a timeless pattern to form long bundles lashed together with mesquite root rope, and individual bundles formed into the three large bundles shaping the craft. A large one, ten meters long, would take several days to make and could carry a whole family or six or seven large turtles. In those days large green sea turtles weighed as much as a hundred kilos. The tapered ends of those graceful double-ended crafts rose out of the water when heavily loaded, reducing water drag. (See chapter 4, *The Guy Who Cuts the Tops off Plants*.)

All those cataloged items, some like new, some beat up and well-used, perhaps throwaway stuff, frozen from a time when the people lived off the desert and the sea, and did not go to a store. Besides, there weren't any stores and nobody had money. Slit-cane musical instruments: rub them around in your hand on a moonlit night during jackrabbit mating season and a curious jackrabbit hops up close enough to be clubbed. Gaming

sticks decorated with Seri blue made from three different plants perhaps related to the species used for the mysterious blue in ancient Mayan murals. Alternating natural wood and black toasted reed-stem milkweed beads of the necklace worn by Chico Romero in Davis' photo, like the ones Seri women sell to tourists. All sorts of necklaces of shells and seeds, musical instruments and boxes made from elephant-tree wood decorated with Seri blue, baskets of limberbush strips with red-brown designs from desert ratany root-dye, *ikokmolka* fetishes like the one hanging over my computer as I write from my field notes, and eggshell-ware pottery vessels. Seri women made the largest, thinnest vessels ever, averaging three millimeters thick. Every bit of weight counted when every day men carried those large water-filled jugs suspended in mesquite root nets at each end of a carrying yoke from mountain waterholes to camps at the shore. Examining each item, I wrote furiously, recording what I saw and knew, and what Davis and curators had written on the labels. Again and again objects in my hands related to what the Old People told us, and what we observed. I wish there had been time to explore other parts of those vast collections, the magnificence of it all. I felt privileged but also remorse as it was not readily accessible, especially for descendants of the makers. But since then the Heye Foundation went belly up and it all went to the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian.

After the warehouse field trip I was back at his majesty's room. (The doctor had sent him away again to dry out.) There were loose stacks of mimeographed pages, that old purple print that soon fades to nothing, extolling restoration to the throne. The other literature was a bunch of secondhand Mickey Spillane paperbacks.

There must have been windows on the other side of dark curtains in the drawing room of too much furniture reminiscent of cluttered rented-rooms that hinder a nighttime path to the bathroom. Dinner guests included sons of famous fathers. One was Adlai Stevenson's. The host and guests ordered out since the hired help didn't do anything and it was a few mayors before Giuliani made uptown safe. Runners brought dinner in duct-taped styrofoam coolers. Multi-wrapped filet mignon, baked potatoes and even the butter segregated, and fat-bomb desserts, each condomized in foil.

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I was about to head home, way too cold for a desert rat, but Allen invited me to his place in Cherry Valley, said it's warmer upstate at his farm. I would have liked to believe him. I had met Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky in Tucson at Bill and Ann Woodin's when I was interested in Wooflie, their teenage wolf. I lived out in the desert and thought it would be a good place for a pet wolf, but after seeing her parents, Beowulf and Virginia, I knew keeping a wolf was out of the question. Ever see a real wolf eat? They fed them from a pan attached to a pole six feet long; otherwise a hand goes with their dinner. Wolves gobble food at warp speed, wolfing it down is for real. Anyone who claims a pet wolf doesn't know a real wolf.

Ann and Bill's 40 acres out in the desert east of Tucson was isolated until urbanization, and their wolves ran free until the Double U guest ranch incident—the place that later became the first Canyon Ranch. Thanksgiving day dinner at the Dude Ranch, New Yorkers filing into the dining room, double glass doors wide open on a perfect desert day. Beowulf, large even for a male Mexican wolf, bounds in, leaps onto the front table, bares his teeth tearing into the turkey, gulping, growling, snarling, slobbering, and trots off with the remains. Once on a sweltering summer day Virginia came home proudly clutching a canteen of cold water in her mouth.

Joseph Wood Krutch and his wife Marcelle Leguia were there for dinner and the Woodins' invited Allen, who was giving a reading at the University of Arizona. Krutch was Ginsberg's literature professor at Columbia. [It wasn't long after that Nancy Tucker began caring for Krutch in his last months. She was staying with me and I had no idea she was a registered nurse until her time with Krutch.] I was planning a field trip to Redfield Canyon the next day, one of the few places in Arizona where the bromeliad, *Tillandsia recurvata*, occurs, in fact the largest population in the southwest—an Ice Age relic from Mexico. Allen was intrigued so it was arranged for he and his partner Peter to come along. Allen reluctantly agreed to 7:30 after I tried for 6 am.

Leaving the graded dirt road at Redington I headed my old white Scout in four-wheel low-range up the rocky road into the west face of the Galiuro Mountains. Peter suddenly demanded a stop to “give the bunny rabbit an apple.” Allen, “but Peter, we don’t have any apples.” About halfway I stopped to botanize in a rocky arroyo, to look for some rare spring plants in flower. Peter pointed his finger yelling there was dead man, and Allen told him it was just a dead cactus.

Two hours later at the end of the road at the canyon edge an eroded rock trail leads a few hundred feet steep down to the riparian canyon. The trail was once a road to the ruined Redfield Canyon house built into a cliff-face cave at the bottom of the canyon shaded by Arizona sycamores. Now a home for packrats, it was built with river rocks in the 1930s by the cowboy Chick Logan and his wife Harriet and then owned by the socialite horsewoman Hope Iselin and her cowboy husband Honeycutt Jones and they all ran wild horses and raised kids there. [I was a sophomore when Danny Mulford insisted on driving his Jeep pickup low-gear low-range down the last few hundred feet past sensibility to a broken axle. It was a long hot summer day hiking out of the canyon of little endangered fishes, waterworn boulders, Arizona sycamores, velvet mesquites and velvet ashes, and alders at remarkably low elevation. Downstream past the last water it was a close call after sipping the last of our water.]

The terrain was rougher than Allen could have imagined. Said he had hip trouble and stayed by the car while Peter and I clambered down the cliff side. There was only one more dead man incident. Using Allen’s strategy, I told Peter it was just a dead log. Later in the day I showed Allen how the stamens of a cholla flower close up when touched, like when a cactus bee stimulates the stamens after diving into the center of the flower to get its nectar reward. Enclosed by stamens, the bee has to push its way out through pollen-laden anthers. In Phoenix a few days later a reporter was goading Allen about his lifestyle and Allen asked if that was any more perverse than a bee sucking off a cactus flower and getting embraced by flowering sex parts to ensure fertilization. The reporter thought Allen was being a smart-ass and punched him in the nose.

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So instead of going home I met Allen on a cold morning at the New York Port Authority bus terminal. Briefcased commuters scurried past the homeless slumped at the walls. The cops didn't hassle as long they stayed along the walls of that great cathedraloid station. I thought about those sci-fi books describing the grim future of Gotham City, as I had ten days earlier on seeing homeless women sleeping on warm air grates along the side of the United States Supreme Court.

The sky was low and gray and the road to the farm snowed in so we had a long sloshing wet walk through knee-deep snow. After changing to something dry and drinking some warm concoction I finally stopped shivering, but that night started coughing. The cozy old farmhouse was warm but too small for so many people leeching off mother hen Allen. Furnishing completed with oil-clothed kitchen table, blotchy linoleum, and sagging couches. Halfway through dinner, Lafcadio, the only one of Peter's three brothers not yet institutionalized, went on a salt-mining dissertation when asked to pass the salt. Someone said it was time to put him back on his meds. The dissertation was ended by asking him to take out the garbage. Later someone realized they asked him to take out the garbage but forgot to tell him to come back in. Poor Lafcadio standing out in the cold until someone told him to come in.

The coughing ramped up without relief and I was apprehensive because of a collapsed lung last summer diving off the desert coast at Tuléar in Madagascar searching for sea grasses. A repeat would not be good. I asked Allen if he could get some cough medicine, but that was not an option in Cherry Valley because Peter had threatened to beat up the only doctor when he wouldn't write a script for speed. Peter at six-two was built like an ox. I called Lew in New York and he phoned the local pharmacy, vowing I was his patient and it was vitally important. More snow fell and a kind soul snowshoed to town to get my prescription. I had sheepish thoughts of Iditarod heroics. Allen casually said to hide the cough syrup. One good slug worked magic. When the effects wore off it was time for another dose but the bottle was empty. Junkie poet Ray Bremser was sprawled out in the next room singing incoherently. From the other upstairs room Peter and his girl friend were publically busy with love.

Peter would do anyone anytime anywhere. In his graduate days at Harvard, Peter Warshall came back to his apartment to find Orlovsky and a girl friend on the floor blocking the open door. He said, “help us, she can’t come.” Warshall had to walk over his ass to get in. Another time, in New York when everyone was shoveling snow off the sidewalk, shirtless Orlovsky was shoveling street snow onto the sidewalk.

Allen’s phone rang mornings from London and nights from Tokyo. It was a reporter from London and Allen wondered what to tell him that would be different. I said tell him about the plight of the whales, the Japanese won’t stop killing them, Iceland and Norway too, and they weren’t the only ones. I provided an earful about the shame of whaling and Allen added poignant words as only a great poet could. I thought how powerful it would be if he wrote poetry about the planet. The phone call was a success. Whales broke into the international press big time and things started happening at a faster clip.

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I thought about the whale issues at the recent first United Nations Conference on the Environment. My official identification entry badge said, “Friends of the Sea Otter” and “Defenders of Wildlife” (then just a tiny organization run by a steel-nerved old lady who founded the nonprofit using her basement mimeograph, before George Whittell Jr.’s bequeathed millions). Other participants included heads of state, cabinet level ministers, famous scientists, and NGO bigwigs. At the red carpet Stockholm Royal Palace reception I gave a Japanese gentleman a talking to about whales.

-But Dr. Felger, you don’t understand.

-What is it I don’t understand? If you kill the last whale there won’t be any for your children and grandchildren’s grandchildren.

-But Dr. Felger you don’t understand.

-A great nation like Japan should not bear the shame of wiping out the greatest animals ever on earth.

-But Dr. Felger you don’t understand.

We tangled round and round, over and over. Later I was severely admonished for talking rough to the Japanese Minister of Finance, the most powerful man in Japan. Margaret Mead complimented me. Like an elfin Brunhilde she stomped around stamping her big crooked wooden staff, coercing recalcitrant bureaucrats to do the right thing. I would have liked to have given the minister Michael McClure's *For the Death of 100 Whales*.

Stockholm authorities set up summertime facilities for the vociferous alternative conference at Skarpnäck Field inconveniently out of town (some called it ScrapNeck), but the protesters filtered downtown anyway, even to the royal palace. Joan McIntyre's and the Hog Farm Commune's rousing whale march got a lot of press. Michael McClure said Joan would have liked killer whales to be vegetarians, certainly not munching sea otters. (Jim Malusa told me he once had a similar conversation with a vegetarian about the Inuit: How come they weren't vegetarians?).

Gary Snyder read Mother Earth ecopoetry and official U.S. delegates objected to everything and tried to stifle Viet Nam horror and protest. I got nowhere on sea turtle conservation, let alone endangered plants. I was a few years too early. Stewart Brand, Sterling Bunnell, the Hopis, Joan McIntyre, Michael McClure, Joanna McClure, David Padwa, Melissa Savage, and Gary: we all stayed at a drab little hotel that had a pay phone in the miniature lobby. The Hopis put tiny Swedish dimes in the phone and talked Hopi to Arizona for hours on end. Someone said Stewart was paying for the calls.

One evening I followed Margaret Mead into a Gamla Stan (Old Town) restaurant, ducking through the low doorway below street level once above ground. I wore my Friends of the Sea Otter and Defenders of Wildlife badges and sat across from Nixon's secretary of the interior Wally Hickel. Conversation was more than lively since Friends and Defenders were suing Hickel. Although I didn't like a lot of his policies, I came to admire the man for his anti-Viet Nam pronouncements galvanized by the Kent State shootings. Nixon promptly fired him.

Sterling discovered a Mexican restaurant, and taco intrigue in Stockholm was not ignored. Red carpets, maître d', tinkling crystal glasses, and blue-eyed Swedes trying to sing *corridos*. [Flashback: Michael McClure claimed scallops are mammals because they have blue eyes, 20 of them.] The tacos were crepes filled with unfortunate creamy concoctions and it wasn't cheap.

After the big conference we took a train ride to Uppsala to pay homage to Linnaeus' garden and home, passing Scandinavian forests where the trees line up in rows. The great man's desk was surprisingly simple for one who led his troops on field trips announced and ended by forty French horns and kettledrums. The popular excursions started from the Royal Botanic garden. Linnaeus spoke in Latin, recorded by a scribe who gave the pronouncements to an assistant who told the troops in French what the great man said. His very popular sexual classification of plants brought the ire of the church.

On the way home Michael and Joanne and Sterling and I stopped over in Iceland. The oldest democracy and freest press in the world, the oldest vegetarian restaurant, midsummer midnight sun, the first country to achieve 100% literacy, where farmers write poetry and nature reigns eider ducks and pink glaciers, and still they kill whales. We had to witness the geothermal Hvalur whale-processing factory, deep in a green-walled fjord. Summer workers in rubber boots sloshed across concrete floors in blood and gore flensing fluted limp white whale bellies. Iceland hunts endangered whales, selling the meat to Japan and to feed mink fur farms. New Yorkers need mink coats.

I stayed on in Reykjavik, eager to see more of such an exotic ecosystem. My hosts wondered why American houses were so dirty; they cleaned the bathtub with a toothbrush. Near midnight I helped a biology teacher haul his small boat down to the Reykjavik dock. Passing puffins, skuas, and kittiwakes on sea cliffs we headed to where land disappeared as the sun dipped below the horizon but it never got dark. We fished haddock and hauled the silvery catch to his house, swinging open heavy wooden doors to the underground icehouse. Like so many Iceland families, they had enough to last through winter. He didn't answer when I asked why they still kill whales.

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Another time in New York, on my way to the UNESCO sponsored Survival Service Commission conference on sea turtles, I brought my hosts fresh green corn tamales from Arizona. They complained about the chilies. I was infatuated with Isabel, then living in the city. She was so beautiful and tried so hard to emulate Jackie and did a pretty good job of it. She got me to take her to lunch at one of Jackie's haunts and during the long wait for her salad, as women of the day lunched on, she asked for extra butter and created a celebrity-worthy scene on being told there would be an extra charge for an extra pat of butter. Years later her ex-husband was implicated on insider trading and sweet gentle Isabel died lonely in Paris.