

Mon., July 24: Dinos and Dialog

Kerrie offered me a choice of activities prior to my leaving the area: a traveling exhibit on dinosaurs she wanted to see at the Museum of Idaho in Idaho Falls, or the Museum of Cleaning in Pokie. I am not making that up. Dinosaurs it was.

Given I was headed north, we arranged to meet at the museum when it opened, but I got my usual early start. Too early, apparently: I drove past the freeway entrance I was supposed to take—the same one I had mistakenly *taken* last night. Cursing myself, and my body's problem with caffeine, I found a turnaround and finally used the entrance when I was supposed to. "Third time's the charm," I griped to myself.

In downtown Idaho Falls, which maintains more of its early 1900s Western charm than does Pocatello, I parked across the street from one coffee shop and walked around the block to another. The first was a bakery and bagel joint, whereas Villa Coffeehouse was just that. I'd already eaten a breakfast bar. The young woman got what I was looking for with little back-and-forth required, and soon I had a lovely mint tea latte with oat milk and sweetener.

Another reason the last couple chapters aren't as detailed as those prior is that I did not want to spend friend time taking notes. This morning I typed three days' worth directly into the computer. The creep in me enjoyed seeing the legs of the woman who'd taken my order from underneath the brim of my hat and without turning my head, so she didn't know. As stated before, I try to be a discreet creep.

The same construction that had slowed my passage south through Idaho Falls blocked the most direct route to the nearby museum. I could see it, but with no detour signs, wasn't sure how to get to it. Eventually I found my way to the front, but with no parking signs, ended up turning just past it before realizing I was on a one-way street going the wrong way. "Hey, I was only going *one way*, officer!" The lot was behind the building, so I didn't have to go far. Kerrie arrived by the same route as I was getting out of the car. I teased her about being a law-breaker before admitting I'd done the same thing.

The cashier asked whether we were state residents, since they get discounts. This launched Kerrie into her confusing tale, which established she was technically a resident again. Alas, the lack of a state driver's license cost her \$2. She was kind enough to pay full price for me, too, as I was a long way from being a resident.

"Dinos of the Deep" had fossils from the inland sea that once covered much of the U.S. West 65 million years ago. Most were complete skeletons, many huge, hanging from the

ceiling. My apologies for the lack of pictures, but I wanted to focus on spending time with my friend, not knowing when I would get to again. A worker who came to keep an eye on us pointed out an inner V of teeth in the top rear of the mouth of one sea serpent. These kept his¹ prey from escaping his elongated snout when he opened it to chew on them.

Two turtles were 20 feet long. As a swimmer I was jealous of holes on the underside of the shells, which made them lighter and added buoyancy. One, however, had a less useful set of holes, made bottom and top by someone else's teeth.

On the topic of lightness, one 24-foot flying beast only weighed 100 pounds. Another serpent's neck was so long, the archaeologist who found it assumed its spine was its tail! "Easy to see why," I said, as the tail was relatively stubby. The skeleton was displayed backwards for some time before someone figured it out.

We wandered the rest of the museum, finding unique artifacts and learning fun factoids:

- Two other of the first atomically lit light bulbs from ERB-1 were there. "Basic Westinghouse," I pointed out, spotting the brand on top.
- At some point Idaho had the highest rate of patents per capita of any state.
- As a territory in the 1800s, Idaho, like Wyoming, allowed women to vote.

A Model T on display was used by an agricultural expert to drive around the state in the 1920s teaching better ways to farm potatoes. (This reminded me of the Cooperative Extension programs by which states and universities provide evidence-based advice to farmers today.) Idaho's particular combination of soil conditions and climate are why it produces so many potatoes. But even Kerrie was surprised to read that dairy products are the state's leading farm export.

A set of signs explained that "Idaho" is a made-up word with a bizarre history. A doctor from Philadelphia conned his way into convincing Congress that he was a delegate from a new territory being formed, which should be given a Native American name, "Idaho." Just before the bill was passed, someone found out he had made it all up, and the name was changed to... Colorado. Today's Idaho was part of another territory, Oregon, which included modern Washington as well. When Idaho was split off, somehow the origin story of the word was forgotten, and someone proposed repurposing that old "Native American" name! Searches for a similar-sounding word in the area nations' languages, so that could be claimed as the origin, failed.

1 I'm not making assumptions here; they identified the specimen as male. Of course, we can't know how he/she/they self-identified!

In a retrospective of 20 years of temporary exhibitions like the “Dinos,” I noticed one on the Titanic had come through. (That’s the luxury ship advertised as “unsinkable” that ran into an iceberg in 1911 and promptly sank, spawning one of my nieces’ favorite movies.) The exhibition was represented by two pieces of coal from the wreck site. “I just learned one of the things on my shelf is a museum piece,” I told Kerrie. I went to the show when it was in Seattle, and for \$22 bought my own piece of Titanic coal (shown at right.) She pointed out several other shows she had attended here.

As we entered one of the rooms, a volunteer was sitting by a box of items, and asked if we wanted to see some animal skulls. She was clearly deflated the answer was, “Not really.” She asked where we were from, leading to a longer version of the cashier discussion. After Kerrie was done, we got to mine. The volunteer observed that I had no Southern accent. I explained that I gotten rid of it at 16, by going through the dictionary and learning its pronunciations. “I didn’t want to sound like a hick,” I said. In my defense, that was the 16-year-old’s explanation. Nonetheless, there have been studies showing people assume someone with a Southern accent is less intelligent, so maybe it was a good career decision. Kerrie pointed out to the volunteer there are times when my Southern accent still comes out, like when I’m tired, or talking to someone with a heavy rural accent. I also admitted that “when I was still dating, I would bring it out at singles’ bars.”

The volunteer’s accent exposed her Boston origins, but she had lived in Connecticut until she went to grad school. Spending most of her adult life in Boston gave her the patois. She then had a series of accidents and other health problems. Idaho relatives got tired of coming to take care of her, so she moved here. I wondered, but did not ask, how this statement affected Kerrie given her recent sacrifice. The volunteer said the museum gave her a sense of purpose, which I fully understand. I said it was quite good for a regional museum. She explained it was locally owned, and private, not a state museum despite the name. When I complimented it as *very* good for a local joint, she seemed gladdened and said twice that she would pass that along.



For me, though, the best part of the visit was Kerrie explaining her personal history with the building. When she was growing up, Sharon and Kerrie were active in the women's and children's arms of the Masons. The "Free and Accepted Masons" is the best known fraternal order, groups who meet to... well, no one who isn't a member is sure of what they do when they meet. There are charity activities, and weird outfits and ceremonies, but the details are held secret. The Masons claim to have roots in actual masons in ancient times, and have numbered many historical figures among their members, like George Washington. You've probably noticed a local "Lodge" building in passing.

This one was a regional Masonic Lodge. Kerrie talked about walking in through the entrance that now is a second-floor door to nowhere, climbing some of the same stairways we took, and so on. It was cool to connect with her early history that way.

Second-best was continuing our phone banter of 20 years in person again. For example, the museum has a reproduction of old Idaho Falls, displaying the usual antique items related to each fake building. At one stop she said, "That's new," referring to an item she hadn't seen there before.

"No, it's old," I rejoined. She dropped her head with a smirk, knowing she'd set herself up for that one.

At a carpenter shop I remarked in reference to yesterday's TV work, "I know that guy can't find a Phillips head screwdriver, 'cause..." She finished with me, "it hadn't been invented yet."²

After a lost-phone panic at her car—she'd left it at the front desk—we decided to adopt her friend's suggestion to lunch across the street at Manwaring Cheese. This 1950s-style building decorated in black-and-white tile houses a cheese-making company, with a large vat visible through a internal window. The menu was about as simple as one can get, complicated only by the choice of cheese you wanted on your grilled cheese sandwich; whether you wanted house-made tomato bisque or chips with it; and your choice of drink from the cooler. I went for dill cheese, the bisque, and an orange Fanta. The price was \$5 and change, the cheese delightfully tart, and the bisque a good middling texture with just enough bite. We ate staring at the gelato cooler, and thus were brainwashed into having some. I went for kiwi plus chocolate and peanut butter.

We walked over to the commercial side of the tracks and strolled and licked. She was captivated by the Doric columns on the city administration building; I by the Les Schwab Tire Store, another business name I hadn't seen since moving east. Passing another

² The stuff on display was from the late 1800s through early 1900s. The first patents for the Phillips head were issued in 1933.

building I cracked, “That can’t be the courthouse. Where’s the statue with the Confederate soldier?” You might be thinking, “wrong part of the country, Jim,” but I’ve read there was one as far west as Montana, for some reason.

We hugged good-bye with the comfort of two peas in a pod, like we would be hanging out again next week, and returned to I-15 to head in opposite directions.

At a rest area some 45 minutes north, nearing the Montana border, I ran into other old friends. A sign said Chief Joseph and the Nimiipu had stolen 100 mules near there on their way to Yellowstone.

My destination for the evening was Butte, Montana, about four hours north of Pokie. Just west of town, I-15 swings right to join I-90 East for a bit. Those veer south around town. But I stayed straight for a little over a mile on I-15/90 Business, which for some reason the federal government felt compelled to also call I-115, as if two names weren’t enough. This dumps directly into city streets. I wasn’t quite sure what to do at that point. My itinerary had anticipated me leaving Pocatello later in the day, spending the night on the way, and driving right to my primary goal in Butte tomorrow. I was too late to see it today, so I just checked into the Rocker Inn.

Vegetarian dinner pickings per Google Maps were slim, so I tried the Staggered Ox, a funky sandwich-and-more place on the southern edge of Uptown. In most places this would be called “Downtown,” but Butte was built up one side of a hill, so... The cashier was in a bustier, fishnets, and flaming red hair. She explained the ordering process for their rice bowls. I chose three veggies (broccoli, bell pepper, and artichokes), two cheeses (Gorgonzola and provolone), and a sauce (cucumber dill). With a soft drink the bill came to \$13. It was not the best rice bowl I’ve had, but was healthy and filling. I should have gotten a more flavorful sauce, however.

The Sage and I drove the town a bit, which featured many older buildings in a thriving Uptown. I paused to text a picture teasing a childhood friend. A beautiful if struggling house had “RRR” above the porch. Clearly the newly married Randolph Ramsey Russell was shamefully hiding assets from his amazing bride Katie.

The promise of a suite at the inn was reduced by the tile floor and the lightweight door between the kitchenette and adjacent room. From the other side of the only table in the room, I could hear my neighbors word for word. I turned on the HVAC fan for the noise and kept my own words to myself. The fan and the White Noise app on my phone did not block the sound of the swinging door between the lobby directly below me and the saloon, which banged late into the night. It was not the type of banging one prefers to experience in a hotel bed. I had my first bad night’s sleep of the trip.